

Chapter 1

Language-Oriented Feminist Epistemology, and the Case of Lyn Hejinian

But let me ask if there is knowledge in poetry . . .

—Lyn Hejinian, “Oblivion” (*The Cold of Poetry* 195)

“A space that has opened”: Gender and Language¹

Of course language-oriented women writers are not the first or only thinkers to investigate the relationship between gender and language. Language—its limitations and its possibilities—has been of ongoing interest to women writers and feminist theorists. An important moment in the history of feminist theories of writing is occupied by *l'écriture féminine*, or feminine writing, which has helped suggest new possibilities for women writers, possibilities that many language-oriented women writers in the United States have been exploring. Articulated in different ways by French feminist theorists including Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, notions of feminine writing suggest that women have a problematic relationship to patriarchal discourse (variously described in the theories as “rational,” “representational,” “symbolic,” “coherent,” and “fixed”). These theories of feminine writing were developed as part of a broader feminist critique of the structuralist psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan’s

theory of subjectivity, meaning in the symbolic realm of discourse and communication is generated in relation to the primary transcendental signifier, the phallus. Within this model, there is apparently no way for women to exist in the symbolic—in language—except in relation to the male. The so-called French feminists responded variously to Lacan by positing different symbologies for women beyond the phallic—Cixous's "body writing," Irigaray's critique of "specular" economies, Kristeva's "semiotic." By locating the "feminine" elsewhere, feminine writing allows women distinctive voices often disruptive of phallic signification.

Many language-oriented women writers—whether they define their projects as overtly psychological, as does Beverly Dahlen, or whether they are more interested in how socially constructed normative models affect women's relationships to language and knowledge, as is Carla Harryman—share some of the French feminists' ideas about language and gender. The issues they explore in their writing include women's fraught relationship to the symbolic order, the connection between language and power, and the notion of radical aesthetics as ideology critique. While in much of their writing, proponents of *l'écriture féminine* trace women's problematic relationship to patriarchal discourse to psychological origins, these theorists do not deny that cultural forces are also at play. For them, as well as for many language-oriented women writers, what marks writing as "feminine" is not the gender of the writer, but the qualities of the writing that place it outside the economy of symbolic discourse. But it is important to note that language-oriented women writers share no one unified position on the question of a feminine aesthetic, and often express ambivalence toward the idea of feminine writing. "I am very conflicted over this subject of a feminine or a masculine voice," admits Susan Howe in her interview "Speaking with Susan Howe" (SSH): "I hope poetry that is Poetry contains both voices" (28).

Several recent insightful accounts of the revolutionary potential of linguistically transgressive writing point the direction that my project will take by describing the feminine and feminist implications of experimentation in language. In her article "Women & Language," language-oriented writer Johanna Drucker advocates a further theorizing of the French feminists' Freudian-Lacanian model of sexual identity and language acquisition to include a more thorough consideration of historical and social factors, but accepts their conclusion that women do have a different relationship to language. Drucker argues that language does not structure our experience, but functions to structure our *relationship*

to both the real and the imaginary. Therefore, by actively choosing to use language "with a kind of improvisational freedom" (61), to "question the assumption of syntax, the authoritarianism of codes which force the structure of expression into the categorical distinctions of grammatical absolutes," both male and female writers can allow the system of rational symbolic discourse "to be seen not as an inevitable, extant order" but as itself the product of specific linguistic practices (66–67). In this model Drucker defines the "feminine" not as an essence that belongs to biological females, nor as "the product of socially determined situations," but as "a concept which critiques the relation between authority and language in the alignment of the patriarchal power termed 'masculine' with language itself" (57).

And in "Poetic Politics: How the Amazons Took the Acropolis," Jeffner Allen describes what she calls poetic politics—"a commitment to textual action" that she finds common in lesbian and feminist writing (307). Like Drucker's feminine writing, poetic politics effects a kind of "pulverization of 'language proper'" (314) and thereby "takes by surprise, and devastates, patriarchal institutions that would control the distribution of meaning, value, and physical goods against the self-defined interests of each woman" (307). And it is by attending to language itself, its processes of constituting meaning, that this writing is able to have an effect. As Allen puts it, "The poetic are political in the most efficient and ensnaring sense, because it takes place in language . . . writing and action are inseparable" (319). Allen is also careful to insist that poetic politics is not comprised of any one strategy or style, but of many.

Similarly, Rachel Blau DuPlessis's book *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* is an extended argument for the political viability of language-oriented writing by women. In her opening chapter, "For the Etruscans," DuPlessis explores the notion of a "female aesthetic." Like Drucker with her feminine writing, DuPlessis does not consign the practice of the female aesthetic to biological females only, but instead refers with the term to "any practices available to those groups—nations, genders, sexualities, races, classes—all social practices which wish to criticize, to differentiate from, to overturn the dominant forms of knowing and understanding with which they are saturated" (16). DuPlessis's notion of the female aesthetic, like Drucker's feminine writing, operates as a critique of normative and oppressive discourses. And like Allen, DuPlessis insists that there is "not a female aesthetic, not one single constellation of strategies," but rather, "various and possibly contradictory strategies of response and invention shared by women in response to gender experiences" (3, 10).

In her introduction to *Language Unbound: On Experimental Writing by Women*, Nancy Gray also stresses the role that experience plays in experimental writing by women. Where for Allen writing and action are inseparable, for Gray writing and experience are inseparable: "Language and experience become interactive, so that words are not merely symbolic but also experiential—experience itself" (5). Gray warns against equating experimental language uses with *the feminine* (as Duplessis seems to do). Although such a concept makes experimental writing strategies available to writers of both genders, "feminine" writing by women is read differently than that by men—not as the product of conscious strategy, but as expressions of "a female essence of which she herself is a representative." Avoiding this problem does not require that we treat gender issues separately from the question of experimental writing. In fact, Gray finds that gender is almost inevitably an issue in experimental writing by women: "Insofar as the term *experimental writing* connotes that which does without or makes untenable the assumptions of literary realisms that naturalize cultural ideology to claim it as a Reality, it affords women writers an important means of leaving old gender codes behind and breaking into language as experience, not as representation" (4–5).

By breaking into language as experience, not as representation, language-oriented women writers avoid the trap of striving to represent the feminine through a feminine or female aesthetic. The concept of "the feminine," when it occurs in language-oriented women writers' theories—from Lyn Hejinian's "la faustienne" to Beverly Dahlen's "root of bare breast" that she imagines is revealed in a gap of language (AR 11–17 11)—operates not as a fixed essence but rather as Drucker defines the feminine, a "concept which critiques the relation between authority and language" (57). In creative work that is a kind of textual action, language-oriented women writers experience a freedom from preestablished norms, rules, or codes. As Leslie Scalapino puts it, "the process of the writing is an alleviation of the social rigidity" (written exchange). Writing in which language is experience rather than representation might allow an increased agency for both readers and writers (women as well as men who have otherwise felt their own agency to be limited) of such work.

It should not be surprising, then, that so many women poets have become conspicuously language-oriented in their writing. While most of the writers initially associated with "language poetry" were men, a few women—including Lyn Hejinian and Carla Harryman—were involved fairly early.² Three poets out of the nine included in Silliman's

selection in *Alcheringa* in 1975 were women. Through the 1980s, as the definitions and boundaries of "language poetry" were articulated and refined, contested and denied (by those "outside" the movement as well as those "within"), more and more writing by women continued to appear in the various journals and magazines associated with "language poetry."³ The number and variety of women poets whose experiments in language and form continue to contribute to the increasingly multifaceted and diverse body of language-oriented writing suggest that linguistic innovation offers many women writers ways to pose questions and suggest possibilities about issues of knowledge, subjectivity, language, and gender that more conventionalized modes of writing might obscure or take for granted.

I focus specifically on women language-oriented writers in this study in order to explore how gender concerns, for these women, contribute to their political-philosophical investigations of language and meaning. What sets American women language-oriented writers apart from their male counterparts is the urgency with which they recognize that the question of how meaning is constituted has particular significant consequences for women. As a result, their writing often explores the role that gender plays in the subject's relationship to language and to knowledge. Certainly such investigations are not conducted only by women writers, or by all women writers. Obviously male writers can and do write language-oriented work, and gender can be of concern to male language-oriented writers as well. And gender is certainly not the only or primary social category of concern to such writers. But, as Rae Armantrout suggests, "[a]s outsiders, women might, in fact, be well-positioned to appreciate the constructedness of the identity which is based on identification and, therefore, to challenge the contemporary poetic convention of the unified Voice" (8–9). DuPlessis offers a more complex and complete model, ascribing to women what she calls an "insider-outsider social status." A woman who "finds she is irreconcilable things: an outsider by her gender position, by her relation to power; may be an insider by her social position, her class" (*Pink* 8). To DuPlessis's duo of gender and class I would add the historically specific social implications of race and sexuality. Still, underlying these theoretical imperatives to limit my study to writing by women is the simple fact that my interest is in women writers. In this sense my project falls within the domain of gynocritics—a term coined by feminist critic Elaine Showalter to refer to the study of women writers and of the history, styles, and structures of writing by women. Showalter defines gynocritics as "historical in orientation; it looks at women's writing as it has actually occurred and

tries to define its specific characteristics of language, genre, and literary influence within a cultural network that includes variables of race, class, and nationality" (37). I am looking at language-oriented women writers *as women* and asking what they are doing in their work, why, and how their work speaks to issues of gender.

In particular, most of these poets acknowledge a connection between using language innovatively and their concerns with gender. Beverly Dahlen suggests that "the tradition of the avant-garde is important for women because it's a space that has opened . . . it's a fluid space" (personal interview). Laura Moriarty likewise finds more space in experimental writing, an alternative to the "very masculine" models of writing that were predominant when she began to write in the 1970s, when she "was very interested in a more nurturing kind of writing" (personal interview). Leslie Scalapino acknowledges that her writing is feminist,

though not as any specific "whole" doctrine known to me. . . "Centers" as economic and military power exist obviously—and we're articulated by conditions not of our choosing that are creating history—but the place where "one" is created and exists in writing is necessarily elsewhere from this. Because writing alleviates society's rigidity, in fact. The process of the writing is an alleviation of the social rigidity. (Written exchange)

Language-oriented writing also allows one to investigate and expose modes of discourse that serve to marginalize women. Carla Harryman describes this aspect of her project: "Gender is a real concern for me in my writing. . . . I'm very interested in power and the marginalization of women. I'm very interested subjectively in the gap between my experience and the discourse that's available to me—whether it's theoretical, philosophical, or just sort of quotidian media" ("An Interview" 531–32).

Susan Howe shares Harryman's concern with gender and discourse. But Howe's work is historical; her primary intention is to recover the varied female, feminine, and feminized voices of the past, to render audible what she refers to in "The Difficulties Interview" (DI) as the "silenced factions" (24) from their "Destiny of calamitous silence" (*Singularities* 25) to which traditional narrative historiography has banished them. Although in one recent interview Howe claims that her own gender is incidental to her writing, for "there's a mystery about poetry that transcends gender" (SSH 28), in another interview she acknowledges a difference that must extend to the conditions under which the poet writes. To Charles Olson's statement "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America"

(11) Howe responds, "I am a woman born in America. I can't take central facts for granted" (DI 21). None of the language-oriented women writers I treat in this study take central facts for granted.

But gender is not the only social category of concern to these writers, nor is their interest in gender traceable to the actual social positions of the writers. For instance, Lori Lubeski and Beverly Dahlen are additionally concerned with sexuality and class. Lubeski is from a working class background and does claim a lesbian identity. But while Dahlen's concern with sexuality is certainly not coincidental to her lesbianism, she has not always lived as a lesbian and she rejects the category itself. Leslie Scalapino, from a white upper-middle-class background, frequently addresses in her writing social injustices related to class and race. In other words, gender is, for most of these writers, one of a network of related axes of difference that their feminist projects address.

Language-Oriented Feminist Epistemology

Despite the diversity among language-oriented women writers and their lack of adherence to any single organized doctrine or method, the eight writers treated here do share a nonconformist, feminist vision and impulse. These writers offer in their work what I call "language-oriented feminist epistemologies"—ways of knowing that take gender into account without essentializing it, and that interrogate the very category of knowledge and the conditions of knowing.

Of course all language-oriented writing, whether feminist or not, is inherently epistemological: the question of how meaning is constituted in language is really a question of how we know what we know. This epistemological function of language, in turn, hinges on a notion of knowledge as inseparable from the social. Such a notion is the basis of Michel Foucault's call "to restore to discourse its character as an event" ("Discourse" 229). And by foregrounding the processes of language, language-oriented writing does treat discourse as an event, suggesting that *how* we know and *what* we know are not distinct categories. Jerome McGann has developed a theory of poetic knowledge that places both poetry and knowledge in the realm of social relations. In *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (SVPA) he claims that "what we call knowledge is not a corpus of information but a series of knowing acts that have been and are carried out under particular circumstances" (54), and urges us to conceive of poetry "as a social activity." Poems, in turn, he views as "instances of a kind of social practice carried out through determinate material forms and

institutions, and at particular places and times by many different people" (245). A poem is a communicative act, historically situated. Furthermore, poetic knowledge is a function of poetry's performativity. Because "the human world is not made up of 'facts' and/or 'interpretations,' it is made up of *events*" (72), and the poetic is "an event of language" (82), "[p]oems, therefore, should not be conceived of as representations; they are acts of representation" (246). McGann never specifies what he means by "poetry" in these descriptions; presumably all poetry—if it is to be called poetry—functions performatively in a social field, whether its writers and readers acknowledge these facts or not. But whereas "workshop poetry"⁴ would seem to depend on obscuring or even denying these characteristics, McGann's theory is particularly applicable to language-oriented writing that calls attention to these epistemological operations, acknowledging that all knowledge is mediated by language, and exploring the implications of this insight.

But as I pointed out in my preface, the epistemological concerns of the women language-oriented writers whose work is my subject cannot be separated from their feminist concerns. Each writer suggests, in her investigations into how meaning is constituted in language, that this question cannot be answered without taking into consideration the question of how the discursive operations of gender participate in the production of knowledge. Although McGann does not address gender per se in his writings on poetics, Joan Scott's gender theory helps show how his theories are conducive to a language-oriented feminist epistemology by revealing gender to be one kind of knowledge that is socially constructed in discourse. Specifically, Scott explains that gender is "the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences" (2). Therefore, "if we attend to the ways in which 'language' constructs meaning we will also be in a position to find gender" (55). Scott's definition of gender "rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (94). In other words, gender functions as a meaning-making mechanism, or a discourse, rather than a fixed biological category. By positing writing as a mode of knowing that continually interrogates its own methods and processes rather than a means to arrive at final conclusions or truths that exist outside the writing, so that "the knowing itself would be new, the news" (Dahlen, *AR* 8–10 133), language-oriented women writers open up to imaginative exploration these social relationships and signifying practices. These writers investigate the social functions of knowledge as

well—what Foucault calls each society's "regimes of truth" that determine how knowledge is produced, gets defined, valued, and shared—always taking into account the function that gender plays in these social processes. "No objects, spaces, or boundaries are sacred in themselves" (Harryman, *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* 40); gender and language are always interrelated and implicated in knowing. Language-oriented feminist epistemologies begin with the insight that how we know what we know, as well as what counts as "knowledge" in our culture, is *gendered*, and this gendering takes place in—and can therefore be transformed within—language. As such, language-oriented feminist epistemologies are distinct from both positivist and feminist standpoint epistemologies.

Feminist standpoint epistemology, rooted in a historical materialist critique of the sexual division of labor, is not wholly inconsistent with language-oriented feminist epistemology. Certainly they both offer critiques of the normative notions of knowing and knowledge that are based on the Western philosophical traditions of existentialism and phenomenology. They share the view that these supposedly gender-neutral systems of thought are not, after all, gender-neutral. But a closer look at this and some other of the most apparent points of overlap between language-oriented and standpoint feminist epistemologies reveals significant differences. For instance, whereas the feminist standpoint epistemologist would attribute this lack of neutrality to a dominant masculine experience assumed to be normative, a language-oriented woman writer is more likely to suggest in her work that this bias is a function of the way that disciplines maintain their linguistic influence and claims to objectivity by reinforcing gender categories and definitions.

In addition, both standpoint and language-oriented feminist epistemologies are based on the assumption that knowledge claims are always socially situated. But in their analysis of this situatedness, standpoint epistemologists attend to the material conditions of women's lives and pay little attention to the role language and discourse play in the construction of knowledge. Granted, language-oriented women writers' concern with gender and other axes of difference likely do stem from their own gender-, class-, race-, and sexuality-marked experiences in twentieth-century Western culture, but their analysis of that experience as it appears in their writing is never limited to labor divisions or to distinctively "female experience" as such. They focus instead on how gender renders and is rendered in discourse, how gender categories and other marks of difference facilitate the policing of discourse to

determine which discourses are available to which people. Feminist standpoint epistemologists, on the other hand, claim that "women's experience" of being oppressed by male dominance defines for them a "standpoint" or perspective from which they are able to gain a more accurate understanding of human relations than males have access to from their positions of dominance. As Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka put it, "distinctive aspects of women's experience . . . can provide resources for the construction of more representatively human understanding . . . a foundation for a more adequate and truly human epistemology" (x-xi).

Language-oriented women writers make no such claims. To the contrary, their writing suggests that the vision available to those in power is not more partial or less "representatively human" than the vision available to those who experience various forms of oppression. So while standpoint feminist epistemologist Sandra Harding urges her readers to accept "the idea of real knowledge that is socially situated" (50), language-oriented women writers would not make a distinction between "real" knowledge and partial or false knowledge. Language-oriented feminist epistemology posits *all* knowledge as socially situated and discursively constructed. This insight is valuable in a feminist analysis because it can illustrate how gender functions discursively and how socially constructed categories such as gender impose limits on human experience and understanding. Furthermore, a language-oriented feminist epistemologist would perceive power to operate not as a simple dichotomy, as standpoint feminists seem to view it (those in power versus those oppressed by the powerful), but in a more Foucauldian sense, as a constantly changing and multiply located set of complex relations.

As a further point of differentiation, Nancy C. M. Hartsock's proposal "to lay aside the important differences among women across race and class boundaries and instead search for central commonalities" (290) reveals the extent to which a standpoint epistemology, as its name implies, requires some solid ground (natural, universal commonalities among women, for instance) to stand on. Indeed, her description of how the sexual division of labor offers women a different perspective from that of men is steeped in essentialist notions of gender: "The female experience in reproduction represents a unity with nature which goes beyond the proletarian experience of interchange with nature" (293). So while standpoint epistemology operates by identifying "the deeper level or essence [that] both includes and explains the 'surface' or appearance [of sexual/social inequality], and indicates the logic by

means of which the appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality" (Hartsock 285), language-oriented women writers are skeptical of such deep meanings. According to a language-oriented feminist epistemological viewpoint, the surface—discourse—is what structures reality, and understanding how that surface works helps us to see how we are led to believe in deep meanings and essences, such as "feminine experience" or "lesbian desire" or the "self." As I illustrate in chapter 3, Beverly Dahlen's poetic critique of unified subjectivity and fixed definitions of gender and sexuality is based on her suspicion that the power relations in patriarchal social structures that many feminists would most like to change are in fact maintained by and depend on such illusions of deep essence.

To language-oriented women writers, gender, while not the only axis of difference they interrogate, is especially important because it is, to return to Joan Scott, "a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (94).⁵ Their writing investigates how gender operates discursively, as an analytical category, not as a perspective of inequality defined by the gender of the knower-writer. One does not have to be a woman or to have had cultural experiences typically associated with women to conduct such an investigation. Language-oriented feminist epistemology is not a *woman-centered* epistemology or a *feminine* epistemology. It is *feminist* because it seeks to disclose and change the operations of power in discourse that have depended on limited and fixed notions of gender and other differences among people.

The modes of inquiry in which these writers engage involve a feminist inquiry into authority. Always indeterminate, open, resisting closure, this writing performs interpretive, expressive, dialogic acts that require both reader and writer to participate in the "untraceable wandering / the meaning of knowing" (Howe, *Singularities* 25)—reader and writer are engaged with language and with one another. Thus, both assume dynamic roles as participants in the making of meaning.

"Night Knowledge": Lyn Hejinian's Faustienne Poetics

"My mortal state, *knowing*, gives
me no guarantee of what
will happen"

So reality is a process
not an identity

—Lyn Hejinian (*The Cell* 105)

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That reality is a process, and a person's knowledge of reality is also therefore a process—something experienced rather than something possessed—is a central motivating assumption behind Lyn Hejinian's poetics. Hejinian's many poetic works—open, elliptical, ongoing—demonstrate and explore the epistemological problem of "the real" that we are faced with when we acknowledge that language plays more than a merely descriptive role in our knowledge of the world.⁶ Such a perspective, especially if it brings with it a "language-oriented feminist epistemology," as her work does, would seem counter to modes of knowing that value objectivity and certainty and that are bent on the acquisition of knowledge as something existing separate from and prior to the means of acquiring and categorizing that prize. I normally think of this model of knowing as definitive of "Western science." Therefore, I was at first perplexed by Hejinian's correlation of poetic experimentation with scientific experimentation:

A central figure of the narrative of knowledge, its hero or genius, could easily be Faust. . . . Faustian desire has driven the encyclopedic enterprises which have been undertaken in the name of that quest—the most obvious being Western science. The "scientific method" has dominated not just the laboratory; it has also provided a compelling model for writers who have undertaken a "poetic method" analogous to it. The scientific and poetic methods have analogous rigors, present analogous challenges, and the comparison has been explicit in, for example, the "avant garde realism" that Gertrude Stein got from William James and Flaubert—employing an "experimental method"—"beginning again and again" with patient attention, demanding long and close observation, and so on, bound to an infinite project which opens up before the insatiability of the desire to know and grieves over the brevity of the experience of knowing. ("La Faustienne" 11)

Hejinian's own desire to know, and her grief at the brevity of the experience of knowing, as expressed in her poetic autobiography, *My Life (ML)*, at first only compounded my puzzlement: "I want to remember more than more than that, more or less as it really happened. It seems that we hardly begin before we are already there" (69). The sense that something is always left out or glossed over in memory—that perfect knowledge of reality (in this case, the past as it "really" was) is impossible—is a recurring, circulating theme of this book-length, nonlinear, poetic work in prose, and is also one source of the work's haunting beauty,

the sense I get while reading that each word is strangely charged with a melancholy humor: "Our dog will eat broccoli. Mischief logic; Miss Chief. I would be aloof, dark, indirect and upsetting or I would be a center of patience and material calm. So that later, playing alone, I could imagine myself developing into a tree, and then I yearned to do so with so much desire that it made me shapeless, restless, sleepless, demanding, disagreeable" (*ML* 29). But a closer reading of her critical and poetic works reveals that for Hejinian the significance—and value—of this continually unfulfilled desire for "perfect knowing" lies precisely in its unfulfilledness. Language plays an important role in this desire. Hejinian explains in her essay "The Rejection of Closure" (RC):

It's in the nature of language to encourage, and in part to justify, such Faustian longings. The notion that language is the means and medium for attaining knowledge, and, concomitantly, power, is old, of course. . . . The . . . position . . . that there is an essential identity between name and thing, that the real nature of a thing is immanent and present in its name, that nouns are numinous . . . suggests that it is possible to find a language which will meet its object with perfect identity. If this were the case, we could, in speaking or in writing, achieve the at-oneness with the universe, at least in its particulars, that is the condition of paradise, or complete and perfect knowing. (281)

In language, then, perfect knowing would be the perfect identity of word and thing. And in *My Life* Hejinian admits to experiencing this linguistic longing as well: "Then cataloguing the travel library I got the mania for panorama which predicts the desire for accurate representation" (58). But language does not mean numinously; in its trajectory from speech to world and back again it marks difference, not identity. In her long poem "The Person," Hejinian writes:

Realism is an unimaginable ballad: direct speech
 across the trajectory of nature in its trees
 Which word is an object of imitation?
 And in returning differs (*Cold* 179)

This stanza illustrates McGann's adage, which I take as one of the defining features of language-oriented feminist epistemology, that poems are not representations, but *acts* of representation. Individual words cannot be identified with individual things—we cannot tell "which word" is

responsible for which meanings, at least not in a one-to-one equation. Language means relationally, associatively, partially, and contextually. The word in world is far flung across a “trajectory of nature”—the field of action and meaning in which it participates, and is changed. “[I]n returning,” the word “differs” because meaning and reference are unstable. While these observations about language are by no means unique, the consequences for poetry that Hejinian perceives as a result are remarkable. For therefore, “writing is contextual. It has ethical, phenomenological, cultural, historical, political, etc. contexts which are then also incorporated into its intentions. Work is both influenced and influential” (“The Poet and the World”). These incorporated contexts, then, are the “particular circumstances” under which the “series of knowing acts,” which comprise knowledge, according to McGann, are carried out (*SVPA* 54).

And herein lies the epistemological value of writing for Hejinian. Because each act of knowing-in-writing is contextual, it is unique. It cannot be replicated or even repeated. Hejinian points out that this is also the case for Faust’s night visions—the scenes distant in time and place on which Faust is able to gaze with the assistance of Mephistopheles—and for Gertrude Stein’s writing experiments, both of which knowledge projects serve as departures for Hejinian in her own work. Hejinian sees Stein’s project as exemplary of the Faustian model of Western science:

Gertrude Stein was a great scientific writer, whose writing was about experimentation even as it enacted experiments, and one would place the motivation—the impulse and the method—right in the tradition of Western science, with the one provision that her experiments can’t be reproduced.

I think this is ontologically important and the implications have, for me, been exemplary—she had a strong sense of the uniqueness of absolutely anything while at the same time seeing that that uniqueness always depended on (because it was derived from) the ever-changing relationships which serve as the context and pretext for anything’s existence. (Letter 1/22/95)

But what finally sets both Stein and Faust apart from the concept of Western science that seems so at odds with the kind of free knowing and radically open experimentation that defines Hejinian’s writing project is that they both acknowledge that context, including language, is

constitutive of all knowing. Since what we know and how we know can never be separated from the *process of knowing*, objective, final knowledge—scientific certainty—can never be secured. Some uncertainty or doubt will always remain. Indeed, the epistemological significance of Faust, Stein, and Hejinian's projects is dependent on this insight. Hejinian explains: "I've learned from Stein (from her method) that knowledge may sometimes produce certainty but that it may often produce uncertainty. Doubt (now dignified by a lot of postmodern philosophical attention) is central to Stein's project. I, of course, don't mean tentativeness, nor even self-doubt, but rather an awareness of incompleteness and perpetual or recurrent newness" (Letter 1/22/95). Hejinian finds a positive value in this uncertainty—and in the awareness of it. Of course if context is always constitutive of knowledge, then this same doubt or uncertainty is a quality of all Western science. And indeed, a scientific result has to be repeatedly verified. The difference is that rather than attempting to eradicate doubt by seeking ever greater objectivity, Hejinian hones in on it, exploring and pursuing the epistemological implications of doubt. Although Hejinian identifies the Faustian "desire that is stirred by language" as "androgynous" because it "seems to be located . . . within language" (RC 283), rather than in the gendered language user, her poetic explorations of the doubt that this inevitably unfulfilled desire continually produces do seem to take gender into account—including problems of gender important to feminist thought—and to offer solutions, greater freedoms, ways of knowing that can be called feminist, if not explicitly gendered. "But who," Hejinian asks, "is Faust's female counterpart. Who is La Faustienne?" ("La Faustienne" 12). In her exploration of uncertainty, Hejinian suggests a faustienne poetics and epistemology—a way of knowing already implicit in the Western scientific method, but whose implications have yet to be fully explored, much less validated.

By aligning the poetic with the scientific, Hejinian is not advocating the kind of poetry objected to by the New Critics, poems with paraphrasable and extractable meanings that can be submitted to a scientific analysis. But neither is she arguing that the only truth poetry can approximate is the truth of subjective personal experience, as the most widely published American poetry of the 1970s insisted. For Hejinian, as for McGann, poetry is able to investigate truth by investigating "the relation of language and truth." In her writing, "the question of poetry's truth . . . gets . . . engaged as an epistemological self-interrogation" (McGann, *Black Riders* 123, 136). Hejinian's self-interrogation focuses on the

experimental *method* rather than its results in order to attend to the role that language plays in both method and outcome, including the significance of doubt in the process.

Hejinian's poetics take the process, context, and materials of the knowing situation into account as components of the knowing itself, rather than trying to separate knowledge (as a product) from the process of "acquiring" it. As is the case for all the writers I discuss in the following chapters, knowing is for Hejinian something experienced, not something claimed, staked-out, possessed. Language, of course, is one of the more significantly material components of the epistemological situation, and Hejinian's writing highlights the constitutive role language plays in how we know and what we know by maintaining a continual state of uncertainty. Thus, her project serves as introduction to the different ways in which Leslie Scalapino, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Carla Harryman explore the phenomenological function of language that I examine in chapter 4. Among Hejinian's works, *My Life*, both as a whole and in its individual passages, serves as an excellent example of Hejinian's sense that process and context—and hence, language—are inseparable from what we say we "know."

My Life unfolds within a formal structure that actually allows the work to remain open and open-ended because the form is both arbitrary and externally imposed; it is not presented as "organic" or the inevitable outcome of the writing's "content." First completed in 1978 when Hejinian was 37 years old, *My Life* was comprised of 37 sections, each containing 37 sentences. The revised edition, which Hejinian produced eight years later, now has 45 sections, 45 sentences in each. The sentences and sections represent units of consciousness—instances of perception, memory, awareness or description of which one's "life" is inevitably constructed. The work continually enacts the interplay between past and present in which any autobiography takes part by presenting details and events not in order of their chronological occurrence in history, but in the order in which they are remembered, even triggering each other associatively: "Sticky finger licking chicken. Cliches and lamentation. We were floating the logic in a rushing medium" (78). The rushing medium is language itself, and submitting to its playful processes allows a more encompassing kind of realism than that which insists that language is merely descriptive, external to the experiences it describes. As a result, Hejinian's sentences describe not only experiences, but a person's experiencing of those experiences. "The synchronous keeps its reversible logic, and in this it resembles psychology, or

the logic of a person" (44). The synchronous is more real than chronology because it allows for a broader spectrum of reality—not just the objects a person describes in language, but the language as well, its processes, and the person's own consciousness.

Hejinian continually reminds herself and her readers that in autobiography, a life is constructed in language and is itself a writing process: "I pushed my thumb to make a lever of the blunt spoon, he took up the palette knife and ships came out of the blue, I hit the space bar" (32). For Hejinian, gaining access to the reality of one's life depends on taking account of language as an active partner, for "What follows a strict chronology has no memory. For me, they must exist, the contents of that absent reality, the objects and occasions which now I reconsidered" (13). One of the work's most compelling effects is the sense of dual consciousness that results when reality is comprised of objects, mind, and language, functioning together in the present, and therefore not referable to chronology or a fixed "past."

A significant component of the nonlinear progression of *My Life* is its repetitions. Certain key phrases recur throughout the text, but in ever-shifting contexts, so that the resulting loops and overlays serve a generative function. Here are three of the many recurrences of one such repeating phrase: "As for we who 'love to be astonished,' my heartbeats shook the bed" (22). "As for we who 'love to be astonished,' every Sears smells the same" (34). "As for we who 'love to be astonished,' she pretends she is a blacksmith" (36–37). The phrase is different each time it recurs because the context—in this case, the main clause that the repeated modifying phrase introduces—is different, unique, unreproducible; "Hence, repetitions, free from all ambition" (7). Hejinian's readers who love to be astonished are continually rewarded by the perpetual newness of her text and its meanings.

That *My Life* is a work composed in sentences is notable for the emphasis placed on the relationship between the sentences. Hejinian does not disrupt syntax within sentences, some of which contain conventionally embedded phrases and clauses: "At the circus men were selling live chameleons which wore tiny collars and were attached to red and yellow ribbons that one could pin to one's dress or shirt as a living jewel" (30). And though some of the units punctuated as sentences are fragments, these tend to be syntactically complete constituents, such as noun phrases—"A common act, the swing of the leg" (70)—or prepositional phrases: "Between plow and prow" (65). The subtle disorienting effect of the writing, then, results from disjunction between rather than

within these syntactic units. Here, again, Hejinian is intentionally exploring the epistemological potential of uncertainty. "One of the results of this compositional technique," Hejinian explains,

building a work out of discrete units, is the creation of sizeable gaps between the units. The reader (and I can also say the writer) has to overleap the period, and cover the distance to the next sentence. But, meanwhile, what remains in the gaps, so to speak, remains crucial and informative. Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (focus backward) and the discovery of newly structured ideas (focus forward). (RC 274)

This interactive reading process that the text initiates, then, ensures that "Utterances are made intelligible because of differentiating features, features which are activated by the exigencies of the moment and context of the utterance" (RC 276). And a significant component of this context is the subject—reader and/or writer—who is always mediated, acting through and dependent on the operations of language that construct a variety of shifting and often gendered subject positions the subject might occupy.

Hejinian resists what she describes in her essay "The Person and Description" (P&D) as the "existential premise . . . of some core reality at the heart of our sense of being" and this notion's attendant conception of "the work of art as an expression uttered in the artist's 'own voice,' issuing from an inner, fundamental, sincere, essential, irreducible, consistent self, an identity which is unique and separable from all other human identities—an independent, undemonstrable, but sensible entity" (166). As I mentioned in the preface, this rejection of essential being is common in women's language-oriented writing, and Hejinian's investigation of the conditions of subjectivity is just one of a number of such inquiries. In chapter 3, I consider three very different versions of this critique offered by Beverly Dahlen, Lori Lubeski, and Laura Moriarty. In Hejinian's critique, she offers in place of the existential notion of an essential self, *the person*—an active, knowing subject mediated by the person's relations to experience—including language—and her consciousness of those relations:

Certainly I have an experience of being in position, at a time and place . . . but this position is temporary . . . I have no experience of being except in position.

All my observations are made from within the matrix of possibly infinite contingencies and contextualities.

This sense of contingency is ultimately intrinsic to my experience of the self, as a relationship rather than an existence, whose exercise of the possibilities (including consciousness) of its conditions and occasions constitutes a person. (P&D 167)

Hejinian's "person," in fact, has much in common with Julia Kristeva's "subject-in-process" in that the person's condition of plurality and of being in flux is a function of its being a speaking subject, speaking (or writing) in language always marked by a quality of uncertainty. For Kristeva this uncertainty exposes a semiotic "disposition" in language, what she describes as "a distinctive mark, trace, index . . . a *distinctiveness* admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer . . . to a signified object for thetic consciousness" (133). Hejinian perceives a similar tension in language and describes it in remarkably similar terms:

The point is that there's a very generative struggle between the two impulses. On the one hand, for the writer, faced with the world of meaning and the intention or hope to make something meaningful out of it, there is an urge to identify, locate, be comprehensive, have content. On the other hand, there is the, to me, endlessly obvious observation that no single thing ever holds it all, or even adequately comes to say what it was I thought I could really get to this time . . . It's like this yearning from one to the other and back again. This is why I used that word desire. (RC 291)

The person, suspended in an interminable state of desire in language, becomes "not an entity but a dynamic. There is no self undefiled by experience, no self unmediated in the epistemological situation, but a person instead" (P&D 167). *My Life*, as one would expect of an autobiography, is riddled with first-person assertions and observations; "I" is one of the most frequently used words in the work. But in Hejinian's writing, the "I" is disunified and rendered slightly incoherent by this very process of "recollection," which demands that "I" exist in at least two places and two times simultaneously. To tell of my past or my "self" coherently demands that "I" occupy a third position neither here nor there, now nor then, subject nor object. She does not attempt to conceal or mend the rifts in the narrative that result. Hejinian shows what

happens when the speaker of one's "own" life does not weave the fiction of an essential continuous self, but instead acknowledges that "My life is as permeable constructedness" (*ML* 93):

I am looking for a little hand mirror. The summer evenings saw window shoppers in a reflecting system, man with merchandise agog. It is hard to turn away from moving water. All summer I worked as a mountain guide and behind me hiked a group of girls giggling in descent of a president. He made me nervous as soon as he began offering a special discount. But the work is probably a good deal wiser than the horny old doctor he was. I wrote my name in every one of his books. A name trimmed with colored ribbons. (*ML* 53)

The overlapping of past and present observations, discontinuity from one sentence to the next, and shifts in point of view, show the person to be constantly moving, dividing from herself both temporally and spatially. The person is here engaged in what Hejinian calls "radical introspection"—a kind of consciousness of consciousness that "newly delineates and constantly shifts the boundary between subject and object. It establishes the relationship between self and other, between body and mind, and then transgresses the borders it has established" (*P&D* 170).

Hejinian explores the process and implications of radical introspection most directly in "The Person," comprised of 28 short sections or individual poems, each of which is also entitled "The Person." This repetition invites the reader to see each section as commenting on every other section of the poem, as well as pointing to "our contemporary experience of being a person—a zone" ("La Faustienne" 11). Also, each new section offers in its title—"The Person"—an answer to the question posed in the first stanza of the first section of the series:

Is there a name
for the imploding series
"consciousness of consciousness"
Realism and depth perception
The audacious science of the thought
of poetry (*Cold* 143)

Because "there is no outside/position" for the person to occupy, no place outside of experience or of the language used to "describe" one's