

the other hand, Language writing often attempts to block that ideology (by jamming the system or by cutting the flow of communication, for example) or to embarrass it (by subjecting it to disclosure and critique). In other words, literary devices—disjuncture, the use of parallelism rather than sequence, ellipses, the incorporation of brutal discourse into work, code shifting, and indeed all devices that accomplish a semantic shift—were used with political intent, and both social and literary material regimens were brought into confrontation.

The political character is not inherent in the devices but in the intention motivating their use. A central concern of writing that views such devices as socially material is not subjectivity but agency.

DUBRAVKA DJURIC: Could you tell me about your first poems and other writings, about the fields of interest that were initial and important for you in your beginnings?

LYN HEJINIAN: One of the too rarely considered features of what we term *language* is its multiple character, its polymorphism. Language is qualitatively different from other artistic mediums in that it isn't, strictly speaking, one thing, a single type of material. Language consists of a vast array of strategies and situations for discovering and making meaning. It not only exists in multitudes of context, it is multitudes of context.

- My first "writings" were made when I was nine or ten years old, and they were unremarkable in themselves. This isn't surprising, since I in fact didn't particularly care what it was I was writing. I never, for example, thought that words could capture the world or capture my experience (although perhaps during my adolescence I thought that

writing might be able to apologize for my existence), and I was never engrossed in "looking for the right word" for something. Instead, my earliest inspirations were my father's typewriter and the two stacks of paper, one clean and the other covered with type, on either side of it. My father, during the first decade or so of my life, spent the evenings and weekends writing a series of novels. None of them was ever published. He also worked as a university administrator, first at the University of California and then at Harvard University, and when I was around ten years old he abandoned novel-writing and returned to an earlier interest in painting. I was given his typewriter.

My earliest writings were, strictly speaking, typing. I was happy to type almost anything, and although I wrote some poems and a short picaresque novel in the guise of a diary kept by a ten-year-old boy (it is no doubt significant that I wrote in the unmarked first person, that is, as a boy), the writing activity that I remember most clearly and with the most pleasure was a series of melodramas based on a popular radio show called "Bobby Benson and the B Bar B." I wrote the plays in collaboration with a friend, and if I remember correctly, she made up the stories and I simply typed what she dictated to me.

I've always had difficulty making up plots, perhaps because I have difficulty imagining people's motivations. It was the material world of writing that first attracted me to it. Because it was material, it was sensual, and despite being material, it was also unpredictable. The urge to write was sparked sometimes by the mere physical activity of writing and sometimes by individual words, but in either case, the

urge preceded knowing what I could or wanted to write about. The typewriter and the dictionary together offered me the promise of projects and discovery.

I don't know when it was that I first encountered poetry, but I do know that T. S. Eliot was an early discovery. Thirteen lines from *Four Quartets* were included in an anthology my parents had given me for my fourteenth birthday. It was called *Imagination's Other Place: Poems of Science and Mathematics* and the passage from *Four Quartets* began:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

What I now recognize as fairly orthodox religiosity, at the time I thought was a study of time and knowledge. Time in its ceaselessness and the eternal changes, displacements, substitutions that it brings about, made everything unknowable (and even, perhaps, meaningless), but the resulting aporia didn't seem the least discouraging. On the contrary, the inevitability of uncertainty seemed to open up the possibility of infinite varieties of meaningfulness. I was discovering a peculiar relationship between sense and not-yet-sense in Eliot, a metaphysics that couldn't be detached from language.

Meanwhile, my parents were guiding me to read other poets; Robert Browning, Stephen Vincent Benet, Robert Frost, and Langston Hughes were favorites. My father admired Gertrude Stein enormously (he had grown up as she had in Oakland, California), and my mother loved Cole-

ridge (she had me read "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" aloud to her over the course of several summer afternoons when I was 9 or 10). I was unacquainted with European poetry, and I hadn't yet made a distinction between English and American poetry, considering it all "ours." I was profoundly impressed by Chaucer.

DD: Please describe the stages of your writing procedure. You have said that the writing process is "composition rather than writing"—could you explain this statement?

LH: The writing process is probably not very cogently divisible into stages. Progress occurs, but not always and strictly in stages. But perhaps I could identify three distinct elements of the process: the scrutinizing attention that both searches and hovers; the strategic force that language itself is; and the conscious writing of the poem and what results, unforeseeable but fully intended. These elements are often present simultaneously and they always overlap, so to use the word "stages" would be misleading; they don't constitute a developmental sequence. And even to name different elements risks obscuring the reality, which is that writing is really an indivisible process. One wants to ask how one gets going, how one keeps going, and how one knows what is going on. One wants to ask where the ideas are and how one sets the whole order of ideas in motion. And underlying these essentially practical, technical aspects of the poetic process, one wants to ask what poetry is *for*—why does one write it? But none of these questions is more or less basic than any of the others. The indivisibility of the writing process is occurring at every point within it.

The notion of active observation has an oxymoronic quality that is important to notice. One is engaged in an active mental (intellectual and emotional) operation in which one simultaneously searches for something with active expectation while awaiting the unexpected, unpredicted material. One focuses closely while expanding one's field of vision into the blurred peripheries. One is trying to be precise, to figure things out, while entertaining the incongruous, the out of scale, the excess.

X For a writer, it is language that carries thought, perception, and meaning. And it does so through a largely metonymic process, through the discovery and invention of associations and connections. Though it may seem merely technical, the notion of linkage—of forging connections—has, in my mind, a concomitant political or social dimension. Communities of phrases spark the communities of ideas in which communities of persons live and work.