

University of Southampton

Writing for the Reader ? The Politics of Selfhood in the Work of
Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino

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ABSTRACT

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The central aim of this work is to examine the significance that has been attributed to the construction of authoriality in contemporary poetics. The thesis examines the author in the text as a site upon which literary critics have been able to debate the political significance of the literary itself. The thesis examines the differing strategies which three American women poets have formulated for negotiating one specific instance of this controversy, and in doing so examines the problems attending the connection of feminist literary production with notions of political agency.

The three poets examined in the thesis have been most readily allied with the school of avant-garde American poetry that has come to be known as 'Language' writing. One of Language writing's foundational tenets has been that its textual 'difficulty' demands an active or sceptical reading practice, which allows the reader to become oppositionally engaged. I contend that this principle assumes that reading, without the intervention of the 'difficult' text, is a passive act, and suggest that an account of cultural consumption, which emphasises the complex dynamics between reading and writing positions, is in danger of being overlooked. The thesis centrally aims to explore such a dynamic by emphasising the politics of the various subject positions created in this writing, and examining what they imply for a reading practice. My methodology involves critically analysing the readings hitherto provided for these poets and making apparent the limiting assumptions that they rely upon. I then propose an alternative reading of each poet's relationship to cultural authority, as it is mediated through the constructions of selfhood and writing.

The chapter on Susan Howe initially explores the complications that have accompanied the construction of the self in Howe's work. I explore the ways in which Howe's authorial 'stammer', her hesitant poetic voice, can be understood as both a subversive and a conservative force in her texts. I contend that critical responses to Howe's writing have been reluctant to fully explore these ambiguities, and attempt to correct this perceived shortfall. My reading of Howe's work aims to demonstrate the ways in which her attempt to establish a caesura between the text and history within which her poetry - and often her authorial self - can operate is a move that can conceal her own investment in producing the narratives her texts ostensibly seek to fragment.

The chapter on Lyn Hejinian demonstrates how Hejinian's work also attempts to create a space within which the authorial self can operate. In Hejinian's writing, however, this space is envisaged as occurring not within the scissions of history, but between 'construction and experience'. I contend that Hejinian attempts to construct a written self that can acknowledge both its external determinations and its own sense of agency. The chapter initially follows the critical readings of Hejinian which have examined the way in which her work uses autobiography to 'renarrativise' the self, and suggests that the emphasis on the active reader, enacted by much of this criticism, has meant that some of the assumptions of Language writing have gone unexamined. Chief among these is the notion that experimental writing and autobiography are necessarily mutually exclusive, and that the former occupies a privileged space for challenging the ideological assumptions of the latter. I suggest that the potency of Hejinian's work is derived from the fact that she refuses to allow it to settle within these generic conventions. This resistance is then read as a strategy by which Hejinian negotiates her own sense of textual agency, an agency that, in her later work especially, actually seems to limit the liberatory positions offered to the reader by the text.

The final chapter examines the work of Leslie Scalapino. Scalapino's lack of interiority is explored in this chapter not through the assumption that this absence allows for readerly participation, but through what it actually implies for an interrogation of the subject's relationship to the politics of space. I contend that the subjective positioning that Scalapino's work constructs offers an alternative to the subject positions created by some modernist and avant-garde poets. In the concluding section to the chapter I examine how Scalapino's move to prose can be read as part of this faltering disillusionment with modernist/ avant-garde paradigms. I note how much of this later prose writing appears concerned with explicit exegesis, with providing her readership with an explanatory structure in which the texts can be meaningfully located. The chapter ends by questioning what this structure, this provision of a directed reading, implies for Scalapino's broader aims. This final question, concerning the political implications of reading these poets outside of Language writing, is taken up in my conclusion, as I consider the need to reformulate an understanding of these poets, and the relationship they construct between politics and reading.

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Introduction. The Will to Change

The poet Adrienne Rich's early career registers one of contemporary American poetry's most dramatic shifts. Her first collection, *A Change of World*, published in 1951, was initially praised for its adherence to the aesthetics of high modernist impersonality. In his introduction to the volume W.H Auden alludes directly to T.S Eliot when he praises Rich's work for demonstrating, 'a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible' (Auden 1993, p.277). Many of the key poems from the volume now seem remarkable, however, not for their capacity for subjective detachment but for the prescience of their implicit critique of the implications of such a criteria. Auden may detect a retrospective preoccupation with the social changes of *early* twentieth century, that 'we are living not at the beginning but in the middle of a historical epoch', but the collection itself suggests something quite different. Poems such as 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' and 'Storm Warnings' are redolent with the taut frustration and oppressive quiet of the early fifties that gave way, in the following decade, to the vocal demand for the sweeping social changes that came to characterise many sections of American society in the sixties. These changes became articulated, in Rich's own writing, through the insights of a politically marginalised feminist and lesbian consciousness. What this later writing also demanded, of course, was a rejection of the 'sweetly flowing measure' of Rich's modernist 'craftwork' (to use Auden's term) in favour of the 'ragged line and coarsened voice' of subjective emotion and personal involvement (Rich 1993, p.247).

Yet this focus on the politics of selfhood, although hegemonic in much American poetry for the three decades following *A Change of World*, was being negotiated in entirely different ways in other intellectual realms as the sixties progressed. The poetic or lyrical articulation of the feminist dictum that the 'personal is political' was often actually reliant upon, as even supportive critics of it later noted, an 'unrecognised Romanticism' of which much critical theory was becoming increasingly suspicious (Montefiore 1987, p.8). Such Romantic models of individual and expressive authorship were, according to the influential poststructuralism of writers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, integral to the ideological narratives of modernity that shrouded discursive tensions with a false belief in the self-founding or transcendental subject.¹

¹

Michel Foucault theorised this relationship between selfhood and authorship most explicitly in his essay

This thesis, at its baldest, seeks to examine the forms of authorship which appear to have been produced within the tension between a theory that challenged the ideological implications of the expressive 'I', and a poetics that emerged from the conviction that to remove the self is to take refuge in an apolitical impersonality, thus removing politics from writing. In other words, the thesis examines writing that is responsive to both a poststructuralist and postmodernist influenced poetics that sought to challenge the centrality of the subject, and to feminist theory which sought, in its own internally disparate ways, to understand what such a move would mean for the marginal subject's ability to effect social change.

In the body of the thesis, therefore, the significance of selfhood in the experimental text is examined not through its congruence with literary poststructuralism but with contemporary feminism. The thesis particularly draws upon recent feminist thinking which has sought to find ways of meaningfully *resituating* subjectivity, of articulating a notion of selfhood that was neither self-founding (by either side of the Cartesian divide), nor wholly externally determined, but was capable of politicising these apparent disjunctions and contradictions of modern selfhood. My aim in drawing upon these theories is to evade the limited, and perhaps dehistoricising, choices that, as Jacqueline Rose has pointed out, feminist criticism has 'for some time' offered women poets.²

The debates informing these apparent choices have, of course, been significant in fuelling many of the central controversies of contemporary thought. Theorists of marginality have explored the range of political and theoretical dangers that removing subjectivity, and thus removing both agency and self-reflection, would incur. It was argued, for example, that Michel Foucault's apparent willingness to relinquish selfhood was premised on a notion of *power* that seemed deceptively disinterested. Foucault's apparent glibness was disparaged by those who suggested that the implied equitable nature of this omnipresent power rendered it a totalising force incapable of analysing the very real and physical nature of oppression. Feminist critics such as Rosi Braidotti noted how Foucault's project was too heavily laden with masculinist assumptions to take into account the foundational inequalities of sexual difference (Braidotti 1991). The Marxist critic Nancy Fraser contested that his failure to distinguish between malign and benign

² 'What is an Author' (Foucault 1984). Foucault's analysis of the relationship between language, discourse, and modernity was more fully described in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and *The Order of Things* (1974).

2

Rose suggests that critical readings of women poets have been restricted by the desire for either 'a consistent and articulate "I"' or for 'linguistic fragmentation', and that this restriction has proffered a 'stark alternative between, on the one hand, a masculinist aesthetic and, on the other, a form of writing connoted to the feminine only to the extent that it is projected to the underside of language and speech [...] both seem to remove the

practices of power, to construct a normative framework within which power operates, implied a belief in the Enlightenment values which he had purportedly set out to challenge (Fraser 1989). The importance of self-reflection to identity was defended by critics such as Manfred Frank, who argued from within a tradition of German hermeneutics that the loss of agency upon which Foucault's work is inevitably predicated is never matched by an analysis of what can be extra-discursive, of subversion itself. For Frank, Foucault's work centrally lacks an analysis that could account for the individual's self-evident capacity for self-reflection (Frank 1984).

What this snapshot survey of responses to Foucault most obviously suggests, however, is that these two positions - between the self founding and the decentered self - were never as dichotomously drawn as these rather stark, albeit now familiar, designations may at first suggest. At stake in the debates around subjectivity was not simply the straw 'man' of liberal humanism but the 'competing problematics that define the relationship of language and subjectivity in radically different ways, [...] problematics [which] underwrite political and ethical values' (Steele 1997, p.15-16).³ The thesis is interested in examining *how* these 'competing problematics' have been rendered significant, how they have underwritten the political and ethical values of contemporary American poetry. These issues are primarily examined in order to highlight how an anxiety about authorship/ subjecthood has affected the way in which the relationship between the literary and the *political* has been constructed. The cultural significance of these changing preconceptions about subjectivity became meaningful, I want to demonstrate, as they were applied within the academy, as they came to influence institutionally sanctioned ways of thinking, reading and writing.

Roland Barthes' proclamation in 'Death of the Author', for example, may have allowed for an overused and aphoristic understanding of emerging debates, but it was also suggestive of the fact that the political radicalism of 1968 retreated, as its revolutionary impetus faltered, from the streets and into the literary academy.⁴ The essay supplies a reminder that intellectual contestations

woman from historical process' (Rose 1991, p.27).

³ The premise to Meile Steele's *Theorizing Textual Subjects: Agency and Oppression* is that 'these debates are so committed to a theory that they either squeeze out meta-critical space altogether or they refuse to thematise the theoretical commitments in their meta-critiques' (p.16). His own goal in this text is 'to create a space for ethics and agency and to reformulate this incommensurability in a positive way through meta-critical reflection. Hence, the dispute between Habermas and the poststructuralists can be reworked so that our theoretical choices are no longer mutually exclusive' (p.11). This goal is in many ways analogous to the preoccupation of this thesis, to examine the significance of the ways in which women 'Language' writers brought apparently mutually exclusive narratives of selfhood into play.

⁴ As Séan Burke has noted, Barthes' essay resulted in controversy, rather than productive debate. Burke argues

over the political implications of subjectivity, the well-rehearsed trepidations about selfhood and its ability to perform political action, have often practically focused upon the significance that could be attributed to the activity of the *reader* and the *writer* of the written text. One of the central methodological aims of this work is to examine these processes at work, to examine the practices that attributed meaning to authoriality at their least abstract. I want to illustrate what was seen to be at stake in issues of authorship for American poetry, and to demonstrate how this played into the ways in which American poetry was taught, written and read.

Contemporary American poetics can be easily located within a theoretical framework that used issues of authoriality to ally the political with the literary. The controversies surrounding the status of the subject within critical thought can be mapped onto the work of two of twentieth century American poetry's most influential thinkers. What such a mapping also quickly reveals is the fact that this was a 'crisis' that was, in practice, actually deeply embedded in institutional and pedagogical practices. Charles Olson asserted in his 1966 essay, 'Projective Verse', that poetry will only 'lead to dimensions larger than man' through 'getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual ego' (Olson 1994, p.620). Conversely, Adrienne Rich used her own subjective positionality in the essay, first published in 1984, 'Blood, Bread and Poetry' to critique the limitations of America's claims to social inclusiveness (Rich 1993). Although there are two decades between them (both in terms of their age and their respective essays) these essays by Olson and Rich reinforce the issues that underlie the use of the subjective in contemporary American poetry. In both essays, form is significant because of the effects it was presumed to have upon the reader and writer. Olson and Rich are both attempting to prescribe a methodology for making the poetic text accountable to a radical (although also radically different) political agenda in an increasingly right wing and expansionist cold war climate. Thus, despite the contrasts, the model of authorship that each proposes is characterised by the need to define political significance for the text through the effects that it has upon the *reader*. The central principle of Olson's projective verse is the movement of 'kinetics': 'a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations) by way of the poem itself, all the way over to the reader' (Olson 1994, p.614). Rich's aim is to participate in the project of allowing women to

that this is because the humanist-post-structuralist positions, which calcified around this specific work, were actually misplaced. Burke argues that the essay is actually constructed around a self-fulfilling contradiction: '[Barthes] does not so much destroy the 'Author-God' but participates in its construction. He must create a king worthy of the killing. Not only is the author to be compared with tyrannical deity, but also with bourgeois man himself' (Burke 1992, p.26).

'have an art of our own [] to speak of what has been muffled in code or silence, to make concrete the values of our movement bringing forth out of consciousness raising, speakouts and activism' (Rich 1993, p 248) Consistent with what, for example, Umberto Eco has argued of literature more generally the author is seen in these models as a textual strategy, complementary 'to the activation of a model reader' (Eco 1981, p 11)⁵

Neither of these essays, and their descriptions of selfhood, are as much about actual readers, however, as they are about *ways* of reading Poetry gains authority, as critics of American poetry have noted, primarily through its ability to construct its own set of reading priorities 'a mode becomes dominant when the ethos it idealizes develops institutional power - both for the ways in which *agents represent themselves* and, more importantly, as the basic example of what *matters in reading and attributing significance* to what one reads' (Altieri 1984, p 8 italics mine) The different formalistic agendas that Rich and Olson advocate in their poetics, specifically in their construction of an authorial presence, are considered by both to effect certain types of reading what I am describing, following Charles Altieri, as a poetic 'mode'

What these two examples also demonstrate is that this 'mode', the relationship between textual author and reader, is necessarily implicated in wider political projects and structures of institutional authority The change in Rich's poetic mode of address that I noted in my opening paragraphs was, of course, about a desire for poetry that could participate in the communal raising of a liberated feminist consciousness that was perceived to be marginalised in the literary and social institutions of the fifties and early sixties Similarly, Charles Olson's desire to enact the decentring of what he termed 'postmodern' man has been linked to his choosing to participate in the innovative intellectual space provided by the Black Mountain project rather than the mainstream American political life that was, as part of the post-war 'new deal' team, available to him (Paul 1978, *passim*) For both poets formalism is intimately linked to structures of authority, reading, pedagogical practice and community in very literal and consciously politicised ways

Yet here the parallels between the two poets begin to falter Although both have wielded tremendous influence in post-war American poetics, and figure large in the two poetic 'modes' of American poetry which I briefly trace below, their ability to construct a way of reading that attributes significance to their construction of an authorial self (or non-self, of course), has not

⁵ Umberto Eco's own text *The Role of the Reader: Exploration in the Semiotics of Texts* adheres to Barthes' division between the readerly and writerly text In Eco's work, these divisions are termed 'open' or 'closed' (Eco 1981)

been equal. The types of reading sought by Adrienne Rich have been, alongside broader feminist programmes, clearly established: her articulation of a poetic self contributed to Charles Altieri's definition, in *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, of America's *dominant* 'scenic mode'. Charles Olson's exploration of lyrical *absence* has not, however, enjoyed the same canonical weight. Critics who were sensitive to his disavowal of a subjective presence treated it as an example of the Modernist impersonality that had led to this movement's 'failure' (Ross 1986). More generally, this aspect of Olson's poetics was seen to be less influential than either his notion of 'composition by field' or 'stance toward reality'.⁶ Indeed, Olson is most readily identified with the 'raw' mode of American poetics which, it has recently been argued, did not significantly question the authoritativeness of the lyric self any more than its rivalrous 'cooked' poetics did.⁷ The tradition of 'Objectivism', which was virtually unique for its questioning of the centrality of the lyric self has been, until very recently, all but omitted from the American canon.⁸

The closest thing that 'Objectivism' has to a successor, in respect of its willingness to challenge the centrality of the lyric self, is the experimental poetry written in America which became known as 'Language' writing. This writing was self-consciously explicit about its relationship to these debates: to its exploration of the significance of the relationship between the formal articulation of the poetic 'self' and contemporary American culture. 'Language' poetry viewed 'mainstream' or non-experimental poetry as reliant on the authenticity of the poet's expressive self, and thus on Romantic narratives of self-discovery and epiphany which were felt to implicitly support the ideology of the bourgeois individual. The explicit intent of this movement was to radically disrupt the notions of selfhood, of language and of reading upon which these constructions were perceived to be dependent. What defined the 'Language' project for many of its practitioners was its interest in exploring the significance of a poetics that foregrounded the materiality of language, rather than selfhood, narrative or representation, as the central conduit

⁶ In the preface to *The New American Poetry*, Donald Allen suggests that these two poetical principles present Olson's 'new double concept' (Allen 1960, p.xiv).

⁷ Walter Kaldjian, for example, has argued that the lyrical self lies behind both the New Critical aesthetic formalism of Donald Hall's *New Poets of England and America* (1957) and the open-form and anti-academic schools of writing in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960). self (Kaldjian 1989).

⁸ Although, as I illustrate further below, all group labels can be misleading for describing poetic practices, in the case of 'Objectivism' this is particularly true. Although Zukofsky appeared to have encouraged this kind of collective identification by publishing *An Objectivists Anthology* (republished in 1975), objectivism never really existed as a coherent movement - or mode - in the same way as other poetic groupings I am examining here.

through which the world is known. In making the opacity of a material language apparent then 'Language' writing sought to fracture the symbolic order, the belief in transparent representation.

The movement emerged as a literary collective in San Francisco and New York in the mid to late seventies, and through the work of a relatively small group of writers publishing journals, monographs and anthologies, and organising readings and discussion groups, literally dozens of poets, many of whom had been writing in virtually unpublished isolation, were embraced by 'Language' discourse and projects. The anomalies and misrepresentations involved in describing many of the poets who were writing experimental verse in America at this time as 'Language poets' cannot be overestimated and it is something that I address in relation to the work of individual poets in the body of the thesis. However, although the homogeneity that the term implies is reductive and inaccurate, the act of collective identification that it involved was integral to the concern of many in this period to explore alternative ways of figuring the relationship between the reader, the writer and the text. It is the implications (and complications) of this latter usage of the term, as a way of describing the theorising behind the reading and writing practices associated with experimental writing at this time, that the first half of my opening chapter is concerned to explore. I use the term 'Language writing' in this thesis, therefore, not to describe the work of any individual poet but to describe the poetic 'mode' through which much North American contemporary experimental writing has been understood.

Language writing was acutely aware of the significance of the reading practices and communities that it sought to construct. The activities involved in the literal communities of San Francisco and New York - publishing poetry in independent presses, holding discussion groups outside of an academic environment, broadcasting radio programmes, contributing to 'small mag' journals, writing collaboratively - were seen to be integral to the radicalness of the 'Language' agenda. Such activities were a significant part of Language writing's resistance to what was perceived to be mainstream poetry's commodified and institutionalised status, were part of its rejection of what was derisively described as the 'workshop aesthetic' that was taught and reproduced in the professional 'MFA' (Master of Fine Arts) poetic career structure.⁹

Crucially, this collective enterprise was extended to include the activity of the *reader*. Part of Language writing's critique of the cultural authority of the authorial 'I' of mainstream poetry was

⁹ For an account that attributes political significance to the participation of women poets in this community see (Vickery 1997).

to construct alternatives to what it perceived to be the deeply complicitous relationship, in this mode, between the reader, the writer and the normalising narratives of capitalist America. The reader of Language writing was perceived to have been given an active role in the production of textual meaning, a role that inevitably breached the ideology of transparent linguistic representation.¹⁰ This assigning of a role for the reader can be seen as part of Language writing's production of a poetic 'mode' for itself, an attempt to explain the significance it attributes to the act of reading the text. It was a way of transferring the aspirations of the actual Language community, its desire to radically challenge the assumptions about reading and self that underlay the dominant modes of American poetry, to the reader. In this sense the construction of a poetic mode for Language writing, and its attempt to blur the division between reader and writer, has to be understood as a deeply politicised act. It was a necessary part of Language writing's attempt to construct an alternative reading and writing space outside of mainstream poetics.

This deliberate slippage, however, between the literal community of poets writing in two specific geographical locations at a specific point in the history of American poetics, and the 'imagined' community of readers, necessarily involved the construction of a poetic mode that could be discussed within the *academy* within the very discourses that Language writing had been so critical of. Integral to the formation of this poetic mode is the assumption that a reading consensus for the text is achievable - that readers will know how to endow the text with meaning before they approach it. As I argue in the first half of the opening chapter, this sense of an imaginary consensus actually became a way of preserving a *formalistic* agenda for reading Language writing, a way of attributing significance to the formal qualities of the text in very specifically defined ways.

Language writing's poetic mode privileged form in this way, when, as it was extended to its imaginary audience, it lost sight of its own radical implications and failed to examine its own assumptions. Ironically, the central assumption in Language writing to remain unexamined concerns, I suggest, the politics of consumption. Language writing's notion of the active reader assumes that consumption (or reading), without the intervention of the difficult text, is a passive

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Peter Middleton's essay on Susan Howe contains a persuasive critique of the limitations of Language writing's capacity to achieve this symbolic disruption. He suggests that the reflexivity that much of this writing contains means that 'the interruption of referentiality which Silliman describes as the key element in the new poetry can no longer be assumed to be automatically disruptive of the symbolic order since if reflexivity is possible then the idea of a thetic boundary between referentiality or propositionality and the fluidities of the semiotic ground, a boundary which linguistic radicalism can shatter, is made untenable' (Middleton 1991, p. 86-87). My thesis is concerned to examine the schism between the ways in which this 'linguistic radicalism' was presented as

act. This assumption overlooks a more contextually grounded account of cultural consumption, an account that emphasises the multiple ways in which readers respond to, and productively use, a *wide* variety of texts. In the thesis I want to examine how this mode was both inscribed onto, and contested by, the work of three individual poets.

In the second half of the opening chapter I detail the agenda which informs my examination of this mode, I do this by surveying the way in which contemporary feminist theory attempted to negotiate a comparable set of anxieties to those besetting Language writing in this period. I examine how feminism struggled to secure political meanings for the literary, meanings which were being placed under pressure as the significance attributable to reading and writing fragmented along with the stability of the subject. Feminist theory became a site upon which poststructuralist/ postmodernist models of reading and writing were brought into play with dialogues seeking to effect direct social change, dialogues which questioned the implications of relinquishing subjective agency to a textual politics. Much literary feminism, in common with a variety of other schools of cultural theory, attempted to qualify the assumptions made about the text in poststructuralist discourse. What emerges from these discussions, which often attempted to retain the political significance of the writer and the reader, is the need to examine the relationship between the dissemination of textual meaning and *authority*. To examine, in other words, how the reader's and the writer's positioning, both in and by the text, involves complex dynamics of cultural and institutional power.

The final aim of the opening chapter is to plot how the work of contemporary experimental American women poets has been specifically positioned with regards to both Language rhetoric and the debates within feminist thought. As the eighties progressed feminism's heated contestations over the need for subjectivity were 'strategically' resolved, for some feminists at least, through an analysis of site-specific subject positions that made no universalising claims. I point to useful parallels between this theorising and the writing that my thesis explores: a parallel that provides a model for understanding the relationship between textual agency and its discursive context. This is a context which is primarily defined by the thesis according to the social politics attributable to the practices of reading and writing. The generic choices of individual writers, for example, are examined not through the assumption that they are intrinsically subversive or disruptive of literary norms, but through what they suggest about the cultural politics of the reader

and writer's textual positioning.

The theoretical sweep of the thesis as a whole entails explaining the move *away* from examining Language poetry in terms of poststructuralist paradigms of linguistic subversion, specifically Roland Barthes' description of the displaced author/emancipated reader, to examining, instead, the politics of the subject positions constructed by these texts and what these positions may in themselves imply for the politics of reading. My suggestion, implicit in this argument, that the cultural significance of the text resides, in part, in the reading practices of its interpretative community, rather than in its formal qualities, is not a precursor to evacuating the text of meaning or politics. To perform such an act would be to allow the values of the reading community an uncontested authority over the text, and would minimise the complicated dynamic between reader and text, when it is precisely this dynamic that the thesis is actually interested in exploring. The thesis attempts to understand how the significance of the relationship between the reader and the text has been culturally produced with experimental poetry - through institutionalisation, through pedagogy, through the circumstances of publication and so on - and to critique the readings that these processes have produced, to make apparent the ideological assumptions that they imply.

There are, then, two quite distinct but interrelated emphases on reading and authorship being brought into play in this thesis. Reading and authorship are examined as structures that are given meaning and take place on both the level of the *social* - through institutions, pedagogical practices, reading modes, and on the level of the *textual* - as dynamics that position the self and the reader. Each chapter opens by examining the former, by critiquing the assumptions supporting the published readings produced for the individual poet within the literary academy. Each then moves on to consider the latter, to considering the ways in which writing by each poet negotiates these assumptions, negotiates the implications of its own status as experimental writing, and acknowledges and addresses its imagined readership. This divided emphasis reflects one of the central divisions within feminist literary theory which the thesis is more broadly attempting to understand - the relationship between the internal (the formal/ textual) and the external (the social) politics of women's writing.

The three author based chapters that form the body of the thesis broadly follow this two-part argument, directing it toward the specifics of each writer's poetics. Each chapter thus begins by scrutinising how the work of the individual poet has been critically read, focusing upon what distinctive meanings have been attributed to the act of reading and to the act of authorial

definition. My aim is to make apparent the theoretical and ideological investments supporting these readings, readings which usually, although interestingly not always, parallel 'Language' rhetoric. This agenda is informed by an attempt to replace the privileged political claims that have been made on behalf of experimental writing, often specifically on behalf of authorial absenteeism, with an analysis of the actual suppositions supporting such claims. The subsequent aim of each chapter is to move the work of these poets from this framework and to place it within the framework outlined in the latter half of the opening chapter. I am interested in highlighting how these three individual poets construct an authorial or active subjective presence within the text, how each writer solved the problem of assigning political significance to the authorial self in the experimental text. I critique how significance is attributed to the authorial self, examine how the reader is seen to be positioned by this self and attempt to ascertain what these constructions themselves imply for a feminist analysis of the cultural politics of reading and writing.

The three poets actually examined at length in the thesis were chosen for two specific reasons. Firstly, because they demonstrated the workings of the Language mode itself more clearly than many of the other woman poets associated with the movement. By this I do not mean that they adhered to Language tenets more closely (this is obviously not the case with Susan Howe, for example) but that they garnered more critical interest - they were read as demonstrating the complications of the Language mode with more frequency, and with more variation, than most other women poets. In many ways the thesis thus unwittingly reproduces the 'star' phenomena of literary fame in which only a selected number of writers from within any one literary movement appear to cross over into the mainstream analysis. However, as one of my interests was in the *effects* that this movement had on the way in which writers were read, rather than on the movement itself, then this seemed a regrettable but necessary evil. Secondly, these poets were chosen because they demonstrated the *diversity* of subject positions that this writing has resulted in - they suggested differing constructions of selfhood that extended along historical, generic and spatial lines in seemingly innovative ways. It is here, in an analysis of what these positions have in common, and what they signify for wider debates, that my interest in this work really began.

Susan Howe is the first poet to be explored in the thesis. In one way this is an obvious place to start: Susan Howe has emerged as one of the leading representatives of women's 'Language' writing. Yet, this is also an incongruous opening simply because, as many commentators have now noted, Howe's writing and its interest in visionary histories, is actually somewhat at odds

with her acceptance into the mainstream American poetic canon as a 'Language' writer. Consequently, although the form of this chapter broadly follows the central polemical structure described above it also deviates from this structure in order to allow for an examination of the specifics of Howe's own poetics. The chapter is an attempt to understand the implications that reading Howe as a Language poet have had upon her work. It is not an attempt to read her as one.

The chapter begins by providing an overview of Susan Howe's writing career. It explores the ambiguities surrounding her use of the autobiographical or lyrical 'I', I suggest that this textual construction is used in her writing both to resist and to enter hegemonic constructions of historical narrative. Howe's early poems demonstrate these equivocations by suggesting a complex relationship to both the dangers and pleasures inherent in the loss of a subjective positioning; a relationship characterised by a central problematic of feminist thought - the contradictory need to both critique and possess authority. I go on to examine the way in which this authorial ambiguity has been represented by Howe's critics, who, I suggest, seek to either celebrate or politicise Howe's apparent absences. I suggest the limitations of both of these types of readings and proceed to establish an alternative reading which requires me to locate Susan Howe's 'authorial stammer' within its cultural context. I initially suggest that this stammer primarily functions as a trope that provides much of her later writing with a powerful analytical tool for examining the ways in which the discursive marginalisations in American history have been produced. Howe's essay 'The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson' and her poem 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', which both explore the role of the written text in forming an identity for the European coloniser, are read in this light. However, in the final two sections, I suggest some contradictions which seem to mar what is otherwise astute political analysis. I argue that Howe's writing is actually more implicated in the cultural systems it critiques than it appears willing to acknowledge. I draw upon the influence that Martin Heidegger has had upon her work to explicitly theorise these paradoxes which I think Howe's vision of the poetic self incurs. In the conclusion to the chapter I argue that her apparent authorial distance from the text is less an attempt to deconstruct the politics of selfhood than it is indicative of a desire to bypass the cultural context of the poet's positioning. I demonstrate the ways in which Howe's reluctance to acknowledge her own inevitable role in her production of historical narratives affects her ability to represent the alterity she ostensibly seeks to emancipate. What emerges from these poetics, so

I finally suggest, is a writing that seeks to quixotically transcend the implications of its own social existence.

The following chapter examines the way in which the poet Lyn Hejinian negotiates what appears to be a comparable problematic to that explored by Howe. However, I am keen to differentiate between the strategies adopted by each poet. The first section in this chapter begins by examining the way in which Hejinian's writing positions the reader. I contend that in Hejinian's work the relationship between reader and author is foregrounded as a type of meta-commentary: that it is the result of thematic, rather than formal, innovation. My understanding of Hejinian's construction of the reader in this writing is then contrasted against the political claims made on behalf of the same in the critical responses to her work. Through this contrast I highlight the limiting assumptions which support these types of claims; centrally that experimental writing and autobiography are necessarily mutually exclusive, and that the former enacts a critique of the ideological assumptions of the latter. The second section to the chapter demonstrates the ways in which both contemporary thought, and Hejinian's writing, challenges these distinctions between 'active' and 'passive' texts. I draw upon the work of Jean Francois Lyotard in order to suggest the ways in which I think Hejinian assigns significance to her own writing's unwillingness to follow these divisions, or to adhere to a single category of generic conventions - either those of autobiography or Language writing. This unwillingness can be read as a strategy by which Hejinian aims to enact her own struggle between the competing narratives of agency and determination, between, in her terms, the person's discursive construction and the person's self-knowledge. This strategy allows her work, I conclude this chapter by suggesting, to negotiate some sense of textual agency; an agency which actually minimises the liberatory positions offered to the reader in the text.

The third chapter examines the work of Leslie Scalapino, the least well known of the three poets I examine in detail. The chapter examines the significance of the apparently close correspondence between the Language mode and Scalapino's poetics. Scalapino's adherence to this mode, primarily her refusal to distinguish between the inner and outer world, is examined in this chapter not through the assumption that it releases the credulous reader from ideological naivety but through what it suggests about the textual subject's relationship to the social or public sphere. I argue that Scalapino's refusal to make distinctions between the interiority and the exteriority of the subject allows for a potentially innovative reading of the politics of the post-

modern emphasis upon surfaces and spatiality. The first half of the chapter, through a reading of Scalapino's early writing, accentuates her analysis of the politicised division between the personal and the public. The critical meanings attributed to Scalapino's apparent reluctance to explore the subjective are then examined. The chapter argues that critical work on Scalapino is often characterised by an attempt to locate the significance of Scalapino's formal disruptions within the social and 'material' realm. The second half of the chapter examines the significance of Scalapino's treatment of this realm. Her writing is set in conjunction with contemporary theories of spatiality, and is subsequently read as offering a critique of selfhood that is sensitive to the primacy of its physical location. In the concluding section to the chapter I examine how the reader is addressed in this writing and explicitly note how Scalapino participated in the more general move, made by experimental writers as their popularity gradually increased, toward self exegesis. The chapter ends by questioning what this structure, this provision of a reading mode as it were, implies for Scalapino's broader aims.

One of the central endeavours of the thesis is to examine how the paradigm of the writerly text, and a more general valorisation of the political implications of experimentalism, has been increasingly challenged, and to explore the ways in which this shift has been negotiated in the work of individual writers. These changes are also reflected in the critical attention which this work has begun to receive¹¹. Charles Altieri is the critic of American poetry who, as I noted above, has considered the relationship between reading, authority and subjectivity in contemporary poetics at some length. I want to allow a brief examination of his changing response to Language writing to form the conclusion to this introduction.

Altieri was initially one of Language poetry's most effective critics and was scathing about the efficacy of the active reader in negotiating the equivocal relationship between post-modern aesthetics and politics: 'why is the process of audience freedom not best understood along the lines of neoconservative economics: is not such a freedom to recast inherited materials a perfect exemplar of the right to treat language as a commodity to be manipulated in whatever ways I can get away with?' (Altieri 1987, p.305) However, in a more recent essay, Altieri charts something of a reversal of this stance. In the first part of this essay he critiques the notion of the active reader and his scepticism derives precisely from his desire to examine the textual constructions which influence the reader's response to these texts: 'to idealise the reader's work as a kind of

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A full discussion of the critical responses to Language writing takes place in Section One of Chapter One.

participatory freedom, is to reduce freedom to a slogan and to ignore the dynamic levels at which it finds itself within resistances and constant deaths' (Altieri 1996a, p.221). What is ignored in this flattening out of reader activity as inherently emancipatory, Altieri suggests, is the way in which the text *positions* the reader: 'absorption is also a matter of application (as Hans George Gadamer argues), because much of its intensity depends on how the text seems capable of modifying our attitudes or, at the very least, of positioning us in ways that allow us to remain fascinated with some aspects of experience mediated by those worldly concerns' (p.231).

In the second half of this essay (written after attending a conference with a number of Language poets) Altieri explains why he has begun to rethink this position and, more significantly, what of it he wishes to retain.

While I think I am right in complaining about versions of readerly freedom that are not sufficiently attentive to either readerly responsibility or the demand that readers provisionally contour themselves to attitudes defined within texts, I simply do not know how to correlate my sense of principle with the actual work done by experimental contemporary writing. I cannot adequately describe just what the reader contours to, or what self-reflexive sense of powers emerges. (p.233)

Although he remains convinced that readerly activity is more complex than the rhetoric of Language writing implies, he acknowledges that Language texts resist the methodologies he tries to impose upon them, methodologies that are reliant on a more conventional relationship between the reader and the author: 'Texts compose self-reflexive attitudes and dispositions that audiences try to use as mapping certain ways of paying attention or reflecting on personal powers or putting philosophical pressure on how experience is represented. But radical writing defines itself largely in terms of its ways of resisting models of mental action that entail coherent self-reflexive agency' (p.234). Altieri's argument, therefore, falters not on his assertion that authors in texts position the reader in some way but that he - or indeed current thought - is incapable of mapping the constructions of self that the reader's of *these* texts are dependent upon: 'put simply, any version of agency adequate to the new poetry will have to characterize mental spaces very difficult to correlate with any of the predicates about will fundamental to modernism' (p.235). The two

arguments of the thesis can be succinctly formulated through the terms of Altieri's argument here. Firstly, that Language writing's notion of the active reader fails to take into account the complex processes that reading involves and, secondly, that in order to understand what *is* going on in these texts, then we have to be able to move beyond modernism's narratives of self, to the new 'mental spaces' that much of contemporary theory can be seen as attempting to construct. The thesis, in other words, replaces the notion of the formally activated reader with an examination of how the reader is actually textually constructed. It then examines how these constructions themselves contribute to our understanding of the politics of articulating a post-modern self.

Chapter One. Language Poetry Comes of Age

Section One. Writing the Language Mode

Part One. Politics and Aesthetics in the Post-modern

The controversies surrounding the emergence of 'Language writing' as a radical literary movement in the mid seventies - its contested claim to open a space in which the assumptions of capitalist America could be questioned, its suggested complicity with the schizophrenic and disempowering divisions of a post-modern cultural logic, its elitism and its eurocentrism - ran right through the heart of many of the political, cultural and theoretical shifts that America has been witness to. These shifts have questioned, in their multiple and often oppositional guises, how political action is to be understood and enacted in an era characterised by a crisis of legitimation. The political and cultural landscape of America into which Language poetry emerged was overshadowed by an anxiety over the country's ability to retain a pluralist conception of itself as a democracy that could uphold the narratives of freedom and equality that were integral to its 'exceptionalism'. The much vaunted radicalism in the sixties of the civil rights movement, the student led anti-war movement, and the growth of the women's movement, had all questioned America's claims to inclusiveness and its ability to distribute power in anything like a just way.

American poetry had played its own role in the production and identification of this sense of 'counter-culture'. Although written in the fifties, the democratic aspirations of the disparate poetic movements collected in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* captured more popularly the sense of optimistic activism of the following decade. By the middle of the sixties the anthology had been reprinted eight times, totalling 40,000 copies. Texts such as Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (of which there are a legendary 315, 000 copies in print) came as close to entering America's national consciousness in this period as poetry was ever likely to do. Poetry could claim not only this substantially increasing readership (the distribution of *Poetry* magazine doubled in one year, between 1963 and 1964, to just under 10,000) but a politicised public stage.¹ In 1968 Robert Bly walked literally onto this stage when he denounced his publishers, Harper & Row, for their tacit support of American intervention in Vietnam at the National Book award ceremony. As Jed

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See (Von Hallberg 1985). Von Hallberg's detailing of other political issues affecting American poets in the postwar period soberly problematises the mythology of the sixties poet.

Rasula notes, Bly's gesture (his prize money for *The Light Around the Body* was subsequently donated to the draft resisters league) may have been the peak of the 'milieu of protest surrounding the war' but the platform upon which it took place was to be 'short lived' (Rasula 1996, p.383).

Although American poetry's moment in the national eye may have been a brief one, the increased readership it accrued during this moment remained with it. This is because, of course, that underlying the construction of this readership, like the wider social movements of unrest to which it had been so readily allied, was the emergence of a burgeoning student body, a body that increased fourfold in the United States between 1940 and 1968. That the 'cultural revolution' that took place in the 'West' in the sixties (as opposed to the more direct political changes wrought in places such as Pakistan) was dependent upon what Eric Hobsbawm has described in *The Age of Extremes* as the emergence of a 'rebel student generation' has become something of a truism (Hobsbawm 1994, p.445). Yet the fact remains that poetry's swollen audience was due as much to the enlargement of the academy, and increased federal arts funding, as it was to poetry's ability to speak to the desire for radical social revolution. What emerged in the shape of a 'New American Poetry' was not necessarily a new canon but a new, institutionally supported, way of understanding the relationship between the text and its audience. A poetic mode emerged that, although hardly homogenous, was characterised by a shared desire to replace 'New Critical strictures against the "intentional" and "affective" fallacies [...] in favour of the author's private lyricism' (Kaldjian 1989, p.4).

That Robert Bly's highly public denouncement of the Vietnam war in 1968 should have been the point at which poetry's contribution to counter-culture should have both peaked and faltered was entirely in keeping with the events of that year in the United States. Nineteen sixty-eight saw both increasing student protests and the escalation of violence in Vietnam, saw the immediate hopes for peace and liberal social change assassinated alongside Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and saw the coming to power of Richard Nixon and the divisive and Conservative opinions of his white, southern and 'silent' 'Sun Belt'. Nixon's presidency and eventual impeachment proved that corruption and self-interest pervaded the highest levels of Federal government - Gerald Ford's pardoning of the President seemed to prove that this status quo remained immutable. The population's apprehensive participation and trust in the machinations of government ebbed away as the voting turn out in Presidential elections, which had experienced its own post-war boom, continued again upon its steady decline throughout the seventies,

demonstrating the increasingly indifferent opinion of the country toward those who sought to rule it (Johnson, Miller et al 1994) ²

This increased distancing from the legislature that America experienced in the seventies did not necessarily mean, however, that all in the country had abandoned their belief in social change. The emphasis on the 'micro' politics of individuals and communities begun in the sixties continued, often with renewed vigour, into the first half of the following decade. The civil rights movement maintained its reforming zeal into the first half of the seventies. The repeal of 'Jim Crow' was finally complete by 1971 and allowed for unprecedented social and economic success in some sectors of the Black community. The power of such direct political action was simultaneously exploited by feminism as it continued to grow into a powerful grass roots organisation that sought to expand, and to directly engage in, the sites upon which political battles needed to be fought. The importance of making women conscious that their 'personal was political' - that their families, marriages, religions, educations, workplaces and bodies were deeply contested locations - continued, with sometimes profound success, throughout collegiate America especially, in this period ³

The emphasis on the centrality and representationality of the subjective self, that had come to dominate American poetry, was well positioned to participate in this broader emphasis upon the politics of the self. The work of Adrienne Rich, held, as I have already noted, to be exemplar of America's dominant 'scenic' mode by the critic Charles Altieri, is instructive in this respect. Rich continued the desire of earlier poetic movements to establish a sense of community. This was a community whose politics, like those of the feminist movement from which it was inextricable, were based upon the experiences of the individual.⁴ Rich 'manages', suggested Altieri at his most expansive, 'to project poetry as a force within social life, a force that *literally* exemplifies a

² The reasons why the period 1948-1968 had defied the gradual twentieth century decline in voting turnout has been attributed to the gradual enfranchisement of the Afro-American community in this period. The turnout in Southern states (although consistently smaller than in the North) increased by 183.8% in this period compared to 38% in the North (Bartley and Graham 1975, p.189)

³ Richard Chafe records how pollster Daniel Yanielovich reported that on College campuses at the end of the sixties the 'women's movement had made 'virtually no impact on youth values and attitudes'. But by the early seventies Yanielovich noted 'a wide and deep' acceptance of women's liberation arguments. In just two years the number of students who viewed themselves as an oppressed group had doubled.' (Chafe 1991, p 434)

⁴ Afro-American poets, such as Inamu Amiri Baraka, Ron Karenga, and Haki R. Mahubuti conjoined poetry and identity politics in comparably powerful ways. The machismo, and heterosexism, in which much of this writing was seen to be steeped was challenged by the writing of Afro-American women poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde and Sonia Sanchez

woman's capacity to integrate subjectivity and community, memory and potential, self-reflexive meditation and believable speech' (Altieri 1984, p.166).

The canonical authority that Rich's poetic mode came to carry within the institution should not be underestimated. As early as 1975 she became the only American writer to have a 'Norton Critical Edition', devoted solely to her, a second edition was brought out in 1993. As the 'chronology' contained at the back of this volume suggests, Rich's working life has been distinguished, characterised by high-profile publications, academic positions and poetry awards. The relationship between experientiality and community, and between identity and politics, that poets such as Rich forged, has been central to much of feminist criticism's celebration of women's poetry.⁵ It was a relationship that was seen, in its subversion of masculinity's stronghold upon the lyric, as inherently political.⁶ One of the most obvious aims of the thesis is to examine how experimental poetry by women - which initially appeared to be critical of the assumptions about selfhood and language which supported this writing - can be understood as re-investigating these assumptions in potentially useful ways.⁷

As the seventies progressed, however, the increasing authority of identity politics, that had allowed women's poetry to become so influential, was to be challenged by both an increasing social bifurcation and the unprecedented rise of a virulent new type of Conservatism. The American economy, like that of many Western countries, faced the 'stagflationary' combination of an increased workforce (as women and 'baby boomers' clamoured for employment), a consumer boom fed by increasing wages not off-set by taxes, and a series of hikes in international oil prices. The blend of inflation and unemployment which resulted from these circumstances, together with the fiscal prudence of Jimmy Carter's Federal budget in the second half of the

⁵ A sizeable critical canon begun to emerge in the mid-seventies devoted to exploring and often celebrating, the emergence of a feminist/ female American poetics canon. See (Juhasz 1976; Montefiore 1987; Ostriker 1986; Yorke 1991)

⁶ Indeed, Cora Kaplan, whose anthology *Salt and Bitter and Good* was influential in establishing a feminist poetry canon, has suggested that the identity of the woman poet as *subversive* of poetic norms actually became the dominating theme of much of this poetry: 'A very high proportion of women's poems are about the right to speak and write [...] To be a woman and a poet presents many women with such a profound split between their social, sexual identity [...] and their artistic practice that the split becomes the insistent subject, sometimes overt, often hidden or displaced of much women's poetry' (Kaplan 1986, p.71)

⁷ Clare Wills has already begun this project of critiquing the limitations of the divisions between experimental and mainstream women's writing. See (Wills 1993; Wills, 1994). These issues are considered explicitly in the fourth chapter of the thesis.

decade, led to the emergence of an ‘underclass’ in American society - a class for whom the rhetoric of opportunity was never intended to become a reality

The increase in poverty in America was deeply gendered and racialised these inequities bit right into the heart of the civil rights and women’s movements. An increase in divorce rates and teenage pregnancies, and a welfare system that required the male to be absent in order that benefit be paid, meant that it was the burgeoning numbers of working class mothers without partners, and limited to welfare or minimum income jobs, who bore the brunt of the recession. This ‘feminisation’ of poverty was felt more keenly in black areas as the relative integration of the Afro-American community meant that these communities, now often divided along the same class grounds as white communities but within lower income brackets, felt the effects of the recession more perniciously.⁸ The growth of the inner city ghetto was commensurate with the exclusion of black working class males and females from education, employment and good housing. As Manning Marable has noted the ‘second reconstruction’ of America ended much like the first, with white America rescinding once again any apparent gains won by the African-American community (Marable 1991)

The emergence of an underclass marked so clearly by race and gender meant that not only had the grounds upon which the left fought for social change begun its inexorable shift to the right, but that the ways in which this ground could be gained, and whose ground it was, also came under scrutiny. The crisis of legitimation facing the cohesiveness and authority of the American identity had begun, by the seventies, to resonate within the very movements which had once so confidently appeared to place their identity politics upon the national agenda. The strained unity that Martin Luther King’s integrationist strategies demanded was fractured in the late seventies by the extreme factionalism within the frustrated and angry Black Power movement that had become ascendant in the second half of the sixties. Feminism’s own claim upon a collective category in the face of these increasing social divisions was also placed under pressure. The ability of ‘woman’ as a category to adequately represent class, race, and sexuality was questioned by the apparent exclusion of the needs of these groups by feminist movements and theories (Spelman 1983, *passim*)

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That the gains of the Civil Rights movement were felt centrally by the ‘Black elite’, has been well documented, although what proportion of the Afro-American community experienced these positive changes is contested. Richard Chafe suggested that as many as 35 to 45 % of black families succeeded in achieving a middle class lifestyle while Manning Marable suggests it may be as low as 7-10 %

These social changes and theoretical oversights increasingly compromised feminism's reliance on the construction of the collective or universal subject, and on narratives of social progression and equality. The emergence of identity politics themselves, as Chantal Mouffe has since suggested, were indicative of this shift. Identity politics displaced the ideology of the proletariat, the privileged agent of socialist revolution, with new social formations and struggles. Yet many of these democratic 'antagonisms' that characterised post-sixties America contained within them no inherent sympathy with a socialist or collective agenda: 'democratic antagonism refers to resistance to subordination and inequality; democratic struggle is directed toward a wide democratisation of social life. [...] democratic antagonism can be articulated into different kinds of discourse, even into right wing discourse' (Mouffe 1988, p.96). The subject came to occupy an ambivalent position in America's political culture, as the mobilisation of the individual's rights potentially lent themselves to appropriation, not only by the single-issue discourses of progressive identity politics, but by the reactionary discourses of freedom and choice that were becoming ascendant in the Right.

Andreas Huyssen's 'map' of the post-modern era suggests that a similar ambivalence infected the significance attributed to cultural production in America from the seventies onwards. He suggests that the potential that the apparent loss of modernity's authoritative narratives had proffered to the radical political and cultural movements in the sixties, which had 'had some of the makings of a genuine avant-garde movement' had inevitably given way, by the following decade, to a more complicated and compromised politics.

By the mid-70's, certain basic assumptions of the preceding decade had either vanished or been transformed. [...] The iconoclastic gestures of pop, rock and sex avantgardes seemed exhausted since their increasingly commercialized circulation had deprived them of their avant-gardist status. The earlier optimism about technology, media and popular culture had given way to more sober and critical assessments. [...] Counter-culture, New Left and antiwar movement were ever more frequently denounced as infantile aberrations of American history. (Huyssen 1990, p.248)

The potential of a post-modern awareness to serve as an unproblematic critical tool became discredited in the seventies, as the art and political organisations which it had allowed for were

also becoming increasingly available for appropriation by the emerging rhetoric of the neo-right and its defence of multinational Capital. Specifically, Huyssen suggests, the willingness that had characterised the earlier decade to revolt against a tradition of high art and what was perceived as its hegemonic role receded as 'experimental strategies and popular culture were no longer connected in a critical aesthetic and political project as they had been in the historical avant-garde. Popular culture was accepted uncritically [...] and postmodernist experimentation had lost the avant-gardist consciousness that social change and the transformation of every-day life were at stake in every artistic experiment' (Huyssen 1988, p.170). What emerged from this loss of belief in the efficacy of the avant-garde was a cultural eclecticism no longer necessarily loaded with political ambition.⁹

Section One, Part Two.

The View from *The American Tree*

Language writing was received into the American academy in the mid-eighties as a knowing response to the apparently deep ambivalences of the era. In 1983, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign held a series of events, culminating in a large international conference, which sought to examine the continuing significance of Marxist thought for cultural theory, to 'deal with the disjunction between our need and our ability to intervene in our historical reality' (Nelson 1988, p.12). Included in the book that emerged from this project was an essay by the critic Andrew Ross in which he suggests that 'Language' writing, as (with the usual caveats) he describes it, allowed for precisely this type of intervention. Language writing, Ross suggests, allowed a Marxist literary aesthetic to 'meet with the political realities of a shared discursive condition and not to insist on the rarefied rhetorical plane writers are inclined to protectively regard as their inherited polemical turf' (Ross 1988, p.375).

This intervention that Ross envisages takes place within a discursive landscape that owes

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The ability of feminism to incorporate the aesthetics of the postmodernism in a less politically ambivalent way has, of course, often been suggested. For versions of this argument see (Owen 1986) and (Hutcheon 1989).

much to Baudrillard's extending of Marx's critique of the commodification of the political economy to include the commodification of the sign itself: a schema in which 'signifier and signified correspond to exchange value and use value. Within the free circulation of a commodity system, however, the signifier is always exchanged like a sign, offering itself as *full* value in the absence of a signified' (p.368). Ross lauds Language writing because of its *subversive* participation in this 'post-modern' prioritising of surface meaning (or exchange value in Marxist terms) over content (or use value). Ross suggests that Language writing attempts to interrogate the implications of the shift from the material to the representational by acting from *within* it rather than by attempting to retreat *from* it. Language writing acknowledges that 'the imperative of political realism no longer means keeping aloof from the dominant political formalism' (p.377). Language writing is significant for Andrew Ross because it allows a broad Marxist agenda - an attempt to regain the deficits accrued in the process of commodification - to be transferred to the simulacra.

At stake in this writing was the political significance that could be attributed to the *agency* of the subject in the simulacra. For Ross, Language writing provided a post-modern antidote to his diagnosis of the failed impersonality of modernism. In *The Failure of Modernism* he suggested that Language writing differs from this earlier movement because it is able to accept 'subjectivity as a *given* and thus *necessary* to language rather than imagined either as superimposed or as pre-existing' (Ross 1986, p.211). In these terms then Language writing brokered the link between post-modern paralysis and political praxis through its ability to acknowledge the *constructed* nature of the subject by language. The political significance of this acknowledgement was extended to the reader, who was seen to be active, as able to take responsibility for the significance of their own consumption.

What is important is that we *recognise* and *accept* the quota of reader's work involved in this kind of poetry. For once, there is the sense that a fair deal has been struck; the labor of composition is somehow equal to the labor of reading, and so the readers share meaning rather than merely responding to the writer's meaning, or else producing their own at will. The result is somewhere between the ease of consumption and the headache of comprehension.[Barret] Watten's work neither hands out privileges nor jealously guards its own. It *formulates* action. (Ross 1988, p.376)

Ross's defence of the political critique that Language writing brings to the post-modern has been echoed more recently in one of the most established and canonised anthologies of experimental poetry to date. Paul Hoover, in his introduction to the Norton Anthology of *Post-modern American Poetry*, constructs the post-modern as liberating and emphasises the subversion that its art forms can provide. The post-modern is defined as an 'ongoing process of resistance to mainstream ideology' and contemporary poetry shares much with it in its decentring of authority, embracing of pluralism and 'panoptic or many centred view. Postmodernism prefers "empty words" to the "transcendental signified", the actual to the metaphysical. In general it follows a constructionist rather than an expressionist theory of composition' (Hoover 1994, p.xxvii).

The alternative position, one that suggested that Language writing's disruption to sense was actually deeply complicit with the loss of agency and political action that some descriptions of the post-modern seemed so dangerously blithe about, was also being rehearsed in mainstream academic debates in the eighties. This was a position most famously occupied by Frederic Jameson, a central figure in American Marxism's attempts to critique the apolitical nature of the post-modern. For Jameson Language writing was symptomatic, rather than critical of, the schizophrenic excesses of a post-modern hegemony in thrall to the divisive demands of multinational or late capitalism.¹⁰ In 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' Bob Perelman's poem 'China' is read as presenting the giddy intensities of a post-modern disassociation which actually heralds the 'waning of affect' and the fragmentation of individual active agency. For Jameson it presupposes a reading which 'proceeds by differentiation rather than unification. [...] disjunction to the point at which the materials of the text, including its words and sentences, tend to fall apart into random or inert passivity' (Jameson 1991, p.31).

Again, this was a view of Language writing that has continued to be debated in the academy as the nineties has progressed. Jameson's attack upon the implicit political abeyance of Language

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British Marxist Terry Eagleton, although without specific reference to Language writing, has also criticized the emergence of theories that have attempted to acknowledge the significance of the reader in the creation of textual meaning. In his essay 'The Revolt of the Reader' Eagleton suggests that such theories are 'equivalent in some sense to worker's co-operatives within capitalism, readers may hallucinate that they are actually writers, reshaping government handouts on the legitimacy of limited nuclear war into symbolist poems' and that the job of 'socialist criticism' should 'not be primarily concerned with the consumer's revolution. Its task is to take over the means of production' (Eagleton 1986, p.184).

writing has found sympathy within practitioners of the avant-garde American poetic itself. The recent *Apex of the M* journal, written by students from the Poetics program at Buffalo SUNY (home of key writers associated with Language writing, such as Charles Bernstein and Susan Howe), is severely critical of what it sees as Language writing's inability to respond to the injustices in the social. The editors of the journal suggest, like Jameson, that Language writing is complicit with what it seeks to attack: 'Self-conscious opacity in poetry, long before it counteracts or brings an end to the socio-cultural status quo, perhaps compounds the problems resulting from increasing rates of illiteracy and atomization in the public sphere, problems upon which global capitalism, supposedly the enemy of the avant-garde has come to depend' (Daly, 1993, p.5). Later editorials go further in insisting that poetry should be made accountable to its political context, an accountability that requires both representation and a transparent language; 'a text is never more material than the context within which, and because of which, it is written. As a result, any poetry that foregrounds a non-contextual materiality reifies language, and does so by confusing politics with aesthetics, responsibility with the play of signs' (Daly 1994a, p.6).

Daly, and his co-editors, Alan Gilbert, Kristin Prevallet and Pam Rehm, are part of what has sometimes been described as a 'second generation' of Language writers.¹¹ What their critique of Language writing most clearly suggests is, as I elaborate further in my discussion of individual poets, that the rhetorical statements involved in the construction of Language writing have an increasingly wavering hold upon contemporary writers - even the writers who once actively participated in this rhetoric. It also testifies, albeit in a paradoxical way, to the fact that, by the early nineties, Language writing had been successful in constructing a poetic mode in some institutional settings in America: a poetic mode that appeared to require contesting.

Language writing's self-presentation during the early and mid eighties, as it presented itself to the uninitiated reader through the anthology and collaborative essay of self-definition, explicitly addressed the issues being discussed by Jameson and Ross in this period. The impetus for the destabilising of self and language, and the resulting invocation of the reader's praxis, was understood to be a specific response to the ambivalence of the subject and of aesthetic practices that post-war social changes in America had brought about. Ron Silliman's anthology *In the American Tree* is a central example of the self-presentation of Language poetry in this relatively

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For an overview of the different writing factions to have emerged in this 'second generation' of Language writers, see (Hansen 1995; Wallace 1995)

early period. In his introduction Silliman, acknowledging the inadequacy of the terms available to him, refuses to define the project and instead recognises it through a broad mutual agenda that seems to inherit much from a poststructuralist and postmodernist scepticism.

What is shared, at best, is a perception as to what the issues might be.

These are not to be underestimated The nature of reality. The nature of the individual. The function of language in the constitution of either realm. The nature of meaning. The substantiality of language. The shape and value of literature itself. The function of method. The relation between reader and writer. (Silliman 1986b, p.xix)

The relationship between the reader and the writer, that Silliman ends by alluding to, was of especial significance to the ability of Language writing to realise its political aims. In 'For Change', one of the central collaborative essays collected in this anthology, the poet Steve Benson describes how the reader 'is presumed not as a *consumer* of the experience sustained by the poem but as a fellow writer who shares conscientiously in the work and can willingly answer the uses of the medium which the writer feels impelled to undertake' (Silliman et al. 1986, p.486). As Jackson MacLow stresses in 'Language Centered', another essay from the collection, the accentuating of the reader actually counteracts the controversial negation of meaning seemingly brought about by some Language writers: 'whatever the intention of the authors, if the perceivers give serious attention to the works they will - at some "level" - be finding meanings' (MacLow 1986, p.494). The reader is seen to be the active *producer* rather than the passive *consumer* of the meanings within the poetic text.

What now seems to be one of the determinant attempts to define, and actually defend, the significance of this experimentalism is the essay 'Aesthetic Tendency and The Politics of Poetry', collaboratively produced by some of the key writers from California's Bay area. What is stressed above all in this text is that Language writing's emphasis on the materiality of the signifier, or its attack upon the individual, are actually less significant than the collective nature of this enterprise. The notion of autonomous poetic genius is supplanted by the co-dependency of communal thinking at the very point of poetic production.

The individual is seen as under attack, and this is largely true: the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded. [...] If there has been one premise of our group that approaches the status of a first principle, it has been not the ‘self-sufficiency of language’ or the “materiality of the sign” but *the reciprocity of practice implied by a community of writers who read each other’s work* (Silliman et al. 1988, p. 263 & p. 271).

The emphasis on the collective self, which includes the reader as part of the writing community, was seen as a challenge to the conservative individualism fostered by contemporary American notions of political self-sufficiency. Such notions had, as Noam Chomsky points out, reached an unprecedented and contradictory pitch by the time of Ronald Reagan’s presidency in the eighties.¹² The politics of including the reader as producer was seen as an *antidote* to the ideology of autonomous selfhood upon which the rhetoric of the free market and consumer choice, evoked to justify the increasing de-liberalisation of social policy in America, had been dependent. In this essay Language writers link this right-wing agenda to an autonomous conception of art, to ‘a kind of individual atomization that stands in for an individual sensibility based on implicit norms. This is precisely the opposite of explicit agency in the arts - the claim of the value of one’s work, appealing not to such judgement but to other measures of efficacy. Aesthetic tendency - the politics of *intention* - as opposed to aesthetic arbitration, offers an entirely different way of seeing the poem as produced and received’ (Silliman et al. 1988, p.271). The politics of ‘intention’, it was proposed, resisted the stranglehold that the individual reader as ‘consumer’ of poetic aesthetics had within the literary marketplace.

As this essay continually makes clear, Language writing was not attempting to construct an homogenous poetic style for itself in this period. The myriad of poets sheltering under the Language umbrella had very different writing agendas: something that the act of anthologisation, as my citation from Silliman’s introduction above suggests, tried to make apparent rather than paper over. What was actually being attempted in essays such as these was the description of a

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Chomsky demonstrates how the Reaganite ideology of American individualism and withdrawal of state intervention actually covered a system in which only the very rich were maintained and protected by Federal aid.(Chomsky 1995).This distancing between the rhetoric of new Conservatism and its actual effects was compounded by the fact that Reaganomics -like Thatcherism- was incapable of achieving its apparently monetarist goals as the high defence budgets maintained by these administrations meant that public spending never significantly declined.

shared poetic *mode*, a reading practice, for those very different writers who were being identified with the Language movement. The significance that many Language writers had attributed to their act of *literal* community - their production of cultural forms outside of the academic marketplace, their readings and discussion groups, their collaborative works - was being extended to include the activity of the reader. In this sense Language writing's poetic 'mode' was, in the context of the broader assumptions that were being made about American poetry, a deeply political act. Although individuals within the Language movement explored increasingly diverse and complex poetics, the significance of the *reading practices* demanded by these formally experimental poetics became a crucial and collective point of identification for many Language writers. As critic Paul Mann has suggested, this collective act of identification was a crucial part of the rhetorical construction of an innovative community. The 'politics of their own occasion', Mann suggests, supplied the necessary space for Language writers to theorise and enact their alternative social formations and aesthetics (Mann, 1994, p.174).

When the 'Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry' essay was published by *Social Text* in 1988 it was renamed by the editors 'Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto'. At its most obvious this subtitle placed Language writing within the early twentieth century Surrealist tradition, by which some of the writers have been influenced.¹³ However, this title also announced the essay as an explicit political platform for Language writing, as a closed declaration, rather than as part of an ongoing dialogue, despite the fact that in the actual body of the text the authors loudly eschew this type of identification and specifically challenge the homogenising effect that the 'Language' label has had upon readings of their work. In aspiring to produce a consciously politicised poetic mode that rendered the activity of reading a site of resistance, Language poetry was necessarily and consciously playing into the academy. As Ron Silliman suggested two years later, in yet another collaborative project by Language writers (this time elevated to the level of a collection), 'without this intervention, aesthetic practice raised to an institutional strategy, the contribution of writers [...] ourselves included, can only fade into oblivion' (Silliman 1990, p.169). In resisting oblivion, in raising an aesthetic practice to an 'institutional strategy', however, Language writing was also being presented as the stable entity that many of its practitioners neither wanted, nor expected, it to become.

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The text being alluded to here is André Breton's 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*.

Section One, Part Three

Technologies of Consumption

By the 1990's Language poetry had entered the institutional 'mainstream' of the American academy. Its presence looms large in recent widely available anthologies such as Douglas Messerlis's *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990* (1994) and Paul Hoover's *Norton Anthology of Post-modern American Poetry* (1994). The existence of a separate canon of experimental women poets, whose interests are in some ways particular, has also been recently acknowledged with the publication of *Out of Everywhere*, edited by Maggie O'Sullivan (1996). Language poetry's increasing popularity in the classroom, which this proliferation of anthologies suggests, is given further weight by the fact that many of the poets who initially glorified in their status outside of the academies taught workshops - poets such as Bob Perelman, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Barrett Watten - are teaching, or have taught, in Universities all over the U.S.

Language poetry's incorporation into the academy has not rendered it a 'mainstream' poetic mode, however, as its 'marginal' or subversive role has often been kept intact. Hence, although increasing numbers of Language poets are teaching in Universities (*as* Language poets), and there are more anthologies devoted to their work, they have yet to rival the authoritative weight that the poets following a more conventional academic poetic career can demand. Hank Lazer, for example, compares the institutional treatment of the poets collected in the *Morrow Anthology of Younger Poets* to those collected in *In the American Tree*, and concludes that 'those poets most frequently proposed for grants and subsequently sponsored to read on university campuses are overwhelmingly the practitioners of a conventional voice-lyric' (Lazer 1996a, p.51).

There are, of course, institutional exceptions to Language writing's relative marginal placing as well. The poetics programme in Buffalo (part of the State University of New York), led by Charles Bernstein, is almost entirely experimental in its emphasis and the institution itself, like the University of California in San Diego, has clearly supported Language writing in an explicitly institutionalised way. Both institutions have provided some financial support for many

poets: both through various forms of employment and, in the case of UCSD especially, through buying texts, working manuscripts, diaries and letters from poets associated with the Language movement. As a result of this type of support, both establishments possess international libraries and manuscript collections that have made the study of this work, of the activities of specific communities, possible.

The poetics programme at Buffalo is an interesting example of the type of institutionalisation that I am suggesting that Language poetry's construction of a poetic mode became implicated in. From Buffalo's very successful poetics programme grew up not only a vibrant poetics community, which successfully supported poetry readings, workshops and bookstores, but an Electronic Poetry Centre ('EPC') that can be accessed via the Internet. The centre perpetuates precisely the type of slippage between the literal and local communities of poets and critics, and the imagined community of readers, that was so integral to Language writing's own rhetoric. The EPC also demonstrates the types of complications (albeit in a very crude way) that I am suggesting are involved in this slippage because, although its existence allows for the *possibility* of an active or creative dialogue, in practice this dialogue seems limited to those with access both to a modem (which suggests either relative wealth or membership of an institution) and to some knowledge of the issues, and people and places, involved in Language poetry.

Although outside of these institutions Language writing may not have achieved anything like dominance, the growing number of anthologies by poets associated with the Language movement, of critical essays by leading academics such as those by Andrew Ross and Frederic Jameson referred to above, and Language writing's place in a sizeable number of overviews of either American poetry or American postmodernism, all suggest that these poetics have emerged within the critical institution as an influential post-modern American poetic 'mode'.¹⁴ It is the assumptions contained within this reading mode, as it was constructed at the point of Language writing's reception into the critical academy, that I am specifically interested in critiquing. The

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The most obvious example of Language writing's current status is provided by its inclusion in Routledge's undergraduate primer *Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader*, (Wheale 1995). The title of the essay, 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: Ashbery's postmodern successors' is instructive of my point here, especially if one recalls that in addition to Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery was designated by Charles Altieri one of America's greatest contemporary poets. Wheale's introduction to Language poetry enacts the construction, and subsequent fragmentation, of Language writing's reading 'mode'. The act of readerly participation is both evoked as key to understanding this writing, and then critiqued, in this essay.

model of an 'active' reading is not being constructed as the simple straw man that my thesis can knock down, therefore, but is being critiqued as a construct that erected a powerful parameter around readings of individual poets: a parameter whose assumptions, and limits, I want to examine.

Critical texts often placed Language writing at the end of broader literary traditions as a representative example of post-modern American poetry. There have been two broad approaches to this problem: both focusing upon the distinctiveness and significance of Language writing's formal qualities. Texts such as Peter Quartermain's *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (1992), Joseph Conte's *Unending Designs: The Forms of Post-modern Poetry* (1991) and, most significantly, Marjorie Perloff's *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (1985), have placed Language writing within a marginalised historical American poetic tradition that has been characterised by innovative forms. A second approach has stressed the contrast between Language writing and contemporary 'dominant' poetic modes. These texts have tended to place emphasis upon the relationship between Language writing's formal innovation and the demands it makes upon either the reader or the institution: Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (1995), Walter Kaladjian's *Languages of Liberation: The Social Text in Contemporary American Poetry* (1989), Jeffrey Nealon's *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (1993), Marjorie Perloff's, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991), Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects 1940-1990* (1996), Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* (1993) and Geoff Ward's *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (1993) can all be read in this way.

In addition, the last decade has seen the publication of four monographs that go some way to narrativising the history of the movement. Unsurprisingly, all four acknowledge the centrality of the reader to Language writing's claim to connect formal innovation and political praxis. The first was Linda Reinfield's *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*. In this text the fundamental 'commitment to rescue' that Language writing brings about is its 'restoring [of] the reader' (Reinfield 1990, p.32). In 1995 George Hartley published *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, which provided a carefully paced defence and explanation of Language rhetoric. Although Hartley was keen to emphasise that Language poetry offered more than simply deconstruction, more than a subversion of the referential fetish, the premise to most of the arguments in the work

is that 'praxis is now a question of syntaxis', that Language poetry laid bare 'the frames of bourgeois ideology itself' (Hartley 1995, p.74 and p.41). Similarly, Bob Perelman and Hank Lazer, whose literary histories were both published in 1996 note, respectively, that this work is 'best understood as a group phenomenon and that it is one whose primary tendency was to do away with the reader as a separate category' (Perelman, 1996, p.31) and that 'the critique of referentiality and the styles of Language Writing are political in nature precisely because of this hope for a radically restructured relationship of reader and writer' (Lazer, 1996a, p.40). What these sources also suggest is that the implications of these political claims became increasingly qualified, although never wholly relinquished, as each writer gained further critical distance from the Language moment.

The demands made upon the reader by this writing were not viewed as politically emancipatory by all of these critics. In Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*, for example, Language writing's reliance 'on the academy to produce the sophisticated, theoretically inclined readers it assumes' simply corroborates the limits of its efficacy (Shetley 1993, p.159). Shetley suggests that these limitations are reflected in the necessary 'knowingness' of the reader of the avant-garde text.

Demonstrating that Frost's poem can yield as many "polyentendres" per line as any by [Charles] Bernstein undermines the case McGann makes elsewhere for the necessity of Language writing and its radical difference from more conventional forms of writing.

What this reveals, as well, is the high and unargued value McGann places upon self-consciousness; presumably, what differentiates Frost and Bernstein is the latter's superior awareness of the many ways of reading his poetry (Shetley 1993, p.141).

The implications of Shetley's observation, that all texts can be read as 'Language texts', seem key to me, and are explored more fully below. Very briefly, I am suggesting that just as the very idea of the avant-garde is now impossible, according to theorists such as Peter Bürger, because its attempts to integrate art and life are reliant on the prior necessity of an *autonomous* art, then the theorising, by Language writing, of the political implications of the active reader seem to rely upon the prior necessity of an *inactive* reader (Bürger 1984). It is the effects of this assumption that I want to go on to critique.

Other critics were more prepared to recognise the *necessity* of institutionalising a new pedagogy to the ideological aspirations supporting this experimentalism. Hank Lazer suggests that the active role of the reader, without such a framework, is simply a 'truism': 'it is one thing to claim, via Stein, that innovative poetics return our attention to the world as such [...] But how do we articulate and write such a reading experience?' (Lazer 1996a, p.141). Lazer suggests that the apparent contradiction arising from Language poetry's assimilation by the academy is the result of static pedagogy, of our continued inability to understand the processes of reading demanded by the post-modern text. He points to the slippage created between the existence of Language texts within the academy and the absence of appropriate reading practices.

While the rise of degree programs in Creative Writing redrew the turf of the English department, the institutionalised teaching methods (and thus also the principles of evaluation and support) were hardly disturbed [...] most current versions of multicultural poetry, while emphasising some cultural and historical information outside the precincts of the autonomous new Critical poem, still leave unchallenged prevailing concepts of the lyric, personal expressiveness, the unified speaking voice, and the habit of (epiphanic) closure. [...] Without significant changes in the disciplinary structures of host academic institutions, the overall effect of Language writing [...] may be minimized, contained, or simply made marginal or anomalous (Lazer 1996a, p.146 and p.149).

Lazer's solution - for a 'heterogeneous textbook anthology that would seriously engage the possibility of putting forward alternative methods of reading poetry' - confirms that Language poetry's institutionalised context results in the impossibility of locating, of explaining, the activity of the reader of the avant-garde text in terms other than those governing institutionalisation. The reader, in this definition, has to be *taught* to read, if only to escape prior teaching.

Indeed, to react against the significance of pedagogy to poetry can sound reactionary or naive in its implicit desire for the possibility of autonomous or even 'organic' art. Dana Gioia, for example, has attributed the sliding slope of poetry's ability to 'matter' to the University: 'the situation has become a paradox, a Zen riddle of cultural sociology. Over the past half century, as American poetry's specialist audience has steadily expanded, its general readership has declined' (Gioia 1992, p.95). For Gioia the academic status of poetry has alienated it from its 'original

cultural function', a function that does not easily include the politicisation or the theorisation of poetry, it is, he suggests, 'a difficult task to marry the muse happily with politics' (p.11).

My own critique of Language writing's partial assimilation is not simply a nostalgic yearning, therefore, for what critic Alan Golding has described as 'an impossible ahistorical wish for an ideologically pure uncontaminated avant-garde that successfully resists co-option by the institution that it attacks' (Golding 1995, p.147). It is, rather, a reinforcement of the need to acknowledge the assumptions that have accompanied the relationship between Language poetry and the institutions which it necessarily inhabits. One should read the institutionalisation of the movement not as a sign of its failure, Golding has suggested, but in order to explore the ways in which it 'affects how the ideological state apparatuses mediating American poetry shape poetry readers as social subjects' (Golding 1995, p.170).

In order to understand how this poetry 'broaden[s] the range and nature of subject positions the American poetry "establishment makes available"', however, the effects that this construction of an institutionalised poetic mode has had upon these reading practices requires more scrutiny than I think that it has presently been given (Golding 1995, p.170). The critic John Guillory points out, in his critique of the collapsing of the politics of representation and the politics of canon formation, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, that the authority of the canon resides not in its representations but in the reproducibility of the reading and writing practices which it engenders. Literature, for Guillory, is the 'vector of ideological notions which do not inhere in the works themselves but in the context of their institutional presentation, or more simply, the way in which they are taught' (Guillory 1993, p.ix).

According to Guillory one of the central effects of an institutionalised reading practice, and its implicit claims upon the authority of an internal consensus, is that the significance of the readings produced within it aspire to become self-contained: 'shall we not say that "consensus" [...] has the same relation to value within a particular "interpretative community" as the notion of transcendent value once had for a community of readers which imagined itself to be the only such community?' (p.27). In other words, Guillory is suggesting that the values being advocated in the production of a reading practice are in danger of screening out the other factors affecting reading, of becoming a self-evident justification for the practice. The sense of consensus that lends itself to this transcending effect is, Guillory also points out, 'a pleasant ideological shift by which social determinations are mystified as "collective decisions" that are finally only the sum of

individual decisions' (p.27). Behind the apparent consensus of the reading community, then, are the *contested* ideological assumptions that the work of individuals - what Guillory describes elsewhere in his book as 'master thinkers' - have attempted to make concrete within 'social and institutional sites [which] are complex hierarchies in which the position and privilege of judgement are objects of competitive struggles' (p.27).

I want to suggest that the Language mode aspires to such a reading, a reading that is able to close itself off from a consideration of other reading practices, in one of its central formulations: in its description of the active reader. The activity of the reader has been analysed in the the work of the poet Charles Bernstein and the critic Marjorie Perloff, both of whom could be described as 'master thinkers' for the Language mode. Both occupy prestigious academic positions and their written work is not only prolific but wide-ranging in appeal. Bernstein is David Grey Professor of Poetry and Letters at SUNY Buffalo and his latest collections of essays *A Poetics* was published by Harvard University Press. Marjorie Perloff is the Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities at Stanford University and has written two of the most influential texts on Language writing. I want to briefly examine some of the central tenets of these works to illuminate the assumptions which I think that Language writing's poetic mode, as an unstable and contested designation, too easily passes over.

Bernstein's lengthy 'poessay' (the term was coined by Marjorie Perloff to describe some of the writing of Susan Howe) 'Artifice of Absorption' explores and narrates the effects which he thinks that formal techniques, which he designates as either 'absorptive' or 'impermeable', have upon the positioning of the reader. Absorptive would appear to imply the act of subjective identification that the 'traditional' poetic forms of the mainstream lyric are dependent upon, whilst 'antiabsorptive' indicates the experimentalism of an innovative poetics. In this piece, however, absorption is associated with an 'engrossing, engulfing / completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie / attention intensification, rhapsodic, spellbinding' reading practice and its opposite 'impermeability' 'suggests artifice, boredom/ exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction / digression, interruptive, transgressive' (Bernstein 1992, p.29). The essay suggests that the effects of these poetic forms are actually more complex than any binary listing can imply, the two techniques can 'shift and slide', be combined as well as divided: no particular affect inheres in either.

Absorptive and antiabsorptive
 works both require artifice, but the former may hide
 this while the latter may flaunt
 it & absorption may dissolve
 into theater as these distinctions chimerically
 shift and slide Especially since,
 as in much of my own work, antiabsorptive
 techniques are used toward
 absorptive ends, [] It remains an open question, & an unresolvable
 one, what
 will produce an absorptive poem & what will
 produce a nonabsorptive one (p 30)

Bernstein's apparent 'scepticism about these binary divisions' of poetic form that this poem appears to enact is motivated by his desire to read poetic technique as intimately connected to historical context, 'today's antiabsorptive works are/ tomorrow's most absorbing ones, & vice-versa the absorbable, accommodationist devices/ of today will in many cases fade into arcanity' (p.85) Although Bernstein is at pains not to essentialise poetic form and constantly underlines the complex attractions of both absorptive and antiabsorptive forms, the conviction behind the essay remains that the 'more intensified, technologised/ absorption made possible by/ nonabsorptive means may get the reader/ absorbed into a more ideologized/ or politicized space' and that 'the distractions of reading/ 'entertainments' - the fastread magazines &/ fictions and verse absorb only listlessly [.] fuelling the banality of everyday life/ not reflecting its elusive actuality' (p 53 and p 84)

In the essay immediately preceding 'Artifice of Absorption' in *A Poetics*, 'State of the Art', Bernstein continues to argue that poetical forms have no intrinsic meaning of their own, form and content are, he suggests, 'inaudible without the other [.] completely interpenetrating and interdependent' (p 7-8) However, this essay also reinforces Bernstein's prioritising of form *over* content as that which defines Language poetry's oppositional space, and thus its claims upon the reader The significance of form may shift and slide, its effects upon the reader may be contingent upon context and content as the earlier essay suggests, but it still defines the political

significance of the text beyond these two things.

To be sure, signature styles of cultural differences can be admitted into the official culture of diversity if they are essentialized, that is, if these styles can be made to symbolically represent the group being tokenised or assimilated. Artists within these groups who are willing to embrace neither the warp of mainstream literary style through which to percolate their own experience nor the woof of an already inflected and so easily recognised, style of cultural difference will find themselves falling through the very wide gaps and tears in the fabric of American tolerance. Such artists pay the price for being less interested in representing than enacting (p.7).

Language writing retains its crucial and radical distance from mainstream verse culture through its formal qualities, it is these that separate it from what Bernstein perceives to be the homogenous commodification of writing that mainstream verse fosters. Moreover, these formal qualities allow the writing its political *efficacy*. It is these, rather than the reader's own context or the text's own content, that 'is at heart a measure of the relationship between a reader & a work' (p.88). There is a contradiction here: one that occurs because Bernstein is at once both acknowledging the limitations of attributing any inherent significance to poetic technique while at the same time making form *the* point of oppositional identification for the work.

Marjorie Perloff's influential *Radical Artifice* also theorised why the radical forms of experimental writing define the action of the reader. Perloff is wisely hesitant about the term 'Language' writing: both because of the subversive claims made on its behalf and because of the homogenising effect that it has upon the work of experimental writers. Her argument, however, still turns upon the notion that experimental formalism demands a specific type of activity from the reader. Perloff suggests that a belief in the lyrical I's ability to command an authentic self and transparent language had been placed under increasing pressure by an ever-expanding electronic and media organised world. The denial of this fact, she argues, by 'what Charles Bernstein calls the "official verse culture" constructs an authenticity of self that has become itself a commodity, a product based on the now-specious ideology of privacy' (Perloff 1991, p.19). Experimental writing does not rely upon this commodified sense of self, Perloff suggests, its poetics are 'more consonant with the reading-writing practices of the new electronic "page" ' (p.20). Language

writing is thus marked for Perloff by its ability to acknowledge its own 'radical artifice'. It is 'less a matter of elaboration and elegant subterfuge, than of recognition that a poem or painting or performance text is a *made thing* - contrived, constructed, chosen - and that its reading is also a construction on the part of its audience' (p.28). Perloff, like Bernstein, defines this poetry as subversive because it demonstrates the conditions of its own constructedness, it finds political action not in the false cover, the 'elegant subterfuge', of some kind of an originary identity but in its embrace of its fashioning and its acknowledgement of its dependence upon audience.

The distinctions used by Perloff have been usefully critiqued to suggest the ways in which the politicising of the differences between performativity and false authenticity can lapse into ahistoricism. Michael Greer suggests that Perloff's categorisation of poetry, based upon a desire to 'name' experimental poetry as 'different', results in a set of misleading dichotomies that is characteristic of critical work on Language writing. Greer points to the tendency of critics, 'to characterize Language poetry as the repressed "other" of a dominant "workshop" poetic, theoretically sophisticated where it is naive, philosophically sceptical where it is idealistic, and politically oppositional where it is accommodating' (Greer 1989, p.337). The result of this 'double gesture', where Language poetry is both 'idealised and marginalised', so Greer suggests, is that we are placed in a position from which we are unable to historicise the specific historical and social impetus behind the movement. Greer suggests that Perloff's construction of 'poetic thinking [...] as a certain form of thought, primarily non-functional; intuitive and imagistic rather than rational and which is repressed and devalued by a technological culture' leads her to 'dismantle the discourse of Language poetry [to] separate the aesthetic component of the writing from its political contexts and impulses, and isolates its forms from its history' (p.338 & p.339). Although Greer possibly over-demonises Perloff's argument here, texts such as *The Dance of The Intellect*, for example, *have* attempted to locate formal experimentation within a literary history, his critique of the implications of Perloff's reliance upon a binary of reading as *either* performative or falsely authentic is one that I want to examine further.

One of the central assumptions of Language poetry's mode that goes unchallenged, in the assertion that form defines the significance of the text for the reader in specific ways, is the alternative ways in which significance has been attributed to the act of consumption. Language writing's foundational analogy, that reading can be equated with consumption, is one that has been echoed in other fields of Cultural Studies, where critics have examined how meaning has

been bestowed by readers/consumers upon the act of reading/consumption. Although the various schools of reading that this awareness has resulted in are considered more specifically below, I want to end this section by highlighting how this alternative view of consumption allows for the construction of an entirely different view of the relationship between the reader and the text.

The work of the cultural theorist Daniel Miller has been influential in foregrounding the political implications of consumption. Miller stresses the *agency* wielded by the consumer and suggests that the failure of theory to consider the significance of the consumer in this light is testament to the fact that thinkers on both the left and right remain welded to discredited discourses of liberal progression. For Miller, the primary function of consumption does not reside in what he describes as the 'myths' of the consumer, who is seen to be responsible for, variously, global homogenisation, the negation of sociality or authenticity, and the production of a 'particular kind of being' (myths that the Language mode seems to buy into to some extent), but in the *productive* act of objectification through which an individual constructs a sense of self in relation to the world. Miller argues a position which recognises the politics of the consumer's intimate relationship with global capitalism, and yet also allows for the possibility that the consumer can influence, possibly subvert, this system (Miller 1995). Political agency is, Miller argues, necessarily limited to the conditions of the subject's production, which are necessarily inextricable from the macro-political realities of a global economy, a construction of gender, a discourse of class and so on. It is in the individual's interaction with these broader narratives that their relationship to agency can be established, as the consumer is always both in and out of the systems with which it interacts.

The significance of the subject who is both 'in' and 'out' of their own formative discourses has been considered in feminist theory. Although feminism's negotiation of the problematic of reading and subjectivity is also dealt with more fully below, I want to consider a single, pertinent, example of this thinking here. The feminist critic Theresa De Lauretis' formulation of gender suggests that 'women' are always both in and out of the gendering process that the term 'woman' implies. In *Technologies of Gender* De Lauretis describes how the action of the feminist can be best understood as the 'movement in and out of gender as an ideological representation [...] a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere of those discourses: those other spaces both discursive and social that exist since feminist practices have (re)constructed them, in the

margins (or “between the lines” or “against the grain”) of hegemonic discourses and on the interstices of institutions, in counter practices and new forms of community’ (De Lauretis 1987, p.26).

Yet De Lauretis, who is primarily a film critic, argues *against* a feminist filmic counter-practice that would exist within the ‘off-spaces’ that avant-gardism, and its separate community and reading practices, requires. De Lauretis argues instead for ‘strategies of coherence’, for a feminist cinema that should ‘not be anti-narrative nor anti-oedipal but quite the opposite. It should be narrative and oedipal with a vengeance [...] to represent the duplicity of the oedipal scenario itself and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it’ (p.108). Implicit within this support for a subversive occupation of mainstream space is an acknowledgement that mainstream or dominant texts can produce active and subversive readings, that the *pleasures* of narrative coherence do not necessarily result in narrative ‘closure’: ‘even the texts of classical narrative cinema display, as feminist critics have repeatedly shown, the very gaps and paradoxes that the operation of narrative is meant to cover up’ (p.109). De Lauretis’ interest is not in assigning specific responses to specific cinematic forms but to find ways of exploring, and of appropriating, the cultural *significance* that readings of these forms have been loaded with.

It is the disregard of these ambivalences in the status of the consumer, for whom the act of consumption may also entail the act of production, in Language writing’s insistence that consumption, within dominant or non avant-garde spaces, is something which is *passive* and must be overcome, which is central to my point here. The Language mode seems to want to deny the implications of the consumer/reader’s ambivalent positioning - their productive as well as consuming role. What is in danger of being missed is what *else* the reader brings to, or demands from, the text: what other discourses are being reconstructed or produced through the act of reading. Daniel Miller, for example, suggests that the productive aspects of the consumer’s activity involves the continual construction of the consumer’s own selfhood. It is this intersubjective relationship between the authorial subject and the reading subject, and its associated dynamics of authority and power - its relationship to the other discourses of identity - that I think requires more emphasis than Language writing’s rhetorical model seems to place upon it. In the following section I want to establish a criteria by which these dynamics can be evaluated in the work of the specific poets examined in the body of the thesis.

Section Two. Feminist Praxis and Textual Practice

Part One. The Paradox of the Literary Critic

The question of how the production of cultural artefacts could be seen as allowing for an intervention within historical reality, that was posed in 1983 by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign conference, has also been central to the debates occurring within feminist theory in the past three decades. The ‘grass-roots’ of feminism in the seventies had been particularly successful, as I have suggested above, in the fertile ground of the country’s educational institutions. Feminism’s negotiation of how political action and collectivity could be understood in the face of the apparently fragmenting narratives of modernity became, by the end of the seventies, quite literally, an academic subject. It was feminists in the Arts and Humanities departments of universities and colleges who grappled with questions about what and where feminist ‘subversion’ was, about how it could be written and enacted, about culture’s ability to perform or respond to social and political change, about the limits of identity and self as inclusive categories, and about how all of these things could be understood and represented. These anxieties stemmed, in part, from a need for the writer and theorist to understand their own role, to know how reading and teaching could remain political acts in the face of seemingly uncontrollable and often alienating cultural and political shifts.

A clear narrative of the increasing tension between feminism’s desire to formulate social praxis and its relatively high theoretical investment in literary studies has by now been established. In the sixties and seventies Anglo-American feminism had seemingly often shared what appeared to be the directly material and collective impetus of the broader feminist movement. In literary studies this reciprocal concern had translated itself into an examination of the ways in which women had been represented in literature and a laying claim of women’s rights to have access to cultural forms from which they had been excluded. The reading of the misogyny of male authors inspired by Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) and the validation of the cultural and literary separatism advocated by Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Our Own* (1977) were influential in analysing the importance of the literary to feminist practice and thought in this period.

However, as feminism reacted to the broader crisis of legitimation that occurred toward the end of the seventies, as it struggled to find a way through what Elaine Showalter went on to describe in 1981 as its theoretical ‘wilderness’, the emphasis shifted away from this sturdy

examination of the *content* of representations of women towards an interest in the *conditions* of representation. Language itself became the central object of study as not only semantics but the neutrality of both referentiality and identity as useful categories were placed under a suspicion that came to characterise the spiralling popularity of poststructuralist thought.

In this context feminist literary experimentalism - which had many of its roots in the modernist practices of writers such as Gertrude Stein and H.D. - was invested with renewed significance. Feminist literary theory increasingly saw language as the ideologically saturated producer of a gendered subjectivity and experience, and sought to explore this structure which apparently maintained an exclusionary hierarchy of difference. It was in this context that the thought of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Hélène Cixous was being made accessible on a large scale for the first time. Central to the attraction that the thought of these writers proffered feminist writing in this period was the notion that linguistic subversion or disruption - be it the burlesque of Irigaray's *mimicry*, the eruption of Kristeva's babbling *semiotic*, the excess of Derrida's *differance*, the pleasure of Barthes' *jouissance* or the flight of Cixous' *voler* - heralded seemingly profound opportunities for vocalising and overcoming a marginality that was seen to be rooted in language. The ability, perhaps even the need, for feminist writers and critics seeking to make the literary political to appropriate the linguistic experimentation advocated by 'French thought', to disrupt the hierarchies of authority perceived to be housed in narrative and syntax, became a dogma accepted and practised by many in the seventies, and on into the eighties and nineties.

The opposing practice of social realism was cast, by some, as inherently conservative or naive in its continuing reliance upon systems of representation that were dependent on a belief system - a phallogocentrism - that was seen to be necessarily exclusionary in its complicity with the narratives of a patriarchal modernity. Anthologies such as Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs' *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, for example, explicitly acknowledge a theoretical debt to the emergence of a poststructuralist feminism that sought to establish the importance of literary innovation for feminist writers seeking to exploit, rather than face marginalisation by, the fracturing of the authoritative narratives of modernity. Alice Jardine's influential *Gynesis* is held to be representative by Friedman and Fuchs of this urging of feminists to explore the costs of a representational language and stable subject position, and, more specifically, to relocate the subversive notion of the 'feminine' within feminism rather than

allowing it to remain the politically ungendered site of modernity's own narratives.

Jardine explores the intersection between feminism and what she calls 'modernity' [...] as inscribed in experimental literature. She points out that although experimental literature and feminism share not only a profound quarrel with established, patriarchal forms but also a sense of identification with what has been muted by these forms - what even the male theorists of modernity call "the feminine" - practitioners and theorists of both camps are not interested in pursuing this issue of their similar concerns. (Friedman 1989, p.xii)

Experimental literature, Friedman and Fuchs suggest in their introduction, allows for important new formations of feminist subjectivity to emerge from this crisis in modernity.

Although the woman in the text may be the particular woman writer, in the case of twentieth century experimental writers, the woman in the text is also an effect of textual practice of breaking patriarchal fictional forms; the radical forms - non-linear, non-hierarchical and decentring - are, in themselves, a way of writing the feminine [...] In exploding dominant forms, women experimental writers not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternate fictional space, a space in which the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed (p.3 and p.4).

However, Friedman and Fuchs' claims that these texts could 'assail the social structure' were treated suspiciously by other feminists within the academy. The concern to appropriate the subversive potential offered by the intersection of modernist/ avant-garde literary paradigms and poststructuralist thought often came into conflict with the need to question the material politics of what such subversion actually meant for the women's movement. Marxist-feminists such as Rita Felski vehemently argued, towards the end of the decade, against the practices of a feminist experimentalism precisely because of its loss of political context and a discernible 'social function.'

The social function of literature in relation to a relatively broad-based women's movement is necessarily important to an emancipatory feminist politics, which has sought to give

cultural prominence to the depiction of women's experiences and interests. Its significance is obscured by the assertion that experimental writing constitutes the only truly "subversive" or "feminine" textual practice, and that more conventional forms such as realism are complicit with patriarchal systems of representation, a position which maps onto gender what are in fact class questions and thus avoids any examination of the potentially elitist implications of its own position (Felski 1989, p.7).

A potential contradiction thus existed between the political and aesthetic aspects of the text, a contradiction that, as Jane Gallop has since suggested, was actually characteristic of the tensions implicit in feminism's concern to retain the *literary* as a valid *political* project in this period (Gallop 1992, p.90). As Gallop goes on to point out, this implicit 'double-vision' in literary feminism has had implications for the ways in which feminists understood the role of the aesthetic itself.

Feminist aesthetics [...] could be seen as a debate between modernist and realist aesthetics. Whereas 'realism' privileges prose fiction, 'modernism' places poetry at the centre of literature. Realism tends toward an extrinsic literary aesthetic, modernism has promoted and benefited from the emphasis on an 'intrinsic appraisal of literature' (p.99-100).

The validation of feminist aesthetics as political in this period often seemed to falter over the question of *where* the political action of the text was to be culturally located. What lay behind this central tension between politics and formalism; between the need to understand literature 'extrinsically' as a culturally located act, or 'intrinsically' as something capable of subverting the hegemonic implications of its own textual status, was the stability of the feminist subject itself. The confidence that feminist literary critics had been able to place in either the reader or the writer was being called into question by the subject's displacement by language.

In a dialogue in 1981 (republished in 1990), which has now become representative of the issues at stake in this debate, Nancy K. Miller and Peggy Kamuf wrangled over the significance that could be attributed to a woman-centred literary feminism. Underneath this argument was a contestation over the need to retain the gendered subject as object of study.

I will be suggesting that by delimiting as the object of criticism literature by but also about, for and against women, this central form of literary theory has already made certain assumptions about the place of critical activity. The feminist critique of cultural institutions (including literature) has, in large part proceeded from the evidence of woman's traditional exclusion and has therefore implied either that those institutions must be expanded to include what has been excluded [...] or that they must be abandoned in favor of distinctly feminine-centred cultural models. These opposing strategies, in other words, both rest on the same analysis of phallogentrism's most readily evident feature - the order of women's exclusion - and proceed in practice to attempt to correct or reverse that feature at the same level at which it appears. (Kamuf 1990b, p.106).

Kamuf's conviction that an oppositional practice would ensure only that the critic remain within the system of binaries against which she strives, was countered by Nancy Miller's defence of the importance of retaining a subject position for the historically located woman author.¹⁵ Miller continued to 'speak as one who believes that "we women" must continue to work for the woman who has been writing, because to not to do so will re-authorise our oblivion' (Miller 1990b, p.113). What Miller sought to specifically highlight was that an important part of literary feminism's attempts to conjoin the intrinsic and extrinsic politics of the text - to culturally locate the text's production and reception - had been to invest in the author and the reader. This is consequently an investment that she is far from willing to relinquish. As she specifically argues in later essays, such as 'Changing the Subject', the role of the author is actually necessary in order that the reader may retain the oppositional agency, the subversive energy, that feminism has entrusted to literature (Miller 1986c).

Section Two, Part Two

Authority and Authorship

Nancy K. Miller's argument is obviously supported by one of literary feminism's strongest traditions. The existence of the author had been politicised in feminist theory in the previous two

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Kamuf explains her critique of the author function more fully in her monograph *Signature Pieces*, (Kamuf 1988).

decades through work done to expand the literary canon, to include the work of women writers whose work had been historically marginalised. The introduction to Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* makes the significance of the context of individual women writers apparent. Showalter's task was to 'look beyond the famous novelists who have been found worthy, to the *lives and works* of many women who have long been excluded from literary history. I have tried to discover how they felt about themselves and their books, what choices and sacrifices they made, and how their relationship to their profession and their tradition evolved' (Showalter 1978, p.36, italics mine). Showalter's work is premised on her ringing confidence that a clear and political connection could be made between the authorial subject and their historical context.

In her book *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* the literary critic and poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis places a subtly different emphasis on how the significance of the authorial subject should be understood: an emphasis I want to examine for the way in which it accents how the tension between feminist cultural politics and literary practices became crystallised around the issue of the authorial subject, as the types of assumptions made by Showalter in 1978 began to come under pressure. DuPlessis concurred with theorists and critics such as Alice Jardine and Ellen Friedman in suggesting that women writers need to occupy 'radical' literary spaces in order that they can appropriate and embrace the implications of the crisis in modernity. As DuPlessis acknowledges this is a crisis that, without such an act of appropriation, held only a distinctly ambiguous political agenda for feminist theory.

Firstly, DuPlessis' writing demonstrated that an interest in literary radicalism continued with the 'gynocritical' practice of unearthing and reviving the work of women who had been traditionally excluded from the academy. Her work thus offers an alternative to the binary of French versus American feminist thought that works such as Toril Moi's 1985 *Sexual/Textual Politics* had concretised. DuPlessis' book on H.D., *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle*, for example, illustrated that work which stressed the significance of a writer's experimentalism could also remain attentive to the need to examine the cultural conditions in which these forgotten or marginalised writers produced work. DuPlessis sought to link H.D.'s experience of social marginalisation with the political significance of her textual subversions.

What are the material and emotional conditions by which H.D. as a woman writer did her work ? [...] What were her sexualities and their dilemmas, marriage, motherhood, and other choices of role with their effects upon her poetic career ? [...] these acts are not purely a psychological manoeuvre which might be relegated only to biography: they are conceptual and linguistic, a matter of studying the self in relation to conventions of representation. (DuPlessis 1986a, p.xiv)

Integral to DuPlessis' attempt to appropriate and explore the experimental paradigms of modernist literature that writers such as H.D. provide is her desire to disturb the hierarchy of social exclusions upon which much of this writing was predicated. DuPlessis' attempt to do this, however, also reveals the ambivalences that this project necessarily entails.

Modernist agendas concealed highly conventional metaphors and narratives of gender, views of women as static, immobile, eternal, goddess like. Until the problematic of women is solved, no writer is truly modern. Modernist agendas conceal highly conventional views of race - African Americans as primitive, "colorful", picturesque people. Until the problematic of race is solved, no writer is truly modern. These poetic objects are filled with stored human labour, stored human thought, habituations. It is a work, a practice to begin the long process of social dislodging..... (DuPlessis 1990, p.44).

What remains uninvestigated by DuPlessis, as the critic Deborah Jacobs has suggested, in her concern to bring about this subversive 'dislodging' of modernist writing is a consideration of the broader politics of this project itself. Jacobs suggests that the attempts by writers such as DuPlessis - and she includes other critics working on modernism such as Marianne DeKoven and Bonnie Kime Scott - to 'rechart' and 'rethink' modernism are in danger of neglecting a consideration of the positions of cultural authority that modernist practices occupy.

I believe that recent feminist criticism of modernism continues to view literature as a privileged separate, distanced discourse that calls for a special kind of writing/ reading skill. And in my view the privileges and powers of the subject position we've inherited from modernist intellectuals are not at all endangered nor is that *subject position's politics* fully

exposed by recent efforts to recode experimental discourse as feminine [] we don't get around to discussing the cultural politics of the move toward expertise itself, the elite positioning of 'high' modernist art in relation to 'others', the self interested privileging of experimentation with technique (Jacobs 1994, p 276)

Central to understanding the relationship between the aesthetic qualities and the cultural politics of the modernist text - the tension between an internal and external critique as Jane Gallop described it - is, for Jacobs, an examination of the way in which these texts negotiate their own investment in the specific cultural capital of the literary text, and, more specifically, the literary author. The 'privileges and powers' conferred upon the modernist subject are protected, Jacobs seems to argue, rather than fundamentally questioned, by the practices of an experimental writing.¹⁶

This is an argument made more explicitly by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak has suggested that the dispersal of authorial subjectivity, described by Barthes, is a metropolitan luxury that can as easily conceal the authority of the 'centre' as question its legitimation.

Are we obliged to repeat the argument that, as metropolitan writing is trying to get rid of a subject that has too long been the dominant, the post-colonial writer must still foreground his traffic with the subject-position? Too easy, I think. Not because the migrant must still consider the question of identity, plurality, roots. But because fabricating decentred subjects as the sign of the times is not necessarily these times decentring the subject. There in the wake of the European avant-garde is also a confusion of the narrow and general sense of the relationship between subject and centre. The trick or turn is not to assume the representation of de-centering to *be* decentring, and/or judge styles by conjunctures (Spivak 1995, p 229)

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Jacob's critique of DuPlessis seems based on a critique of poststructuralist practices that is echoed in the work of Andreas Huyssen. Huyssen suggests that poststructuralism can be read as continuing the modernist project 'if it is true that postmodernity is a historical condition making it sufficiently unique and different from modernity, then it is striking to see how deeply the poststructuralist critical discourse - in its obsession with centre and writing, allegory and rhetoric, and in its displacement of revolution and politics to the aesthetic - is embedded in that very modernist tradition which, at least in American eyes, it presumably transcends' (Huyssen 1990, p 258)

This difference, between the representation of textual decentring and the experience of material decentredness, between a profound cultural disenfranchisement and a textual strategy, appears very pertinent. One of my central evaluative criteria for analysing the significance of authorial articulation in the work of individual poets turns upon an analysis of how this difference has been negotiated or acknowledged. Such an acknowledgement is necessary, of course, because the cultural privilege and authority of the writer's own positioning has to be fully considered in order that it can be meaningfully challenged.

It appears as if Nancy K. Miller's argument, that authorial presence is necessary for the reader's praxis, does not conclude the 'case' for the author. Authorial presence is also significant because it allows for an acknowledgement of cultural location. This point was most clearly made by Adrienne Rich in her groundbreaking essay 'Notes Towards a Politics of Location'. In this essay Rich uses her own identity to acknowledge and delineate the complicated relationships between her positioning laden with privilege and her positioning of oppression. Central to this project seems to be the desire, on the part of Rich, to acknowledge her responsibility. To mark the specific lack of neutrality with from which she necessarily writes.

As a woman I have a country: as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government, or by saying three times 'As a woman my country is the whole world.' Tribal loyalties aside, and if even nation states are just pretexts used by multinational conglomerates to serve their interest, I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history, within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist, I am created and trying to create. (Rich 1985, p.8)

Rich acknowledges that she is the product of this socio-political landscape of identities: she acknowledges both its generative force in forming her and is explicit about her own desire to alter, to 'create', it. This emphasis upon the 'politics of location', upon the writer's willingness to acknowledge the way in which their own subjectivity is implicated in the sites of authority that they wish to undermine, allows subjectivity to be articulated without returning it to discredited liberal narratives of progression.

Section Two, Part Three

Resistant Readings

Feminism's need to attribute political significance to the literary text had been alternatively focused, for some theorists at least, upon an examination of the role of the *reader*. The reader fulfilled Rita Felski's prescription of feminism's need for a 'social function' of literature by placing 'real' women at the core of the cultural politics of the text. The presumed effects that the literary text would have upon the reader's gendered identification of themselves had been integral to much feminist literature and criticism's sense of collective purpose. The subjectivity of the reader as 'woman', as able to read as a feminist and thus possess a consciousness seeking social change, was the stake in feminism's investment in the reader. Judith Fetterley, in her then innovative *The Resisting Reader*, subscribes to this view of literature in her introduction.

My book is for me more than an academic matter, more than an act of literary criticism, more than a possible text for courses on women in American literature, more even than a source of dialogue: it is an act of survival. It is based on the premise that we read and that what we read affects us - drenches us, to use [Adrienne] Rich's language, in its assumptions and that to avoid drowning in this drench of assumptions we must learn to re-read [...] At its best, feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read. (Fetterley 1978, p.viii)

Fetterley's assumption that the text could coherently and uniformly deliver its ideological message (albeit one which was then 'resisted') was, however, gradually usurped in the eighties by the more complex models of textuality and reading demanded by poststructuralist and postmodernist theory. Theories that, in placing both the meaning of the text and the stability of the subject under pressure, stressed the opacity, rather than the transparency, of the relationship between the text and its reader.

The need for feminism to retain the belief in a 'social function' for the text, however, has also meant that many feminist critics have remained sceptically resistant to these pressures. Sara Mills

and Lyn Pearce's collection *Feminist Readings: Feminists Reading*, (now in its second edition) was premised on the assertion that 'a feminist reading of a text of any kind is still necessary to express a political commitment to the fight against women's oppression in patriarchal culture(s). How literature and/or literary criticism engages with such oppression in the "material world" remains, of course, a complicated issue, but most of us who identify as feminist theorists and critics believe there *is* a connection' (Mills 1996, p.2). Mill's later collection of essays *Gendering the Reader* was devoted to the attempt to find ways of *maintaining* this vital connection between the feminist reader and the text. In this section I borrow the outline of the schema delineated in the introduction to this text. This schema suggests an overview of the ways in which theorisations of the reader placed the connection that they forged between the text and the 'material world' under pressure. I am specifically interested in exploring how the three separate reading methodologies named by Mills - 'ethnographic/empirical', 'linguistic analysis', and 'reader-reception theory' - are seen to serve (or hinder) her broader goal of forging a political link between the text and the reader. In the conclusion to the section I want to suggest the ways in which this survey of reading practices has informed the reading agenda I bring to bear upon the work of individual poets.

The first approach to be illustrated is described as 'ethnographic/ empirical', and is firmly subject centred, garnering its material from empirical research of reader responses. This approach, most famously exemplified by the work of Janice Radway and David Morley, concentrates on the politics of cultural reception through attempting to understand the how 'real' readers negotiate the assumed meanings of the text. It has been most clearly theorised in a British context by the school of thought to emerge from Birmingham University's Centre for Cultural Studies in the early seventies which suggested that the reader of the (mainly popular media) text was active, and able to resist, the meanings which the text sought to deliver. These were ideas first promulgated in Stuart Hall's seminal 1973 'Encoding/Decoding' essay which proposed the notion of a reader capable of 'decoding' the 'encoded' message of the text, not only in the 'preferred' or dominant manner which the text seems to seek, but also in a 'negotiated' or 'oppositional' manner in order to make it relevant to his or her own circumstances (Hall 1980). This approach examines 'the degree of freedom which audiences demonstrate in their interaction with media messages and their interest in the way such cultural forms are embedded in the social life of their users' (Radway

1987, p 7)¹⁷ Although this model is only directly invoked in the thesis in chapter three, centrally because of its sidelining of the specificity of the complications of the individual text in favour of generic generalisations (Radway, for example, used it in a study of Romance and Morley to analyse a run of the television programme *Nationwide*), its stress upon the *activity* of the reader informed my challenge to the assumptions about the passive nature of consumerism or reading made in the Language mode

Language writing's own implicit dismissal of this approach was paralleled in other models of reading being constructed in British Cultural Studies at this time. The second broad approach, described by Mills as 'linguistic analysis', refuted the 'ethnographic/empirical' approach because it was unable to grant the reader this degree of autonomy, asserting instead that their response to the text was dictated by the text's positioning of them. Mills is curt in her dismissal of its 'unquestioned assumptions about the nature of the text and its role in determining meaning, to the point at which the reader is portrayed as passive dupe' (Mills 1994a, p 3). This model of reading is clearly poststructuralist in its approach, it places the text as central in the interpretative process that the reader undergoes¹⁸. The effects that this emphasis on the text has upon the reader have now become familiar. The endlessly deferred poststructuralist readings encouraged by Barthes, and the Althusserian construction of the reader as positioned by ideology emerging from *Screen* writers such as Colin MacCabe and Laura Mulvey, can both be understood through their prioritising of the text over the reader¹⁹.

The cultural implications of this emphasis have also become familiar. This reading mode perceived reader empowerment to be arrived at only through the possession of a relatively sophisticated cultural capital: the reader had to be able to produce the complex 'writerly' text demanded by Barthes in *S/Z* or be able to construct significance from the non-realist Brechtian

¹⁷ Janice Radway in her introduction to this 1987 edition of *Reading the Romance* (the text was first published by University of North Carolina Press in 1984) comments upon the connection between her work and the Birmingham school that was unknown to her when the book was originally written. The ways in which this empirical model of research has recently lent itself to more text based analysis is explored in Chapter Three.

¹⁸ David Morley's own refutation of the apoliticisation of this *Screen* 'position' is clearly articulated in his work of the period such as 'Texts, Readers, Subjects' (Morley, 1980).

¹⁹ Anthony Easthope has pointed out that MacCabe's view of the relationship between the text and reader can be attributed to Barthes but suggests that MacCabe goes further than Barthes in theorizing the role of the reader. Easthope posits that this difference is the difference between structuralism and poststructuralism - 'MacCabe's work is a development, clarifying and evidencing the idea's sketched out by Barthes [] Between *S/Z* and *Screen* from 1974 on there is a problematic, from structuralism (the effect of the text) to poststructuralism (the

text as defined by MacCabe. Again, this model, and its casting of the reader, without the intervention of the difficult text, as 'passive dupe' seems to share much with the assumptions of Language writing that I have already critiqued.

Reader-reception is the last approach cited in this introduction and Mills is critical of its attempts to methodologise the interplay between reader and text. This was a debate, she suggests, that was polarised around the familiar tension, 'between theorists who tend to characterise the reader as simple recipient of a reading enforced by the text or [those] concerned to posit the reader as an active resister of the meanings which the text attempts to foist on her' (p.11). The attempt by writers such as Stanley Fish to locate the attribution of textual meaning not solely with either the reader or the text but within institutionalised reading structures - 'interpretative communities' - is similar to the notion of the 'reading community', which I have already proposed Language writing was attempting to construct in order to give cultural weight to its notion of the 'active reader'. I want to examine this type of construction in more detail in order to reiterate both the problems which I think it was attempting to resolve and the problems which it also seemed to accrue - problems which have informed my own construction of a reading agenda.

In his introductory essay to the collection *Is There a Text in this Class ?* Fish suggests that his notion of the 'interpretative community' was brought about through the realisation that his attempts to endow the reader with significance in constituting the meaning of the text had been balanced upon an aporia: in acknowledging the significance of the reader he was in danger of emptying the text of the possibility of any shared meaning, and yet his attempts to prevent this implicitly reinstated the authority of New Criticism's insistence upon the stability of the text.

I could not both declare my opposition to new critical principles and retain the most basic of those principles - the integrity of the text - in order to be able to claim universality and objectivity for my method. I kept this knowledge from myself by never putting the two arguments together but marshalling each of them only to rebut specific points. When someone would charge that an emphasis on the reader leads directly to solipsism and anarchy, I would reply by insisting on the constraints imposed by reader on the text; and when someone would characterise my position as nothing more than the most recent turn of the new critical screw, I would reply by saying that in my model the reader was freed

from the tyranny of the text and given the central role in the production of meaning. (Fish 1980, p.7)

In place of this contradiction Fish introduced the notion of the interpretative community in which the 'reader is identified not as a free agent, making literature in any old way, but as a member of a community whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he [sic] pays and thus the kind of literature "he" "makes" [...] Thus the act of recognising literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature' (p.11). Fish's account of interpretative communities acknowledges the significance of the reader without allowing their existence to empty the text of meaning. This notion of the text's meaning resulting from an act of collective will allowed Fish to circumvent, so he argued, 'the debate between the champions of the text and the champions of the reader' because these 'competing entities are no longer perceived as independent' (p.14).

However, although Fish concedes that the processes through which these reading communities are established are grounded in broader social networks, that readings are 'not made once and for all by a neutral mechanism of adjudication, but will be made and remade again whenever the interests and tacitly understood allowed goals of one interpretative community replace or dislodge the interests of the other', his interest does not really lie in examining the issues of marginality, authority and access that actually underlie the tensions that exist between the competing demands between and within different reading communities (p.16). As the critic Isobel Armstrong has pointed out, Fish's interpretative community 'seems to want to retain an unreconstructed form of close reading [...] it is antipathetic to cultural materialism's seriousness about power, the power of a specific political interest which [...] always tempts to a reading for mastery' (Armstrong 1993, p.401). It is precisely this type of blindness to the interestedness of the assumptions of those influencing and producing the interpretative community that I have already suggested, via John Guillory's notion of cultural capital, is one of the central limitations in adhering to this model as a single method of explaining the significance of the reader in relation to the text.

My dual methodology for assessing the significance of experimental writing in terms of reading can be summarised through the terms of these debates. The first stage of my argument,

my analysis of the social politics of reading, is rooted in an examination of the effects that institutionalisation has had upon the attribution of textual meaning. My analysis of the relationship between the work of individual poets and the construction of a poetic mode (an interpretative community) for Language writing is an attempt to make apparent the assumptions about writing and selfhood which have supported such readings. Assumptions that, as I have begun to imply above, are in danger of failing to consider their own relationship to cultural power, of failing to consider the significance of the types of cultural investment and expectations that they require from both reader and the writer.

As well as analysing the 'attempt for mastery' that these readings can become implicated in I am also interested in analysing the ways in which individual texts and readers have negotiated these meanings. This second aim requires me to draw upon, however obliquely, the two other models of reading described by Sara Mills. I am interested in examining both how the works of empirical readers have variously negotiated the rhetorical mode within which this writing is located *and* in examining how this writing *itself* addresses its own location. In other words, the relationship between the text and the reading community is scrutinised through an examination of how the text positions the reader (or itself) in relation to these dynamics, in relation to these reading expectations and all that they involve.

Diana Fuss's book, *Essentially Speaking*, is an attempt to intervene in the essentialist-constructivist debate within feminist theory. Underlying this project is an attempt to provide a strategy by which feminism can combine its political agenda with the insights of contemporary theory. Integral to this project is, as Fuss specifically suggests in the title to the second chapter of this work, the need to retain the ability to 'read as a feminist.' One way in which such a reading can be performed, Fuss suggests in this chapter, is through analysing the text not through the questionably essentialising categories of author and reader but through examining the 'subject positions' taken up, and offered, by it.

First, the notion of subject position reintroduces the role of the author into literary criticism without reactivating the intentional fallacy; the author's own interpretation of his/ her own text is recognised as a legitimate position among a set of possible positions a subject may occupy in relation to the text produced. Second, because subject-positions are multiple, shifting and changeable, readers can occupy several "I slots" *at the same time*. This

dispersal suggests both that no reader is identical to him or her self and that no reading is without internal contradiction. Third, there is no “natural way” to read a text: ways of reading are historically specific and culturally variable and reading positions are always constructed, assigned or mapped. Fourth, basing a theory of reading on subjectivity undermines any notion of “essential readers”. Readers, like texts, are constructed; they inhabit reading practices rather than create them *ex nihilo*. (Fuss 1989, p.35)

Reading for the ‘subject positions’ created by the text allows for a reading agenda that is sensitive to the critiques of authorial authority that critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have called for. Moreover, it also allows for a theorisation of the link between authorial subjectivity and the significance of the reader’s own positioning that does not fall back into becoming a rigid analysis of the politics of Althusserian interpellation - to the *Screen* position as it were. Rather, it allows for a reading of this relationship that remains grounded in an analysis of the social and institutional factors supporting reading. It is this type of reading that I want to bring to bear upon the work of specific Language writers.

Conclusion. However

Maggie O'Sullivan's recent anthology, *Out of Everywhere: linguistically innovative poetry by women in the UK and North America* brings together a range of other experimental women writers. This anthology testifies not only to the fact that experimental poetry by women writers is being separated out, in some ways, from the work of contemporary male writers (an issue which I shall come back to shortly), but that this body of 'linguistically innovative poetry by women in North American and the UK' (to give the work its lengthy subtitle) is complex, wide-ranging and, above all, *heterogeneous*.²⁰

The common (possibly the only) thread to much of this work has been its foregrounding of language: Maggie O'Sullivan suggests, in her brief introduction to the collection, that 'the poets, here, to my mind, have each in their own imaginative way committed themselves to excavating *language* in all its multiple voices and tongues, known and unknown' (O'Sullivan, 1996b, p.9). However, as much of the chapter above has obliquely demonstrated, this 'linguistic turn' has characterised the multiple strains of contemporary poststructuralist, postmodernist and feminist thought for a number of reasons and with a number of effects. Hence, although much of the work anthologised by O'Sullivan participates in a broad examination of language politics, this doesn't really allow for an agenda to be imposed upon it. In many ways this writing can be read as a site upon which the different debates surrounding the politics of the relationship between the signifier and the signified in contemporary culture - debates that I have attributed in the chapter above to names such as Andrew Ross and Frederic Jameson, Alice Jardine and Rita Felski, Colin MacCabe and David Morley or Peggy Kamuf and Nancy Miller - are played out.

One of the ways in which this writing demonstrates its varied allegiances to the intersections of contemporary thought, and their diverging constructions of selfhood, is in the way in which it attributes significance to the category of gender. In 1983 two influential journals of North American women's experimental poetry emerged: the American *How(ever)* and the Canadian *Tessera*. Both organs sought to respond *as women* to the emergence of a changing theoretical consensus that questioned the usefulness of this category. The broad differences between the two journals, however, are suggestive of the different stances toward this issue held by experimental

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This gathering together of a contemporary female canon for experimental poetry has been marked by other texts (criticism and collections) that have appeared in the nineties: See (Godard 1994; Keller 1994)

women poets in this period.

The writers contributing to the journal *Tessera* now seem to have been candidly aware of the paradoxes in writing a feminist experimental verse: of the dangers that the collapsing of a subject position brought to women authors. The journal, attempting to explore the specific linguistic and cultural dualities of Anglo vs. Francophone Canada, combined the complex issues of representation and translation with its interest in textuality. Much of its writing, some of which has now been collected by Barbara Godard in *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera*, seems interested in exploring the empowering possibilities of what came to be described, following the works of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, as 'feminine ecriture' - an experimentalism that retained the primary importance of the feminine subject. Collaborative essays from *Tessera*, such as 'What we Talk About on Sundays', demonstrate a suspicion towards narratives of postmodernism which seems to be indicative of much of the writing in the journal. In the words of Louise Cotnoir 'postmodernity underlies male complicity with a certain anti-life way of thinking. Post-modernity is the ultimate expression of a masculinist suicide drive. / How can feminist authors be taken in by such a trap? I'll take up the defence of modernity because it offers me the possibility of transforming writing and society, of *feminizing* them' (Brossard et al. 1994, p.130).

My use of the term 'feminine ecriture' here obviously flies in the face of the complicated differences that have actually characterised the work of Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva. Although Cixous and Irigaray, for example, share an interest in attempting to challenge and denounce the dominating narratives of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis, which they consider to be perpetuating a set of oppressive binaries, their methodologies for disrupting these narratives are quite different. Irigaray's work stresses the need to display and subvert the specific and covert misogynistic agendas of Western philosophical texts, whereas Cixous seeks to make apparent the alterity within language itself. This difference can be crudely understood as Irigaray accenting discursivity and Cixous textuality: parallels can be drawn between, respectively, the differences between the work of Foucault and Derrida.²¹ The subject positions that result from these thinkers are consequently quite different. Cixous' is based on a notion of a 'bisexual' feminine 'economy' (a libidinal drive that can be experienced by either sex) and Irigaray's on the ability of woman to

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Edward Said's essay 'The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions' is useful in describing these particular points of difference between Foucault and Derrida. (Said 1978).

re-claim the specific and negated experiences of her own physical and imaginary body. However, what these writers *did* significantly share, and what probably made them so influential upon women writers and thinkers, was their desire to construct a subversive and gendered subject position within language.²²

Kathleen Fraser, in her introduction to the first edition of *How(ever)*, stresses, like the editors of *Tessera*, the woman-centred, collaborative aims of this journal. She suggests that its aim is to establish a place where writers can ‘make a bridge between scholars thinking about women’s language issues, vis a vis the making of poetry and the women making these poems [...] making textures and structures of poetry in the tentative region of the unheard’ (Fraser 1983).²³ However, although the editorial imperative was ‘absolutely based in the dilemma of and attunement to gender’, and many of the journal’s contributors defined their writing through the possibility of linguistically disrupting the political marginality which women have experienced, the journal remained suspicious of basing a poetics upon the idea of a specifically gendered subject position. (Fraser 1994, p.43)

But for women writers who resisted ‘common language’ as a potential replication of the weighty and threadbare threads of the traditional male prosody currently in use (and wary, as well, of prescriptive ideas of ‘women’s poetry’), a taking apart and putting together of *the poem* - of the very writing task itself - was the exciting task. So much had been hoarded, silenced, pre-Judged as not enough or too much. (Fraser 1994, p.43)

This equivocal attitude to a collective gender identity, and the prioritising of *poetics* above such

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The work of Julia Kristeva is probably less harmonious within the category of ‘feminine écriture’ as used in this instance, because her empowerment of the symbolic ‘feminine’, what she calls the semiotic, is the expression of that which has been repressed by our entry into the symbolic order and thus has no specific relationship to women’s experience of gender. Nonetheless, Kristeva’s *Desire in Poetic Language* appears to go further than the work of either Cixous or Irigaray in explaining the potential significance of a disruptive language form. However, to regard the expression of the semiotic as liberatory for women writers is problematic as Kristeva suggests that the condition of its utterance is insanity. Although this latter point has been hotly contested (Moi 1993; Bedient 1993).

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Linda A. Kinnahan’s book *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov and Kathleen Fraser* examines the work of Kathleen Fraser and *How(ever)* through Fraser’s desire to allow women poets a space in which to appropriate and explore a modernist experimental agenda. In so doing Kinnahan also places more direct emphasis on the relationship between these writers and the emergent theories of *feminine écriture* than perhaps I have allowed for here. (Kinnahan 1994)

a thing, also characterised the work of the women writers that I am specifically interested in. These writers were often more interested in the ideas emerging from the Language project than in gender politics which were, at least initially, fairly low down on this movement's list of priorities. Although the work of Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva was received with interest by women Language writers, it was not a major catalyst for their work. *Poetics Journal*, for example, edited by Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten and central to the theorising of much of the 'west coast' Language writing, issued its single edition that brought together contemporary theories of gender and poetry in 1984, three years after the date by which Jane Gallop has suggested the work of 'French feminists' had reached a point of near saturation in the academy (Gallop 1992, p.47).²⁴

The critical work of the poet Rae Armantrout is instructive in respect of women Language writer's ambivalent relationship to feminism. Armantrout's 'Why Don't Women Produce Language Centered Work' is the only text in the key anthology *In the American Tree* which is explicit in its consideration of the relationship between gender and poetic form. When asked 'Why don't *more* women do language-orientated writing?' Armantrout's response is initially clear: 'Women need to describe the conditions of their lives. This entails representation. Often they feel too much anger to participate in the analytical tendencies of modernist or "postmodernist" art' (Armantrout, 1986, p.544). However, when asked why women don't produce language orientated works Armantrout's answer was different, she simply points out that they do. Armantrout stages a shift in this piece, from acknowledging the need for women to control the conditions of their representation to championing, instead, Language writing's ability to depict what is 'surprising, revelatory' in this relationship between language and representation. The need to represent the conditions of one's life doesn't 'explain anything' for Armantrout because it is dependent upon what she considers to be a misleading divide between words and meaning - an easiness of language and syntax that she eschews. Gender difference is, so Armantrout implies in her clear dismissal of it as important to understanding experimental language, part of a 'facile' belief in the ability of language to represent reality. Of Language writers Armantrout simply says, 'some of them are men and some of them are women'.

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Entitled 'Women and Language' the edition contained essays, such as Johanna Drukker's 'Women and Language' and Beverley Dahlen's 'Forbidden Knowledge', which made explicit the connection between language writing and the subversive possibilities of a 'feminine ecriture' (Dahlen 1984): (Drukker 1984).

Armantrout 'revisits' this essay some years later in the pages of *Sagetrieb* and in this later piece acknowledges the importance of the work of feminists such as Irigaray and Cixous in developing and enriching the 'role of women and minorities in experimental writing' (Armantrout 1992, p.7). Armantrout is now interested in the relationship between Language writing and gender because of what she believes to be this writing's capacity to articulate, and empower, an experience of marginality. Armantrout is responding to Ron Silliman's assertion in *Socialist Review* that the 'spectrum of the marginal's' 'manifest need to have their stories told' explains why 'their writing should appear more conventional'. For Silliman experimental writing allows straight white males [WMH] to interrogate the 'specificity of [their] privileged oppression', to critique the notion of the unified subject through which their self-identity has been formed. Those identity groups experiencing oppression are less likely to use experimental forms, Silliman suggests, because their opportunities to disrupt self-hood are more apparent: 'by demonstrating traditional WMH subject positions [...] inhabited by other subjects - women, homosexuals, people of color - such writing explodes the fiction of the universal' (Scalapino 1991b, p.54 and p.55). Silliman seems to be acknowledging that Language writing entails the loss of subjective agency - albeit an agency which causes 'all other peoples [to] disappear' in its claims to universality.

Armantrout counters Silliman by suggesting that the experimental narratives of language writing are actually more *responsive* to 'women's condition [...] internally divided, divided against herself' than conventional narrative. Armantrout suggests that women's problematic access to language could actually constitute a 'moment of freedom [...] As 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 conventions of the unified Voice' (Armantrout 1992, p.9). Armantrout's response is characteristic of that to come from women writers associated with Language writing. This response involved a resistance to being defined through a gendered position, often because the experimentalism of this writing was perceived to destabilise such categories, *and* the construction of a feminist perspective.

Lyn Hejinian's influential essay 'The Rejection of Closure', for example, cites directly from Luce Irigaray to illuminate the implications and potential of the open text for the subject. Yet in the essay Hejinian rejects the strict gendering of desire that she perceives to be emanating from these writers in favour of an ungendered and unembodied desiring language.

The narrow definition of desire, the identification of desire solely with the sexuality, and the literalness of the genital model for a woman's language that some of these writers insist upon may be problematic. The desire that is stirred by language is located most interestingly within language itself (Hejinian 1984d, p.142)

It is this rejection by these writers of the originary points of both the self-founding lyrical 'I' and the alternative feminist subject positions proffered by the post-structuralist theorisation of 'feminine ecriture' in the American academy, in their embrace of a formal practice which actively seeks to disrupt notions of authenticity or experientiality, that I am specifically interested in attempting to theorise.

Donna Haraway's cyborg has influentially theorised the construction of just such a subject position. Haraway counteracts the reifications implicit in the belief in the all knowing and authentic 'one subject of monotheism' with the image of the cyborg, a being able to acknowledge its hybrid construction by the conflicting and often ambivalent discourses of the contemporary: it is 'a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self. This is the self that feminists must code' (Haraway 1990, p.205) The locations for this re-appropriation and re-coding of the meanings of selfhood are necessarily multiple: it is in the nature of the cyborg to blur the distinctions between 'text, machine, body and metaphor'. Although the changes in social relationships and identities to which the cyborg is a response are crucially precipitated by an explosion in technological and communicative knowledges, Haraway suggests that the text is still a site for cyborg activity. Her description in the 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' of these textual possibilities is footnoted by a reference to the type of innovative writing that my thesis is concerned to examine. Haraway suggests that a 'feminist modernist/ postmodernist cyborg writing' can be found in the work emerging from Kathleen Fraser's journal *Howe(ever)*. The theoretical practices of this innovative writing, according to Haraway, offered writers ways of understanding and constructing the relationship between experience and representation capable of challenging the traditional poetic discourses of self and language that were seemingly determined by a concept of transcendent wholeness that was being placed under increasing pressure.

Haraway's notion of the cyborg, and its attacks on the notion of an originary or essentialised identity, found an alternative, but equally influential, expression in Judith Butler's construction

of a 'performative' self: a self constructed *through* language rather than 'discovered' within it. Butler's central thesis, in *Gender Trouble*, is that a pre-discursive construction of biological sex, as well as gender, results in a subject that 'paradoxically undercut[s] feminist goals to extend its claims to "representation"' (Butler 1990, p 5). Hence, Butler seeks to replace this construction of biological sex as absolute with an acknowledgement of the performative practices of gender: 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (p.25). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler's follow-up to *Gender Trouble*, the practices of performativity are made more explicit. Butler suggests that performance is not about 'theatricality': it 'is thus not a singular "act" [...] its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated'. Rather, performativity, or what Butler now often calls 'materialization', 'will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of an "I"' (Butler 1993, p.12 and p 15).

In her most recent work, *Excitable Speech*, Butler goes even further in attempting to establish precisely how the powers and significance of this "I" can be understood. In this text Butler uses the phenomena of 'hate speech' in order to trace the relationship between the performative self and political and legal culpability. Her premise is still that agency lies not within the sovereign subject but within its ability to participate within socially bounded dialogue: 'the address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy' (Butler 1997, p.26) However, in this text, Butler is at pains to emphasise that this intersubjectivity does not necessarily imply a diminishment of individual agency.

Understanding performativity as a renewable action without clear origin or end suggests that speech is finally constrained neither by its specific speaker nor its originating context. Not only defined by social context, such speech is *also marked by its capacity to break with context*. Thus, performativity has its own social temporality in which it remains enabled precisely by the context from which it breaks. This ambivalent structure at the heart of performativity implies that, within political discourse, the very terms of resistance and insurgency are spawned in part by the powers they oppose (which is not to say that the latter are reducible to the former or always already co-opted by them in advance) (Butler 1997, p.40 italics mine).

This quote, and its clearly Foucauldian analysis of the plasticity of power, suggests both the significance of this particular work and some of the broader critiques levelled at Butler's theory. Criticism of Butler's overall thesis has focused upon the political equivocations that her debt to Foucault has incurred. This criticism thus often echoes the critiques of Foucault alluded to in my introduction. Alison Weir, for example, has suggested that Butler's critique of identity, like Foucault's critique of discourse, is so caught within the 'logic of power/language' that it renders 'identity so omnipotent and intransigent that subversion becomes impossible' (Weir 1996, p.113). Yet *Excitable Language* can also be read as a defence against this type of criticism. Within its pages Butler is seeking to explicitly trace the processes by which agency is bestowed upon the subject. Her intent is to clarify (and give real instances of), rather than simplify or ameliorate, the subject's complex relationship to agency. What emerges most strongly is a picture of the subject for whom agency is a consequence of discursive positioning and negotiation. A subject which is the product of cultural discourse and power for which it cannot be solely accountable.

By locating the cause of our injury in a speaking subject and the power of that injury in the power of speech, we set ourselves free, as it were, to seek recourse to the law. [...] This phantasmatic production of the culpable speaking subject, spawned from the constraints of legal language, casts subjects only as agents of power. Such a reduction of the agency of power to the actions of the subject may well seek to compensate for the difficulties and anxieties produced in the course of living in a contemporary cultural predicament in which neither the law nor hate speech are uttered exclusively by a singular subject. (Butler 1997, p.80)

Butler's subject is necessarily limited by its discursive constructedness – it cannot be wholly responsible for all of the implications of its articulations because meanings are not 'uttered exclusively by a singular subject.' Yet the flip side of this key reliance upon intersubjectivity is the fact that the subject is always responding to others, its actions only have meaning as they affect another. My reading of the significance of the subject positions taken up and offered by the work of the three individual poets is informed by an examination of the way in which this very equivocal construction of individual agency - as both enmeshed in discourse beyond the subject, and yet also

always responsible to and for alterity - is negotiated by the individual text

I do not want to conclude, however, by simply suggesting that this emphasis upon a discursively grounded and site specific subject position provides a panacea for a methodology wishing to avoid universalistic assumptions either those of feminism or of Language writing To name the local can be just as much an act of power as refusing to name it As Elspeth Probyn has noted, the local does not exist in 'a pure state', it is 'only a fragmented set of possibilities that can be articulated into a momentary politics of time and place' (Probyn 1990, p 187)²⁵ It is the significance of these 'momentary politics', the ways in which the subject positions constructed by these texts locate themselves in relation to the other discourses constructing contemporary selfhood - of time, of space, of race, of class - that I am concerned to examine in each of the following chapters

One strategy for this analysis involves scrutinising how this writing attempts to place its own, and its reader's, assumptions within a broader context In the thesis this context is often defined by the structures which attribute significance to reading and writing One of the ways in which these issues are addressed is through an examination of how this writing locates itself, and its textual difficulty, in relation to *other* reading and writing modes The generic choices and shifts made by each writer examined in the thesis are thus foregrounded not as intrinsically subversive but as a way of examining the cultural implications of the writer's and reader's positioning Rather than allowing this writing to be understood through literary theory's effacement of 'genre as a category of literary interest in favour of a borderless ecriture' I am interested in examining the meaning attributable to the *practices* which have brought about this slippage - from categorisation to 'borderless ecriture' Genre is retained not as taxonomy but as a marker 'of social and historical experience where it intersects with the ideology of form' (Scheneck 1988, p 283)

The foundational assumption of the thesis, that women associated with Language writing were actively engaging with, rather than simply decentring, the subjective self, was suggestively noted in Marjorie Perloff's recent review of Maggie O'Sullivan's anthology *Out of Everywhere*. In this review, called 'The Coming of Age of Language Poetry', Perloff suggested that the poets

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Indeed, even Rich's generative essay 'Notes on a Politics of Location' has been critiqued for its failure to examine the significance of the act of *centering* that locating can involve Kathleen Kirby suggests that in 'Notes' Rich is concerned with attempting 'to overcome her tendency to generalise her experience as 'woman' to 'women' everywhere' but that her attempts to locate herself in this way flounder on 'the logic of centering, in spite of her attempt to ward it off' A logic that does not only imply the primacy of the authorial ego but also insists on the stability of the unified self, for Rich, Kirby suggests, 'the limits of identity are fixed, and we can

collected by O'Sullivan place their examination of 'selfhood in larger cultural and social perspectives'. She goes on to suggest, moreover, that this change has occurred as experimental poetry by women places less emphasis upon technique which is 'always and only technique: the new sentence, as many readers have noted, can be used as advertising copy as easily as in poetry' and more on the issues surrounding the 'historical, the literary and mythological' (Perloff 1997, p.587).

In the chapters that follow I want to align the concerns of my thesis within the shift that Perloff describes when she suggests that writing by contemporary experimental women poets is relinquishing the formalistic concerns that have characterised the 'new sentence' in favour of an interest in a material context of a 'larger cultural and social perspective'. I want to explore not only the ways in which the political implications of selfhood are negotiated in these texts without being hung upon the familiar, but derided, coat pegs of realism or confessionalism (form may be 'only technique', but Perloff still defines the poets in *Out of Everywhere* against the 'ubiquitous realist/confessional mode') but also through the way in which the authorial self is *reinvested* within these texts. I want to contextualise the politics of writing the self within Language writing in ways which chime with the debates taking place in contemporary feminist/ postmodernist thought and in doing so demonstrate the potential - and the continuing problems - of this movement's 'coming of age.'

Chapter Two. The Singularities of Susan Howe

Introduction. Frame Structures

The recent publication by New Directions of Susan Howe's previously uncollected early work, *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979*, appears to mark a significant shift in Howe's writing career. Most obviously, such a publication, which 'brings together those of her earliest poems she wishes to remain in print, and in the forms in which she cares to have them last', is suggestive of the authorial control of the newly canonised artist, of privileges and rights which Susan Howe has certainly not always been able to command (Howe 1996, back jacket). The publication is indicative, I think, of the contradictions emerging from Howe's new role as a mainstream, and yet experimental, poet. This apparent contradiction undermines neither the significance of Howe's growing popularity nor her importance as a textually experimental writer: the fascination of her work actually appears rooted in the wider implications of this ability to extol equivocation.

The introductory essay to *Frame Structures* appears to embrace Howe's position. An air of the established appropriately distinguishes it, the narrative moves from the personal to the profound with a daunting certainty.

Daddy held on tightly to my hand [...] Animals sense something about the ruin I think he said our human spirits being partly immaterial at that prefigured time though we didn't know then how free will carries us past to be distance waiting for another meeting a true relation (p.3).

The indeterminacy of the punctuation here paradoxically emphasises Howe's possession of the poem at its opening. The reader is left scrambling to disentangle the words of the father from the poet, the past from the present, and meaning from this swift philosophical flight. The passage ends on an epigram, we are told how to understand our confusion: 'Historical Imagination gathers in the missing', we are, one grasps as the poem moves to '*Primitive Notions I*', being led into the 'missing'.

What is so striking about this journey, which, as I shall later make clear, is in other ways quite typical of the historical narratives that figure largely in the poetry of Howe, is that we are

travelling across the historical imagination of an authorial 'I'. Within 'Frame Structures' Howe appears to construct an authorial persona whose absenteeism was one of the confounding characteristics of much of her earlier work. 'Frame Structures' is built around personal anecdotes, relationships, a family lineage; in short it appears to provide Susan Howe's rapidly expanding critical audience with an apparent antidote to her previous authorial liminality. Thus what is so contradictory about this text is that the journey into an historical imagination is self-evidently not into the missing, but into the 'autobiographical, familial, literary and historical motifs' of the writer who creates the wilful indeterminacy of the text. (*Frame Structures* jacket)

This autobiographical intimacy is not totally unprecedented in Howe's work, 'There Are Not Leaves Enough To Crown To Cover To Crown To Cover', the introduction to the anthology *The Europe of Trusts*, shares some of the allusions made to childhood memories in 'Frame Structures'. Central to both texts is the concern to narrate the disruption to family life precipitated by the Second World War. The central feature of this event is the betrayal associated with the father's departure.

Our law- professor

father, a man of pure principles, quickly included violence in his principles, put on a soldier suit and disappeared with the others into the thick threat to the east called West. (Howe 1990b, p.10)

a parent figure scattered among others in favour of disobedience. 'Well goodbye and don't forget me.' (Howe 1996, p.3)

Crucial to both of these accounts of early childhood is the significance attributed to the complex and constructed act of *remembering*. The sharp pain associated with this separation from the father is inextricable from the adult's knowledge of the father's reasons for leaving. Reasons which are read, in turn, through the gendered, social and international implications of war itself: 'American fathers marched off into the hot Chronicle of / global struggle but mothers were left' (Howe 1990b, p.10). Thus, although Howe's rendering of the child's memory appears to lend itself to a psychoanalytical reading, the wider cultural significance of an individual memory is

perhaps what Howe is examining here. The childish indignation which inflects both narratives suggests an implicit challenge to the foundational role which war plays in constructing identity. Howe's narration of her past is reliant upon, but not simply about, autobiography and historical context; the texts are actually more concerned with examining the politics of the relationship we construct *between* these two things, about the uses to which history is put. Howe's history is an act played against other acts.

This bewildering recollection of the child's experience of war traces the violence that history wreaks upon the personal, upon what Howe elsewhere refers to as the 'singular'. Within this writing the violence of historical or narrative unity is placed *against* the confusion of individual fragmentation: 'Substance broke loose /from the domain of time and obedient intention. I became/part of the ruin' (Howe 1990b, p. 12). The potency of this acutely subjective memory does not lie in its ability to delimit our readings of the text but in its very existence as an oppositional energy, an energy recovered from the way 'women and children experience war and its nightmare [...] blown sand seaward foam in which disappearance fields expression' (Howe 1996, p. 7). Howe's construction of these histories, of her history, is political precisely because it rescues the singular from the homogenising 'malice [which] dominates the history of Power and Progress. History is the record of winners'. In this reading, Howe's use of her subjective memory is actually vital, it is only this, her ability to articulate the 'fright formed by what we see not by what they say', that can disrupt the possession of power by the 'masters' of history (Howe 1990b, p. 11).

The politics of reading Howe's proffering of herself and her genealogy to us at the opening of collections such as *Frame Structures* or *The Europe of Trusts* are complicated. On the one hand her historical / lyrical 'I' confines our reading of the text, it appears to contradict the search for textual plurality, the 'active' reading, which experimental textual practices such as Howe's (especially when read as part of the 'Language' movement) have been explicitly associated with. Conversely, the construction of this subjective history is a political act. It reveals that which cannot be absorbed by the predatory energy of uniform historical narratives.

In a letter to the poet John Taggart, Howe describes the power she attributes to her lyrical 'I'. The expression of the subjective self is seen to protect the poet from assimilation by historical narrative by allowing them to enter the unknown, by allowing them to enter what lies beyond history.

[The] lyric 'I' is both guard of sacred vision, guard of the holy unseen, guard of what must remain unmutilated. Truth, beauty, tenderness, charity: and a hunter of the words to say the vision. [...] Absence is what has not been said or spoken, the place to where our imagination keeps returning. (Howe 1988a)

It is not simply the case in Howe's work, then, that because authorial *presence* can be read as defying appropriation by an homogenising narrative then poetic *absence* can be read as complicitious with it. The lyric 'I' may be the 'hunter of the words to say the vision' but the vision itself, Howe suggests in this letter, is found through *absence*: it is 'what has not been said or spoken, the place to where our imagination keeps returning'.

In other, published, works Howe attempts to explain more clearly this somewhat contradictory construction of the poetic self. In the essay 'Encloser' she suggests that it is an expression of her desire to resist the force of historical narratives. Rather than placing the facts of her autobiographical self against these narratives, however, she enters them in an attempt to disturb them, she ventriloquises their 'stammer' in order to utter the voices that they have concealed.

This tradition that I hope I am part of has involved a breaking of boundaries of all sorts. It involves a fracturing of discourse, a stammering even. Interruption and hesitation used as a force. A recognition that there is another voice, an attempt *to hear and speak it*. It is this brokenness that interests me. (Howe 1990a p.192, italics mine)

In an essay 'Submarginalia', published three years later, Howe explicitly suggests that she operates from within an 'intervening absence' and concedes that such an interrogative void (that has force but no self) may be, indeed, an 'oxymoron' (Howe 1993 p.24). In this chapter I am intent on exploring the ways in which this curious authorial liminality of Howe's can be understood as both a subversive, and yet deeply conservative, force in her texts. Howe's authorial stammering is read in this chapter as indicative not only of her desire to examine the significance of historical narrative but also of a more problematic desire to *escape* its confines.

The chapter broadly follows the structure of my argument as it has been set out above. It begins by providing an overview of Susan Howe's writing career. This introduction to her early

work specifically examines how selfhood has been used to negotiate issues of history and power in Howe's writing. I contend that Howe's work is marked by one of the central problematics of feminist thought, the contradictory need to both critique and possess authority. The second section of the chapter examines the critical meanings that have been attributed to Howe's writing within the academy. I suggest in this section that these critical responses to Howe's writing have been reluctant to fully explore the political implications of the significance that she attributes to her authorial presence. The last three sections of the chapter can be read as an attempt to correct this perceived shortfall, as an exploration of the problematics involved in locating Susan Howe's 'authorial stammer' within its cultural context. I initially examine how this stammer has worked as a trope that provides much of her later writing with a powerful analytical tool for examining the ways in which the discursive marginalisations in American history have been produced.¹ In the penultimate section, however, I note the places where this analysis falls into contradiction, where Howe's selfhood becomes implicated in the stammers she is attempting to critique. I draw upon the influence that Martin Heidegger has had upon her work to explicitly theorise the paradoxes which I think Howe's vision of the poetic self incurs. In the conclusion to the chapter I suggest that these contradictions emerge from the way in which Howe constructs her own poetics. I suggest that her attempt to establish a caesura between the text and history, within which her poetry can operate, is a disingenuous move. A move that, moreover, actually conceals her own investment in producing the narratives she ostensibly fragments.

1 Although most criticism written by Howe is explicitly concerned with early America the same cannot be said of her poetry. Her early poems, some of which are discussed below, were concerned with more abstract notions of history and authority and more recent poems such as 'A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Baslike, collected in Howe's 1993 anthology *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, on the other hand, examines the British origins of Puritan thought.

Section One. Biography Blows Away.**Part One. Secret Histories**

Howe's early work, and her move from visual to language-based art, appears motivated by a desire to exploit the internal inconsistencies of our dependence upon syntax, upon regulated language. Poems such as 'Hinge Picture' and 'Cabbage Gardens' intermingle snatches of narrative with mesmerising chains of words.

Remembered a fragment of the king's face
 remembered a lappet wing
 remembered eunuchs lip to lip in silent profile kissing
 remembered pygmies doing battle with the cranes
 remembered bones of an enormous size as proof of the existence of giants
 remembered the torso of a swimming girl
 remembered the squeeze of a boundary (Howe 1996, p.41)

Howe's anaphoric 'remembered' gains its potency from its ability to work as both a verb and a noun. The incredulous nature of the memories recalled throws the act of memory itself, and the limitations of narrative that it can overcome, into relief. The shifting evocations of the fantastic and the mythic, that characterise this early work, challenge not only the assurance and validity of knowledge and narrative, but of verbs and nouns - the very vehicles of sense. Integral to this implicit interrogation of the construction of meaning is a constant awareness of the need to elude the unyielding austerity of linguistic and structural certainty. An austerity that, in poststructuralism's terms, places limits upon the possibility of meaning.

'The Secret History of the Dividing Line', like the other early poems in the *Frame Structures* anthology, resonates with the impossibility of the fairytale. The poem shares with the introduction to *Frame Structures*, and the poems in *The Europe of Trusts* anthology, a concern with contrasting an individual presence against the eclipsing sweeps of hegemonic historical narrative. Although the readings that can be attributed to the narratorial 'I' of the poem are often obscured by a poetic landscape both fantastical and rapidly changing, themes that are consistent with the concerns of Howe's later work can be discerned in this text as its wistfulness begins to gain a

sharper poignancy.

thread, thread
ambiguous conclusion

the king my father
divinity of draft.

It is winter
the lake is frozen over (p.98)

The ambiguity of 'draft', the source of the father's divinity - a call to arms, a written text, a cold gust of air - underlines the plasticity of authority that the poem attempts to evade.

In the lengthy preface to the poem the tension which Howe constructs between domination by narrative and a celebration of its instability, is given the more convincing political authority of an historical context. The work 'mark' is given multiple meanings.

MARK

border
bulwark. an object set up to indicate a boundary or position
hence a sign or token
impression or trace (p.90).

Howe gives the composite meanings of the sound some degree of historical specificity; she intervenes in the play of signifiers whilst acknowledging it is uncontrollable. The poem's ostensible concern to narrate the 'war whoop in each dusty narrative' begins by focusing on the inequities associated with the claiming, symbolically and literally, of American land (p.99). The marking of territory, 'an object set up to indicate a boundary or position', becomes synonymous with the systems of power and dominance that Howe's poetry constantly seeks to evade. Most obviously, the poem alludes to the devastation of native American common land ownership, and consequently culture, that the cartographic project inherent in the colonisation of America caused.

In the right hand corner of the following page is written ‘*for Mark my father, and Mark my son*’. The word here also intimates, although with an affection typical of Howe’s ambivalent relationship with authority, the system of paternal naming upon which female identity has symbolically floundered. Finally, the word ‘mark’ cannot help but be about the hierarchical project of writing itself, the very project that Howe’s political agenda seeks to disrupt.

The slightly later poem ‘Pythagorean Silence’ develops Howe’s poetic evasion of monological meaning, of authority.² Her equivocal authorial presence is read in this poem through her reluctance to accept the boundaries, and the dangers, of a unified poetic voice. The very title of ‘Pythagorean Silence’, referring to the effects of Pythagoras’ misogynistic dualisms, resonates with the paradoxes of female articulation that Howe is intent on exploring. The opening to the poem re-interprets the autobiographical atmosphere of ‘There Are Not Enough Leaves To Crown To Cover To Crown To Cover’, which immediately precedes it in *The Europe of Trusts* anthology. The physical and symbolic divisions of gender, that are central to the narrative of the initial poem, begin ‘Pearl Harbour’. ‘HE’ is seen through the ‘Demands’ of ‘scholars, lawyers, investigators, judges’, his representation is contrasted against ‘SHE’, who ‘(With her arm around his neck/ whispers)’ (Howe 1990b, p.21). The poem explores the contested control of meaning that the cultural potency of these divisions, the civic versus the sensual, imply.

This gendered juxtaposition of verbal authority and its muted subversion dominates this first section of the poem. That the dissenting presence can only stifle sound is acutely poignant: ‘(her cry/ silences/ whole/ vocabularies/ of *names*/ for/ *things*’ (p.22). This thwarting presence blankets the poem. The power of language itself is obscured by the snow that silently falls throughout this section of the poem, the ‘scene is played/ softly// snow spread on sound’ (p.25). The image is appropriately ambiguous: it is both beautiful and deadly, it describes that which silences as easily as that which is silenced.

Transcendant could be whis

Buried

2

The version of the poem I am citing was anthologised in *The Europe of Trusts* anthology, published as a Sun and Moon ‘classic’ in 1990. The poem was first published in 1982 as a special supplement to the journal *Montemora*.

Or as snow fallen

Could be cold snow
falling

Lie down in snow

Do nothing
wrong (p.30)

The poem replaces Manichean simplicities with the dangerous acknowledgement of the pleasure in submission - 'lie down in snow/ Do nothing/ wrong' - until, with a nearly seductive inevitability, the authorial self is immersed within this incessant conflict.

morning star evening star will
rise

and swim and sink again
Slipping

forever

between rupture and rapture

soul

Severed from Soul (p.31)

The querulous ending, 'Body and Soul/ will we ever leave childhood together', makes explicit the pain of separation (both Cartesian and Oedipal) that underpins the poem.

'Pythagorean Silence', the second section of the poem, is concerned with frustrating, almost with mocking, the written structures that support the authority the poem is attempting to evade. The

violating dualities of 'Pearl Harbour', the first section of the poem, are now confronted with the knowledge that they are sustained only through representation, narrative.

cataclysmic Pythagoras Things
not as they are

for they are not but as they seem (p.38)

The subversive pleasure in the disruptions that the poetry now seeks to enact, '(oh women women look) how my words/ flow out/ kindling and stumbling/ Sunwise/ with swords and heys', does not simply challenge the gendered basis of symbolic referentiality but the temporal and spatial construction of identity itself (p.40).

The poem seems to seek the past that history has no language for. It searches for 'shelter', the precarious space that escapes representation, 'But I am reaching the end Sky/ melts away into sand/ sand into Sound' (p.43). Throughout the rest of the poem Howe does not seem to be searching for her actual past, but for the sounds and sensations of what lingers, inexplicably, imaginatively, beyond the regimented narratives of memory and identity.

seeds to be sorted Where
have I been I say to myself Mother

winding as she does around the axis
How far

back through Memory does memory

extend a gap
in knowledge before all people

tell
historical past the historical

truth

a Parlance spoken by strangers (p.52)

The recovery of these ‘gaps’ in memory is so important because their elision is not accidental or imaginary. The contradictory reality of ‘battles cheap as water/ fought ferociously/ on paper’ is still a violent one (p.72).

Howe’s eclectic movement in the poem, from twentieth century war, to the covert midwifery of Socrates, to the lost ‘Penelope/ who is the image of philosophy’ seems to be given little historical specificity or source. Howe is deeply implicated in constructing the narratives she ostensibly disturbs: the ending of the poem is able to acknowledge this complicated dependence. The oscillation between freedom and order, which structures the poem, gains overtones of a tension between fear and desire. The movement of the poem shifts against the uneasily seductive power of language and narrative, emphasising Howe’s awareness of the internalised ambivalences of power which she cannot easily escape. The image of the hunter and the hunted, which runs through so much of the poem, has no urgency or pity, the peaceful beauty of its almost clichéd inevitability overwhelms it.

but a gentle doe

chased by white hounds

across summer sands

lapped by ripples (p.80)

The last page of the poem sums up this play of complex images as it warns, finally and paradoxically, against the written word itself. The single words which span the page contrast optimistic images of liberation and wealth with sombre warnings.

amulet instruction tribulation

winged joy parent sackcloth ash (p.84)

The play of these shifting meanings is abruptly halted by a reminder of the physical, and yet

chillingly anonymous, authority of the written word, 'in the extant manuscript SOMEONE/ has lightly scored a pen over'. (p.84) Howe emphasises that authorial intervention arms the page, language, with the power that it is ostensibly trying to evade. Yet implicit within this critique is the knowledge that this is inevitable, that the act of writing cannot wholly escape its relationship with authority, that escaping the limitations of the written word carries its own cost. The words 'diadem dagger a voyage gibbet' immediately follow the above quote, Howe's archaisms again contrast freedom and wealth with a sense of brooding danger. Her acknowledgement of this necessary relationship with authority grounds her precarious transcendence of it in ambiguity.

The last words of the poem enigmatically open these tensions: 'weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide' (p.84). 'Weeds' is the term used by Viola in *Twelfth Night* to describe her hidden clothes, and in *Hamlet* by Gertrude when describing the death of Ophelia.³ In the former it represents the mutability of gender identity that is the focus of the play. Howe's earlier allusion to *Twelfth Night* in this poem, 'Words are not acts/ out of my text I am not what I play', can be read as the evasion of gender or as an evasion of the implicit authority of the authorial role (p.46). Indeed, the play itself can be read as enacting both. The allusion to the pathetic death of Ophelia reinforces, however, the 'shiver' of fear that the casting off of these identities entails. Howe's rejection of an essentialised gender position, and of the certainties associated with the construction of a textual identity, is acknowledged to be threatening. This very liberation is thus an equivocal one, Howe is aware that such an act of emancipation is loaded with dangers. The desire of the poetry to avoid the limitations of an overarching authorial presence, to indulge instead in the Ophelia-like jouissance of a relinquishment of the self, is countered by the remembrance of the political erasure also suggested by Ophelia's silence. The recurring paradox of contemporary feminist articulation, that seeks to both undermine and possess authority, that is both in and out of history, is echoed in Howe's evocation of these texts.

3

Hamlet, (4.vii)

There on the pendant boughs her crowned weeds
 Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
 When down the weedy trophies and herself
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
 And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up

Twelfth Night, (5.i)

That I am Viola, which to confirm
 I'll bring you to a captain in this town
 Where lie my maiden weeds

Section One, Part Two

The Different Way

Critical attention on Howe has often focused on examining how her relationship to history can be understood. Indeed, the significance of her interest in actual historical violence, rather than in the symbolic subversions of the writerly text as constructed by the Language mode, has been cited as one of the factors that keeps her writing distinct from this mode.⁴ I want to delineate two of the dominant readings that this focus has resulted in before going on to suggest, in my own reading of her work, a third.

The critical attention which Howe initially received largely came from her contemporaries involved in the growing Language movement. It was a reception consolidated most obviously in the editions of *The Difficulties* and *The Talisman* devoted to Howe in 1989 and 1990 respectively. Both journals were expansive in their acknowledgement of Howe's ability to perform historical analysis in a poetic style that eschewed authority. Howe was lauded, in the words of Bruce Campbell, as a 'kind of poststructuralist visionary', melding 'transcendental possibility' with an awareness of 'how mediated both language and consciousness are' (Campbell 1989, p.105).

This first 'wave' of criticism, as well as reviews of Howe's early work featured in a wide range of small press magazines such as *Abacus*, *Temblor* and *Poetics Journal*, appeared, with only one or two notable exceptions, to accept this mixture of vision and scepticism as integral to the potency of Howe's work.⁵ Charles Bernstein, for example, hailed Howe's ability in 'Secret

4 Peter Middleton demonstrates this point most thoroughly in his reading of Howe's poem 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time'. He argued that 'Howe's work shows that literary experiment is not necessarily 'destructivism' but can also be an exploration of what is never clearly text nor clearly other, only a history of boundaries, captures, escapes, genocides and glimpses of something "seen once"' (Middleton 1991, p.93)

5 One of the richest critiques of Howe that significantly deviated from this reading was Susan Schultz's review of *The Birthmark* 'Exaggerated History'. Schultz suggests that Howe's attempts to negate the prohibitions of history by entering historical texts embeds her work in paradoxes which she is unable to overcome. Howe 'forces

History of the Dividing Line' to meaningfully traverse the boundaries of poetic finitude: 'This luminous --illuminated--poetry refuses the categories of lyric or historical, mythopoeic or word-materializing, rather enlisting these approaches as navigational tools, multilateral compasses, on a journey into the unknown, denied and destroyed' (Bernstein 1989, p.84).

Many of these readings of Howe are, however, characterised by a tendency to value Howe's opacity over an examination of the political implications of such innovation. Critics searched for the fantasy of 'The Real Susan Howe', the artist of plenitude without embodiment.

Her technique is almost absence of technique. Inventive and innovative as she is, she is not artful [...] And this brings us back to Objectivism, the mistrust of metaphor, the shedding of herself from her lines. Here we do not have roles, voices, personae etc. (Metcalf 1989, p.55)

Paul Metcalfe's insistence on Howe's absence, of self and of technique, self-consciously recalls George Butterick's claim that the 'astringency' of Howe's poetry emerges from 'the host ego absenting itself' (Butterick 1983, p.152). The analysis of Howe's poetry that emerges from this celebration of lack seems disinclined to consider the cultural context of the poet. The reluctance of both critics to *analyse* the politics of Susan Howe's poetry is evident as both essays are centrally reliant on their mastery at evoking the *sensations* of reading that this writing provoked: 'the fluidities, the immediate delicacy. Attenuated, tensile lines. So deliberate the form, so controlled, almost icily cut back' (Butterick 1983, p.148).

Other criticism of this period was more explicit in its rejection of an analysis of the complicated politics of Howe's authorial distance. Janet Rodney emphasised the ways in which Howe's 'connection with the larger context' meant that she was 'only secondarily concerned with subjective experience of ordinary life', instead she achieves a 'disentangling from the Personal. Without betrayal without cause' (Rodney 1989, p.48). Such criticism valued Howe's subjective absence without questioning its cost. In an even more telling manner David Landrey unproblematically places Howe alongside the 'spider self' of Emily Dickinson, suggesting that if 'poets are going "to keep love safe from the enemy" [...] it must be by abandoning the self as

an old impossibility, that of women's speech, into possibility. That she pushes her reading of this impossibility into metaphysics is, as I've been indicating, typical of her ambition. It may also undermine her historical claims by reinvesting the poem and the poet in an old metaphysics, one that keeps everyone - but especially women -

some limited “identity”: it must be by projecting the self into an idea of grace as part of an infinite mystery in us but beyond us’ (Landrey 1990, p.107). Landrey’s apparently easy dismissal of Dickinson’s lengthy marginalisation and appropriation by the academy is indicative, I think, of the failure of some of Howe’s early critics to fully question the relationship between political context and ‘infinite mystery.’

The incongruities of such criticism appear all the more jarring as the interviews given by Howe at this time are dominated by her anguished accounts of the difficulty of writing verse that demanded a moving beyond the subjective boundaries of the self. In an interview given to Janet Ruth Falon, Howe describes how reading Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson inspired her venture into language. Howe links this questioning of the construction of subjectivity with her sanity:

I remember being afraid that if I worked too hard with words *I* might start hearing voices. I had this lesson of these two writers whose language was exemplary but whose mastery told the other story that a woman could go too far. When you reach that point where no concessions are possible, you face true power, *alone* (Falon 1989, p.34).

Howe is acutely aware of the political risks of experimental writing: she connects her inability to jeopardise herself with her gender and its responsibilities.

Writing still seems more threatening to me than painting because it becomes so self-absorbing. I saw my desire as a threat to my children. [...] I kept myself in one piece because I had to for Becky and Mark [her children] I had to accept that because I was also a mother it might take more time (p.34).

In this interview Howe appears to be acknowledging that she does not perceive the waiving of the construction of the subjective self as an empowering abandonment of the politics of self. Indeed, Howe appears to perceive her prioritising of language over narrative as actually *dangerous* in the risk which it incurs. These risks are greater for a woman writer, Howe seems to suggest, because she is ‘alone’. What is lost, perhaps, is the security of a political, and

potentially collective, identity. To suggest, as these critics seem to, that the absence of the lyrically expressive subject simply allowed the writing to escape the political implications of the subject, appears ingenuous at best.

The acceptance of Howe's work in the early and mid nineties by the poetic academy, however, brought about critical readings of the poetry that were more concerned to examine the implications of the politics of Howe's textual practices. The critical work of feminist theorists and poets such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Marjorie Perloff were at the forefront of these changes. Both writers were keen to emphasise how the combination of Howe's textual play and apparent historical specificity allowed her to reveal the voices that history had marginalised without reverting to an appropriation of these voices. DuPlessis demonstrates how the poem 'The Liberties', for example, is able to question the derided status of the feminine whilst attempting to free women from such essentialist notions of gender.

[Howe is] a woman - a person mainly gendered feminine- writing "feminine" discourses, knowing and re-writing 'masculine' discourses, in the name of a feminist and critical cultural project which wants to transcend gender (DuPlessis 1990, p.125).

As my reading of the interview above suggests, it is not simply the subordination of women that Howe wishes to challenge, but the limitations of narratives of gender and of identity themselves. In acknowledging this DuPlessis thus constructs Howe's use of the indeterminacy of poetic language as an influential tool for analysing the ways in which marginality is maintained and produced within culture's dominating narratives. In the specific instance of the 'The Liberties', for example, Howe pours scorn upon the discrepancy between Jonathan Swift's literary treatment of women as muse and his actual failure to attend to his lifelong companion, for fear of scandal, in the last months of her life.

The potency which theorists such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Marjorie Perloff read into Howe's equivocal attitude to the complex politics of emancipation was also extended to an examination of Howe's broader sweeps along the marginalisations of white American culture and history. Howe's appearance in James Clifford's groundbreaking *The Predicament of Culture* was part of an emerging critical awareness of the politics of Howe's fissuring of American historical narratives. Clifford cites Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* as an example of a text capable of

disrupting the ‘narrative continuity of history and identity’.

What Susan Howe (1985) has written about a woman - Emily Dickinson, working during the same decade from another place of New England ‘isolation’ - echoes strangely the Indian predicament: the problem of finding a different way through capitalist America (Clifford 1988, p.343).

The attraction of Howe’s ‘different way’, her ability to challenge the dominance of history without placing herself in a position of authority, was widely disseminated amongst her critics.⁶

Marjorie Perloff, crucially, applied these insights to the construction of the self in Howe’s writing. She suggests that Howe’s trawling through the politics of historical narrative, in texts such as ‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’, is part of a striving for an identity that can acknowledge its necessary historical specificity without being limited by the powers that evoke these constructs. Perloff suggests that this desire itself makes identity both fundamental and indiscernible.

Ostensibly absent and calling no attention to the problems and desires of the “real” Susan Howe, the poet's self is nevertheless inscribed in the linguistic interstices of her poetic text [...] In substituting the “impersonal” narrative – a narrative made of collage fragments realigned and recharged – for the more usual lyric “I”, Howe is suggesting that the personal is always already political, specifically, that the contemporary Irish-American New England woman who is Susan Howe cannot be understood apart from her history (Perloff 1990, p.310).

Hence, Perloff finds the identity of Howe partly within the authority that she challenges. Howe's poetical deconstructions of language, knowledge and history are applied to the poet in the text. In Perloff’s reading Howe avoids the lyric ‘I’ not because she is content to allow her poetry to participate in Janet Rodney’s description of the ‘larger context’ beyond selfhood, but because

6 Recent Howe criticism, not explicitly addressed here, has focused upon the significance of Howe’s textual innovations for challenging the hegemony of historical narrative. See (Ma 1994; Naylor 1993; Nicholls 1996; Ramke 1994) Much of this criticism implicitly supports Perloff’s view that Howe’s authorial presence is inextricable from her relationship to her historical sources: ‘a distinct voice is traceable through a geography only because it “originates” from relationships between multiple histories. To trace a voice is to traverse a historical

subjectivity itself is implicated in the totalising narratives that her poetry is attempting to challenge.

Perloff's reading of Howe is so persuasive because it constructs a political significance for Howe's questioning of the authorial role. Stepping across the 'minefield' of feminism and poststructuralism, Perloff achieves a critical stance on Howe that neither sanguinely negates her politics nor attempts to simply explain her apparent absences through the search for either the 'real' authorial voice or the 'real' voices of historical marginalisation in her work. Indeed, her approach chimes neatly with the response by some feminists to Roland Barthes' ecstatic proclamation of the death of the author, which so fundamentally challenged the politics of authorial subjectivity and historical context. Nancy K. Miller, whose position I have already described in my opening chapter, infamously responded to Barthes' 'foreclosing of the question of identity', by advocating:

A critical positioning which reads *against* the weave of indiffereration to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity [...] Not only to retrieve those texts from the indifference of the aesthetic universal, but to identify the act of this reading as the enabling subjectivity of *another* poetics, a poetics attached to gendered bodies that may have lived in history (Miller 1988, p.80 and p.97).

Miller's reading of the politics of the subject parallels Perloff's reading of Howe. In both the formative relationship between subjectivity and language is acknowledged, the self of the poet 'cannot be understood apart from her history'.

However, although Perloff's reading is convincing, I want to argue in the rest of this chapter that Howe's work does not sit as neatly within the bounds of contemporary feminist thought as it implies. Howe's self cannot simply be located in the political 'interstices' of the text because the relationship that she constructs between herself and her text is far too unstable, too shifting, for such a reading. The flattening of the emphatic ambiguities of Howe's texts that Perloff's reading appears to perform actually prevents us from acknowledging the meaning which Howe's own writing attributes to these ruptures. I want to outline a reading of Howe's subjective self that falls somewhere between the two dominant critical approaches to this issue. I want to suggest that

Howe's writing supports an authorial self that is more complicated than either of these two models suggest: it is neither ecstatically relinquished into language's mystery nor exists within the interstices of historical sources.

Section Two. Out of My Texts I am Not What I Play

Part One. The Poet in History

Howe's essay, 'The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson', published in her critical work *The Birthmark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*, explicitly demonstrates the political implications of her reworking of historical narrative. Mary Rowlandson's original text, telling the story of her capture and eventual return by Native Americans, was the first of a genre that was paradigmatic in constructing the tropes of white America's gendered and racialised identity. Howe's re-reading of the genre takes the form of a meta-narrative, its concern with imagining the stories that Rowlandson's captivity narrative conceals becomes an enquiry into the cultural appropriation of discourse itself.

Howe's characteristic blending of the sceptical and the visionary finds an appropriate hybridity in an essay that mixes poetry and critical analysis. This increasingly popular amalgamation, according to the critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis, combines attentiveness to 'materiality' with an awareness of 'positionality'.⁷

While this attention to materiality can also sometimes be split into two tendencies - an emphasis on either textual or biographical/ historical materiality - the real interest comes when these emphases are fused: when textuality (style, rhetoric, image, resistant diction, insouciant tone, weird page space, ploys opening out the book, visual text, multiplex of genres) is presented as a social practice [...] The essay ruptures the conventions - especially the scientific ethos of objectivity - of critical writing. When a situated practice of knowing made up by the transparent situated object explores (explodes) [...] that's it: *f*-words. The essay (DuPlessis 1996, p.24-25).

DuPlessis seems to invest in this form, in line with her other theoretical/creative writings, a way of locating 'the seam between textuality and sociality' (p.23). It is Susan Howe's mining of this same seam that I want to critically examine in the rest of the chapter.

Howe's aim in the 'Mary Rowlandson' essay is to challenge the mythologisation of America's constructed history in order to demonstrate its continued influence on the ideologies of the

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Susan Howe is specifically cited, amongst a dizzying array of others, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis' essay.

present. She describes the original narrative as a, 'microcosm of colonial imperialist history and a prophecy of our contemporary repudiation of alterity, anonymity, darkness' and is keenly aware of the potent instability of such constructions (Howe 1993a, p.89). Her critique of the ways in which such bald domination presented itself concentrates on demonstrating the linguistic and historical rifts that such seminal narratives are formed by. She does not re-write the text to subvert history but to realise the subversion that the instability of such texts reveals. The accuracy of Howe's poetical confrontation with what she describes as a 'definitive version' of New England's history has been recently supported by growing academic scholarship seeking to examine the foundational role which captivity narratives played in the construction of an American hegemony. Gary Ebersole's *Captured by Texts: Puritan to Postmodern Images of Indian Captivity*, for example, attempts to reconstruct the contemporary consumption of Mary Rowlandson's contested text.

In general, then, the events of Mary Rowlandson's captivity were not in dispute in the late seventeenth century: at issue and of much greater import was the *meaning* of these and related events. Rowlandson's captivity came to have great communal significance for the Puritans because it was narrated in an authorial manner through a biblical interpretative frame that transformed it into an exemplum for the entire community [...] The particulars of the captivity were properly to be understood by subordinating the specific instance and personal narrative impetus to a larger covental account or metanarrative of God's intervention in New England history (Ebersole 1995, p.23).

Although Howe shares these basic premises what the fluidity of her text seems capable of, where the orthodoxy of Ebersole's research falters, is a more thorough explication of the political and cultural significance of the linguistic structure of these 'particulars' within the text. As Christopher Castiglia, another academic working within the field, acknowledges, Susan Howe's reading of Mary Rowlandson's text was 'one of the earliest and most eloquent assessments of the deployment of the figure of the captive white woman to uphold patriarchal and imperialist ideology' (Castiglia 1996, p.200). It is the suggestive plasticity of this 'eloquence' that I think renders Howe's text so potent in revealing in such detail the cultural uses to which Rowlandson's text were - and are - put.

Howe's essay aims to demonstrate the equivocal nature of the mechanisms of discourse that aim to impart cohesive identity to the formation of America. Her reworking of Rowlandson's words contrives to simultaneously show how such discourses both supported and transgressed the borders of American cultural specificity.⁸ Captivity narratives were most crudely used to erect the necessarily reassuring boundaries between the Native American and the coloniser. Such narratives worked to contrast the demonic threat that the wilderness held with the secure purity of the settled communities. Captivity narrative's 'enormous popularity came from the form's power to articulate mythically the deepest anxieties of the colonists' (Carr 1984, p.50).

The Puritan community saw peril everywhere, the first nations, the land, and women were felt to threaten the white masculine sanctity of the 'new world'. All three were marginalised through the constructed polarities of difference that has parallels with the 'Pythagorean' negations that were so influential to Howe's earlier work. With a crudity that is deliberately reductive the land was feminised, and women and the native Americans were demonised: 'Women and Indians as alarming and disturbing challenges to mastery are repressed; they re-emerge by a process of condensation and displacement, as this virgin country, ready as a pure and untouched bride for her rightful husband' (Carr 1984, p.53).

Biblical rhetoric provided the vehicle that enforced this binary of cultural difference. God invoked the ultimate, and necessary, linguistic authority. Howe suggests in her essay 'Encloser' that the Bible was used to bring unity to the chaos of mass migration. When the state had been replaced by 'freedom and fright. All the settlers, some would say invaders, had to connect them to home, familiarity, and family was the Bible. They had a text' (Howe 1990a, p.190). This religious rhetoric that saturated captivity narratives constructed individuals to conform to the other needs of this 'new world'. The settling of the colonies may thus have been cloaked in the rhetoric of salvation but this barely concealed its other agendas.

Early New England Rhetoric claimed for every single Christian a particular evangelical and secular use and progress. Individual identity was prophetic and corporate [...]While helping

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It is also obviously part of Howe's larger agenda to challenge the legitimacy of this 'True History' of Mary Rowlandson. She notes early in the text that, 'No copy of the first edition of Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* is known to exist. All of the editions we have now depend on the text of a 'Second Addition Corrected and Amended' printed during the same year as the first. Future distortions, exaggerations, modifications, corrections and emendations may endow a text with meanings it never formed' (p.97).

the original inhabitants of Earth's millennial fourth corner to become Christians, members of the moral and profit-seeking Elect helped themselves to land (Howe 1993a, p.90-91).

Howe is acutely aware of the specific implications of a female appropriation of such religious discourse. The use of religious rhetoric within captivity narratives authenticated female articulation by bypassing it. Women proved that they remained culturally and sexually chaste through demonstrating a piety that negated them. The narrators 'enveloped themselves within God's Plot to survive the threat of openness.' The shelter that they received demanded a high, if now familiar, price: 'the quotations became a second voice. Often a paternal and contradictory one' (Howe 1990a, p.190). The act of narration thus became a sign of submission rather than of authority; even the actual telling was 'increasingly structured and written down by men' (Howe 1993a, p.89). The safe reinstatement of women to the coloniser's communities confirmed not only the secure possession of women and thus of paternity but, by implication, of the land itself. This idealisation of the land and of the feminine was maintained by the ruthless treatment of those who challenged its boundaries. Hence women became not only the 'commodities' passed 'between two hostile armies' but actually the scapegoats for their failures.

Howe's text challenges this retrospective illustration of conversion narratives as discourses of possession by synthesising it with readings that highlight the subversions of this authority. This occurs most strikingly through the intervention of Howe's composed reflection by the harsh and raw sounds of seventeenth century discourse. Howe appears to attempt to replicate Rowlandson's narrative and experience by placing them amidst the animated and contradictory discourses of the period: she mingles Native American names, Biblical citations and extracts from the journals of state officials. These discourses appear to be evoked in order to set into motion the insurrection within and against each other that all signal. Howe exploits the inconsistencies within America's constructed past in order to demonstrate the actual diversity of ostensibly unificatory discourses. The latter sections of the text demonstrate this most obviously as the authority inherent to sources as diverse as Bradstreet's poetry and the diaries of state officials are contrasted against the internal slips and eruptions that all contain. These are 'the perils of colonial Infancy: Captain Johnson's custom of dropping into poetry. John Winthrop's journal entering into history' (Howe 1993a, p.118). Like the conversion narratives these texts are so potent because they fail to contain the pressure of disintegration against which they are pinned.

Howe is thus able to suggest that religious rhetoric, invoked to protect the female narrator from suspicion by circumventing her mortality, actually conceals the narrator's voice: 'each time an errant perception skids loose, she controls her lapse by vehemently invoking biblical authority' (p.100). The Bible is 'counter-point, shelter, threat' (p.124). Rowlandson controls the 'slide into Reason's ruin' that would result, for example, from her 'list of specific criticisms of colonial policies' with an appeal to the 'imperatives of Wonder-Working Providence' (p.101). This equivocal use of theological certainty reaches its apex in the citation that Howe attributes to Rowlandson after the death of her infant daughter, Sarah. Rowlandson appears to be attempting to make sense of the overwhelming senselessness of her child's death through the Bible. What she actually writes seems full of a terse and angry awareness of the calamitous absurdity of her narrative.

The Lord brought me some Scriptures, which did a little revive me, as that Isai. 55.8. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your wayes my wayes saith the Lord.* And also that, *Psal. 37.5 Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in him, and he shal bring it to pass.* (p.99)

The death of Sarah seems to mark a turning point in Rowlandson's writing: 'After the war whoop terror and the death of her little daughter, a new management of the truth speaks to oppose itself.' This new truth emerges from the need to disrupt, with reality, the ideology behind New England's history. Rowlandson becomes, like Howe herself, 'an author [who] cannot let some definitive version of New England's destiny pull her' (p.126 & p.125).

The 'poems' (much of the writing is marked, like 'Mary Rowlandson', by its generic hybridity) collected in Howe's anthology *Singularities* also chart Howe's explorations through the discursive remnants of first encounter America. They also mark more clearly, so I want to suggest, the way in which Howe envisaged *herself* as operating within, and as identifying with, this history. The first poem in the collection, 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', represents the exploits of Hope Atherton. Atherton was a reverend and a soldier in southern New England during the violent Indian wars of the sixteen seventies. He was a member of a battalion that massacred an Indian encampment in the relatively infamous 'Falls Fight' of 1676. During retaliation by the Native Americans, in what is now recognised as the last act of effective

resistance to colonisation by the native peoples of this region, Atherton lost his horse and became separated from his colonial community⁹ When he rediscovered them, as the only survivor of the battle he had been involved in, he was held to be suspicious and rejected by this community ‘No one believed the minister’s letter He became a stranger to his community and died soon after the traumatic exposure that has earned him poor mention in a seldom opened book’ (Howe 1990d, p 4) His existence is dependent upon recognition from a community, the point at which this falters is the point at which the instabilities and insecurities of the community emerge Atherton, like Mary Rowlandson, demonstrates the precariousness of the individual’s assimilation into collective meaning, forcibly illuminating both the limitations and the necessity of identity through writing its physical loss

Atherton’s expedition is taken by Howe in the poem to be symbolic of her *own* journey through the colonial landscape of America in the sixteen seventies His contradictory status, as complicit with colonialism and yet alienated from it, parallels Howe’s own construction of a poetics that is defined by an historical context from which it is also distant What are described as Atherton’s literal attributes ‘effaced background dissolves remotest foreground Putative author, premodern condition, presently present what future clamours for release’ are used by Howe as an ‘emblem foreshadowing a Poet’s abolished limitations in our demythologised fantasy of Manifest Destiny’ (p 4) His movement between visibility and invisibility offers Howe a trope for her ‘intervening absence’, for her attempt to explore the violence of colonialism from the inside, without being contained or appropriated by it

Howe’s description of Atherton’s history, and her configuring of the relationship between herself and the minister, comprises the first section of the poem The second, ‘Hope Atherton’s Wanderings’, disrupts the more conventional description of Atherton’s life and attempts to describe him journeying through the inbetween spaces of American history Crucially, he operates

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Richard Middleton describes the battle Hope Atherton was involved in ‘The conflict was the natural result of population pressure on the Native peoples immediately to the west and north, notably the Wampanoags, Narragansetts, Mohegans and Nipmunks [] The new Englanders sent a combined force under Josiah Winslow against them which killed 300 men, women and children. This assault promptly increased support for Metacomet, since most American Indians now realised they were fighting for their lives [] Most notable was the routing of a force under Captam Turner in the Connecticut Valley in which forty of Turner’s men were killed [] By the summer of 1676 it was all over the American Indians of Southern new England had effectively been reduced to a few remnants cooped up in special villages, their way of life and environment destroyed forever ’ (Middleton 1992, p 127) It was the rout against Captain Turner that Atherton, in becoming separated from his regiment, escaped.

The critic Peter Nicholls has suggested that Howe’s account of this battle was taken from George Sheldon’s *A History of Deerfield Massachusetts 1895-96* (Somersworth NH New Hampshire Publishing, 1972)

without access to an understandable language. The poem talks of the ‘clog nutmeg abt noon / scraping cano muzzell/ foot path sand and so’ the neologisms and half words mingling a sense of the acutely and threateningly physical with evocations of seventeenth century words and sounds (p.6). Peter Nicholls, in his successful tracing of the sources for these sounds, argues that rather than trying to recreate a narrative for Atherton - as other critics have suggested - Howe is actually interrupting the *possibilities* for narrative that the original sources for this text contain (Nicholls 1996).

The sense of chaos that this unhinging of linguistic certainty sets loose is contrasted in the poem against the incipient authority of the systems of communication that Hope Atherton has unwittingly left behind.

Colonnades of rigorous Americanism

Portents of lonely destructivism

Knowledge narrowly fixed knowledge

Whose bounds in theories slay [...]

Marching and counter marching

Danger of roaming the woods at random

Men whet their scythes go out to mow

Nets tackle weir birchbark (p 12)

Howe makes clear that the ‘knowledge narrowly fixed knowledge’ that the Europeans brought to America had violent repercussions. Her continuous interest in borders extends here to examining the politics of land itself. Farming, for example, is associated with the violence of war. The loss of common land, ‘the marching and counter marching and the danger of roaming the woods at random’ is linked to the violence of a harvest that has been taken out of collective ownership, the whetting of the scythes carries with it violent connotations that suggest a reaping of a decidedly unwholesome nature.¹⁰ The clarity of this familiar, if malevolent, image of the

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Although the native Americans in this region were agricultural and did farm the land they did not farm it in the

scythe jars against the loss of that which it sweeps away. The nets tackle 'weir birchbark', something unknown is being tamed and controlled, and Howe's poetry, in acknowledging this, seems to seek to liberate this energy.

Howe (and Hope) seemingly attempt to disrupt the conventions of difference and alterity, that structure the discourses of colonialism, through disrupting its relationship to language. Howe disrupts narrative possibilities because she is seeking to write a narrative of history that is able to overwhelm the layering of circuits of difference - linguistic, historical, cultural - that, in Derrida's version of post-structuralism at least, endow our every articulation with an oppressed alterity. 'Articulations of Sound Forms in Time' can be read as an attempt to *imagine* America's foundational violence without allowing the language of the poetry to be re-appropriated by this violence, by the divisive forces of settler colonialism. The text is, as I noted above, taken from the *Singularities* anthology. This title, as Howe explained in the year of its publication, was fundamental to understanding the thinking that influenced this particular collection of work.

I was having a terrible time coming up with a title for that group of works together [...] and Thom came to Buffalo and gave a lecture called 'Singularities'. In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. On a line, if you start at the x point, there is +1, +2, etc. But at the other side of the point there is -1, -2, etc. But at the other side of the point is -1, -2, etc. The singularity (I think Thom is saying) is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It's a chaotic point. *It's the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else* [...] I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen [...] And it seemed to be a way of describing these poems of mine. They are singular works on pages, and grouped together, they fracture language: they are charged. (Howe 1990c, p.173, italics mine)

This 'leap into something else' describes both the settling of Europeans in America and Howe's own work. The two are obviously connected in Howe's poetics: her writing becomes the point where the violence of difference, that constructed America, can be overcome, can be resolved into

intensive manner of the Europeans and it was, until the settlers had taken occupancy of it, left in common ownership. The farming of the land was crucial to the power balance between the two communities because it was the realisation that commercial crops - mainly tobacco - could be grown that made the colonisation of the

a singularity

At the end of the section 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings' in 'Articulation' Howe appears self-reflexive about whether Hope/ Howe's wanderings, 'signal escapes wonderful in themselves', can achieve this desire to unite difference. The archaisms of the seventeenth century fall away as Howe considers the implications of her own paradoxical status.

We must not worry
 how few we are and fall from each other
 More than language can express
 Hope for the artist in America & etc
 This is my birthday
 These are the old home trees (p 16)

The stanza is characteristically equivocal. The comfort of the assurance that 'we must not worry / how few we are and fall from each other' is undercut by the more detached 'Hope to the Artist in America & etc'. The ability of the poet to challenge the system it rages against - to have or to be Hope as it were - suddenly seems reliant on the individual poet, 'This is my birthday / These are the old home trees'.

In a hand-written letter from her manuscripts (apparently never sent) Howe suggests her own interpretation of what these lines tell us about the role of the American poet.

Last page of Part I [which is the section I have just cited] *very* crucial. Here I mean Hope to be Hope, myself. All outsiders, all poets who have tried to give a message and been misunderstood, laughed at, ignored etc (We are a small remnant - the poets - those in a line going through time and I suppose I mean American poets []). That etc is the key. *What* comes after the etc. That is the wild, always fascinated by that little word or bit of word []. The Forest is language yes - but it's also quite specifically the Forest - the American Forest. We can't take it but we try like hell to take it - and if you were in the Adirondacks

you would see that nearly did take it and still may - But I always think of Heidegger too-
and clearings ¹¹

The 'etc' that Howe seems to want her writing to evoke is the singularity which history has silenced. The 'stammer' is her discovery of the potent combination of America's physical and linguistic past. Yet, if we are to find this 'singular' in American history it is, she also seems to suggest here, only through trusting in the singularity of the poet's martyred self.

Section Two, Part Two

The Poet in the World

The work of Martin Heidegger, who is obliquely cited in Howe's description of 'Articulation' in this unpublished letter, provides a way of theorising Howe's aims in this text. The notion, fundamental to her poetics, that language 'conceals' meaning that the poet can bring into the 'open', is explicitly addressed in Heideggerean thought. Heidegger suggested, like Howe, that this uncovering of meaning is a political act, which some form of liberation inheres within it. It is the significance that Howe's writing invests in these assertions, as well as in the assumptions that lie behind them, that I think are particularly relevant to the way in which Howe viewed both her articulation of an expressive self and poetry itself.

In *Poetry, Language, Thought* Heidegger suggests that language is the *foundation* of existence. That it is the 'precinct, that is, the house of Being. The nature of language does not exhaust itself in signifying, [. . .] It is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house' (Heidegger 1971, p 132). His use of language is predicated upon the belief that it has primordial meanings which are denied to us in our everyday life. These meanings can only be found in their uncorrupted state through art, or rather poetry, '*All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry*', for it is only in poetry that we can overcome the assertion of the subjective self (p.72).

Heidegger understands the assertion of self, the act of modern subjectivity, to be a form of

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Undated and untitled. From the Mandeville Department of Special Collections, at University of California, San

Nietzsche's will to power The desire to organise the world and to control the conditions of representation must be overcome, according to Heidegger, if we are to base selfhood not on mutually destructive self-assertion but on a comprehension of the meanings and forces which construct our lives The assertion of self is thus contrary to the truth for Heidegger because it prevents the subject from attaining the openness of being of the 'temporal context' Heidegger suggests, in 'Origin of the Work of Art', that this operation of unconcealedness, that poetry offers, unleashes an energy that allows history and truth to emerge 'genuinely poetic projection is the opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast' (p 75)

Heidegger's construction of selfhood was crucial in challenging the atomism of the transcendental individual As Charles Taylor argues, Heidegger was significant in empowering twentieth century thought with 'an understanding of the agent as engaged, as embedded in a culture' in contrast to the quixotic objectivity of the rationalist subject (Taylor 1993, p 318) However, even Taylor's support of this apparently pragmatic agency 'whose experience is made intelligible only by being placed in the context of the kind of agency it is' is rooted in the paradoxes familiar from my first chapter The 'irreducible content-context structure of engaged agency' makes, he admits, 'the prospect of total explication incoherent' truly engaged agency is incapable of expressing a sense of self-reflection it has to just 'be' (p 329)¹² Other critics push this critique of Heidegger further David Kolb, for example, notes that Heidegger is unable to offer *advice* about how to achieve what Kolb describes as a 'deconstructive living', a living in which we will be able to 'think beyond the current mode in which things are revealed to us' (Kolb 1986, p 191) Heidegger's theory is premised on the reluctance to advocate social change as it would require the subjective willing that he finds anathema 'The thinker can give no advice on concrete matters except to point out the space in which they move' (p 197)

The relevancy, and difficulties, of this problematic relinquishment of self-reflective agency to Howe's vision of poetics becomes apparent when the changes that arise from the primacy which Heidegger attributes to language in his later writing are also considered As Richard Rorty points out, the concern of the Heidegger of *Being and Time* with the 'sociohistorical situation of Dasein', which Taylor is so keen to emphasise, gave way in his later work, to a philosopher who rendered 'Thought' a substitute for what he called metaphysics This led him to speak of

Diego, [MSS 0011, Box 30, Folder 14]

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Taylor's own argument relies on the assertion that our perception of such a regress is actually indicative of the *limitations* of rationalistic thinking, and that 'the pragmatic self confirmation' of his own articulation of

language as a quasi-divinity in which we live and move and have our being' (Rorty 1993, p.340). The primordial energy which Heidegger attributed to language appeared, by *Poetry, Language, Thought* at least, to have gained a potency for which the subject, by its very nature, cannot be accountable: unable to articulate a subjective agency the individual can only 'dwell' within the space which language allows. The Heideggerean construction of the relationship between the poet and historical meaning, which appears to allow the writer an access to 'truth' without encumbrance by the complicated politics of identity, actually ensnares them within the paradoxes they are attempting to resolve. Far from being freed from the Hegelian dance with alterity, the poet seems unable to acknowledge the significance of his or her own selfhood.

It is the limitations, even the impossibility, of attributing this act of 'unconcealedness', this intervening absence to writing, even to writing as politically astute as Howe's, that I want to finally focus upon. As I have suggested 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings' in 'Articulation' can be read as an attempt to represent the fear and tension which the violence of difference, embodied by the decimation of the first peoples, signalled for American culture. The challenges which Howe issues to this representation of difference focus upon finding a language form that can express the 'etc' of American history, that can speak the silenced voices concealed in language.

Two blew bird eggs plat
 Habitants before dark
 Little way went mistook awake
 abt again Clay Gully
 espied bounds to leap over (Howe 1990d, p.8)

The poem appears to attempt to evoke the forest, the landscape that Atherton is wandering through. However, he does not appear to be floundering in the 'clearing' of, in Heidegger's words, 'genuine historical truth'. He is presented, rather, as a white man in a land that ideology has rendered savage. His attempts to eat or to find a place of safety that is recognised, that the poem is seemingly attempting to depict, are made more tense because of the threat of the 'Nipnet Ninep Ninap' from whom he must - as our 'kinsmen'- 'hasten'.

Kinsmen I pray you hasten

Furious Nipnet Ninep Ninap

little Pansett fence with ditch (p.8)

The playing of these sounds suggests a faintly ridiculous and chaotic unknown tribal system, quite different from the specific knowledge of the indigenous organisations of America actually chronicled in accounts of this battle and its aftermath. This language is given no specific meaning but is used to indicate the violence of difference that Howe is ostensibly seeking to use Hope to overcome. Hope's innocence is drawn from its juxtaposition against the menace of the 'furious' native Americans. What is being elided in this contrast is the specific histories of violence that these people endured. The 'wildness' of America's past that this poem is obviously intent on unsettling appears to be more selective than Howe's liberatory and idealistic rhetoric would suggest. Howe's critique of the violence of America's history, which this poem is undoubtedly effective in performing, trips up here on its own visionary aims.

Howe's description of Mary Rowlandson's narrative suggests a similar slippage. However thorough her reworking of the cultural potency of these captivity narratives may be, it is never clear that she manages to wholly repudiate the western reliance on the construction of alterity. Although Howe's reading is based on acknowledging the racial basis of captivity narratives, a curious act of prioritising still occurs within them.

Mary Rowlandson has been condemned for her lack of curiosity about the customs of her captors (she was starving, wounded, weary), and her narrative has been blamed for stereotypes of native Americans as 'savages' [...] These critics skirt the presence in this same genre of an equally insulting stereo-type, that of a white woman as passive cipher in a controlled and circulated idea of Progress. (p.96)

Howe renders narratives of race and narratives of gender subtly incompatible in this comparison: the critic must, she implies, choose between who is represented in the text. Moreover, her defence of Rowlandson's racism actually undercuts, contradicts even, what I have suggested she herself has read into Rowlandson's texts. Most obviously Howe is casting Rowlandson in this instance as a victim, 'starving, wounded, weary'. Four pages on, conversely, Howe details both the compassion of her captors and Rowlandson's ingenuity in bartering for food.

In return for a piece of beef she made a shirt for a squaw's sannup. For a quart of peas she knit another pair of stockings. Someone asked her to sew a shirt for a papoose in exchange for a 'mess of broth, thickened with meal made from the bark of a tree' [...]. None of her captors harmed her. Many shared what little they had with her [...]. she never saw a single native American die from hunger (p 100)

This apparent reversal is reinforced by Howe terming Rowlandson as a 'passive cipher', when she is subsequently described as a woman who 'saw what she did not see and said what she did not say' (p 128). Her argument that Rowlandson's subversion of narrative allowed her a voice, fails to take into account the silencing of the native American which such articulation was actually complicit with.

I am, of course, not suggesting that the different trajectories of race and gender are incompatible in Howe's text, she is at pains to make clear that early American discourses were both misogynistic *and* racist. Nor is Howe simply complicit with the ideological amnesia of dominant white American history, she points out that 'only a few of her [Rowlandson's] captors have names. Most of them are wrong' (125). I am arguing, rather, that the historical specificity that Howe is intent on constructing against the discursive homogeneity of Rowlandson's texts is not extended to *include* the experiences of the native Americans. The decimation of these first peoples by the effects of American colonisation is given only the meaning that colonisation gave it. The retention of such absences jars against the ostensible purpose of much of Howe's poetical agenda to discover presences within the unwritten and silenced scissions of American identity. This omission is apparent in Howe's use of Native American names and words in this text: they are given no etymological specificity and their usage is not contextualised. For a poet otherwise so concerned with the historical power concealed in sounds this oversight is rather stark.

Conclusion. 'Possibility has Opened'

I want to argue, in way of conclusion, that these textual slippages stem, in part at least, from the way in which the *poetic* is privileged in Howe's writing, even in writing which ostensibly problematises such definitions 'The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson' and 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' are both, in many ways, similar to Howe's earlier 'critical' work *My Emily Dickinson*. In all three texts Howe re-reads the writing (or the accounts of) of a marginalised historical figure in order to reveal the meanings which history has suppressed¹³. Crucially, these meanings are located within the instabilities of an indeterminate language. The processes by which Howe unearths these political revisions are themselves, however, loaded with contradictions. On page thirteen of *My Emily Dickinson*, for example, Howe appears to suggest two quite opposing things. She recognises that Dickinson's historical context is fundamental to understanding the specific subversions she attributes to her work, 'givens of Dickinson's life her sex, class, education, inherited character traits, [] all carry the condition for work in their wake'. Yet Howe also suggests that these things are irrelevant, not because they are suggestive of intentionalism, but because 'the conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach, indifferent to worldly chronology' (Howe 1985). Hence Howe's reading of the work of Emily Dickinson is informed by a tension between history and what lies beyond it.

Howe's reading of Dickinson enacts this tension between being in context and being beyond it. It is a reading concerned to empower the ambiguity of this enigmatic and eclectic verse. Howe searches for the meanings that she imagines Dickinson salted away into the 'slants' of her poetry. This project thus shares ostensible similarities with other feminist acts of historical 're-vision'. Indeed Adrienne Rich, whose term this originally was, had performed just such a reading of the politics of Dickinson's covert subversions some ten years earlier (Rich 1975, reprinted 1993). What is so interesting about Howe's reading of Dickinson is that it resists the straightforward connections between the political context of Dickinson's marginality and her employment of clandestine meaning that Rich, for example, appeals to. At the beginning of *My Emily Dickinson* Howe actually directly attacks Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Hélène Cixous, for the attempts all make to understand the complexities of feminine writing through the constraints of

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This project of Howe's - to have access to and eventually publish the original and unchanged version of Dickinson's manuscripts - has recently come to fruition with the publication, by a student of Howe's, of Dickinson's manuscripts. See (Werner 1995).

a patriarchal society.

‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ by the French feminist Hélène Cixous is an often eloquent plan for what women’s writing *will* do. The problem is that *will* too quickly becomes *must*. [...] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar are perceptive about the problems and achievements of nineteenth century British novelists who were women. Sadly their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, fails to discuss the implications of a nineteenth century American penchant for linguistic decreation ushered in [...] by Emily Dickinson. For these two feminist scholars a writer may conceal or confess all if she does it in a logical syntax. Emily Dickinson suggests that the language of the heart has quite another grammar (p.13).

Howe objects not to the consideration of gender by these three writers, she concedes that, ‘gender difference does affect our use of language’, but to what she perceives as the formulaic aspects of feminist theory which reduce everything to the constructed nature of gender. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and Hélène Cixous fail Susan Howe’s Emily Dickinson because they cannot allow for ‘possibility’.

Howe diverges from the accepted, although widely different, feminist theorising of Gilbert and Gubar, and Cixous, because she is unwilling to allow the connections between experimental writing and historical marginality to be framed only through context. Howe cannot accept this reading because of her controversial contention that there is a ‘mystical separation between poetic vision and ordinary living’ (Howe 1985, p.13). Hence, Howe’s acceptance of alterity, her openness to the voices of history, is problematised by the suggestion that in order to write such emancipatory verse she must, in part at least, be able to *transcend* the politics of the subject. The equivocal authorial role of Howe herself is deeply implicated in this; it is as if the theoretical restraint placed upon the author as originator of meaning is taken by Howe to allow for the transcendence of cultural context by the meanings in a text.

There emerges in Howe’s writing a significant contradiction. The deeply emancipatory aspect of Howe’s textual revisions fails to challenge the authority of the written word. Her challenges to the marginalisation of historical narrative are less concerned to consider the cultural politics of, for example, the prohibited access to written documentation than to valorise the *indeterminacy*

inherent in the written word - these two things are not the same. Howe fails to consider that the culturally elite status of poetry actually reproduces the dynamics which silenced the ghostly protagonists who people 'The Liberties' and 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time'. The fundamental assumption of Howe, and Heidegger, that the 'frontier zones' of language and of history are simultaneous, that the voices that have been written out of history can be found in the truth concealed by an ambivalent language, requires more scrutiny than either Howe or many of her critics presently give it.

The relinquishment of self into textual narrative, for example, does not necessarily trigger a liberation of the meanings within this narrative. In the case of 'Mary Rowlandson' and 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' the opposite actually appears, at times, to be true. Howe's placing of herself into the historical narrative meant that her own inevitable position of authority and cultural positioning went unchallenged in this text. Howe failed to read herself as, to return to the themes of James Clifford, ethnographer, as narrator of the events of American history which her writing depicts. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of the politics of self and language is relevant here. Spivak asserts that, when producing ethnography, 'the clearing of a subjective space from which to speak is unavoidable'. Spivak, examining Rudyard Kipling's use of indigenous names and words as simply markers of difference, suggests that a reluctance to acknowledge one's own subjective relationship to the context of translation results in 'translation as violation': 'thus the incantation of names, far from being a composition of place, is precisely the combination of effacement and specificity and appropriation that one might call violation' (Spivak 1986, p.233). Howe's frequent manipulation of actual historical specificity, in texts such as 'Mary Rowlandson' and 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', combined with her reluctance to challenge her own subject position, problematises our ability to discover liberation, the articulation of alterity, in her textualised exploration of historical texts.

It is not simply, then, that native Americans are denied historical specificity in texts such as 'Mary Rowlandson' because of Howe's articulation of a gendered standpoint. Judith Butler's critique of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray for assuming a binarised gendered position that is inevitably oppressive to alternative articulations of alterity cannot wholly explain Howe's racialised text (Butler 1990). For although Butler's argument obviously does bear down on Howe, it does not totally explain what is happening in her re-reading of American history. In Howe's reading of the past it is not gender, but the meanings *beyond* gender which are constructed as

essentially pre-discursive. Howe's unacknowledged whiteness is not a result of her acknowledged gender but a result of her desire to dismiss her own subjective presence: to dissolve herself into history. Howe's desire to unleash the indeterminacy of language, to relinquish herself into her text, prevents her from acknowledging the significance of her own, and the text's, cultural positioning: it overlooks, to return to Rachel Blau DuPlessis' terms, the importance of positionality to the material. Howe consistently fails to acknowledge the fundamental differences between historical acts and textual silences: her refusal to recognise her own place within the text is part of this blindness. The danger, which I suggest Howe explores in 'Pythagorean Silence', is perhaps only half of the story: the danger of relinquishing oneself into language is matched by the danger of *not* acknowledging what it means to do this. Howe's attempts to integrate her subjective self into the web of historical narrative is problematised when it renders her incapable of acknowledging her own influence on the production of these narratives.

Howe's reluctance to consider her own positioning as author within the text, her attempts to allow her own authorial presence to escape from the political networks she examines, renders her, to return to the terms of my introduction, an impersonal force within her writing. This echoing of T.S Eliot's high modernist poetics seems appropriate. Howe's willing of her own absence has a similar effect to that which Maud Ellman has ascribed to Eliot: 'the poet now resembles God in nature, untouched by the energies he has unleashed. [...] The poet's reticence actually safeguards his identity, as if impersonality were the formaldehyde that preserves the self against dispersion through effusion' (Ellman 1987, p.7). In the following two chapters I want to examine the way in which the construction of selfhood in the work of Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino is both preserved 'against diffusion' and yet able to acknowledge the potential significance of its own positioning.

Chapter Three: Whose Life is It Anyway? Lyn Hejinian and the Autobiographical Act

Introduction. A Giant Task

Susan Howe and the poet Lyn Hejinian began corresponding in the early seventies. Much of their communication (which was not always easy and which eventually seems to have all but petered out) is characterised by their sharing, and assuaging, of one another's anxieties about writing. The letters are usually interested and always encouraging. The anxieties discussed, in their early letters especially, often concerned the practical difficulties that each faced as they tried to combine the financial and emotional demands of their families with the growing demands of their art. These domestic misgivings frequently fed into a broader uneasiness and confusion that both felt about the relationship between their gender and their writing; about what it meant for women to write experimental poetry of the kinds both were practising. In their later correspondence, as they mutually grapple with the Language 'mode' and theory more generally, this uneasiness is often manifested as a shared ambiguity toward feminist theory. Hejinian, although moving in an increasingly different direction, shared Howe's resistance to the subjective certainties that a theoretical allegiance to feminism was felt to demand.

There were two somewhat extra-literary currents that I have come away thinking about [...]

First, the 'social rhetoric' that the occasion elicited -- Barrett's estranging estrangement being the most extreme at one pole and Diane's timid persona at another. [...]

This brings up the 'Woman' issue --- which certainly has a lot of energy and even intelligence behind it, but which disturbed me in the context of the colloquium. [...]

For me one of the problems is the implicit anti-intellectual tendency. Kathleen Fraser, for example, has characterised an "intellectual bent" as being a male characteristic. The alternative is that women have a "non-linear" style of mind -- whatever that means. [...] I grew up trying to hide my intellectual bent because it was unlovable -- unfeminine. Finally I freed myself from those fears [...] and now it is the *women* who are telling me that I am unacceptable as I am -- that I have been "co-opted" by the men. I find this enraging and disheartening.

And then I found the emphasis on the quest for the female self disturbing. It is hard to be a self, I admit. And I feel strongly the lack of models for an interesting and vibrant female

self [...] But I no longer feel that my first loyalties are to such a self -- to my self. But rather to various communities -- my family, the poetry community and, most thrillingly, to Poetry. Not to my Self, certainly.

You can see that I am flailing (Hejinian, 1985)

Lyn Hejinian, who wrote this letter, is aware that gender inequalities affect 'social rhetoric', that gender inequalities have deprived American women of 'interesting and vibrant' role models. She also perceives that feminism's reaction to such disparities demand positions, a non-linear/ non-cerebral or an essentially female self, that she can neither adequately describe or begin to fulfil. Hejinian 'flails' in this letter between knowing that she is constructed by an oppressive gender identity and rejecting the strategies of selfhood which feminism appears to proffer to salve this knowledge.

In another letter written by Hejinian to Howe eighteen months later the topic remains the same. Both seem to be struggling with the issues involved in understanding the relationship between feminism and aesthetics.

I really don't know what effect our being women has, either on our correspondence or our writing. It is a big question but it lacks big answers. The political and social issues are very clear to me, but the aesthetic issues are not -- that is, I know that my position vis a vis the power structure is conditioned and even determined by me being a woman and I know how and why that is so -- I can watch it be so. But I don't know what there is in my imagination or my syntax or my literary or linguistic impulses that is specifically determined by my being a woman? Do you? about yourself, I mean? [...] What we need to know is what kinds of thinking and writing and knowing are being suppressed -- and then to do, or help others to do, that thinking and writing and knowing. A giant task. (Hejinian, 1987a)

Again, Hejinian is caught between knowing that her relationship to power is 'conditioned and even determined' by her gender and yet rejecting that her 'imagination', 'syntax' or 'literary or linguistic impulses' can be determined by it. Hejinian's relationship to the subject, like the letter's recipient, is marked by the ambivalences of contemporary theory described in my introduction; is marked by the tension that the writer Meili Steele describes as operating between theories 'that

speak of the subject's determination and those that speak of the subject's ethical/ political agency' (Steele 1997, p.107). Like Howe, Hejinian is attempting to negotiate, in her need to explore 'what kinds of thinking and writing and knowing are being suppressed' in the juxtaposition of these two narratives, a way of opening up a textual space in which they can be meaningfully brought into play. This textual space would allow the writer to articulate both their 'position vis a vis the power structure' and their individual 'literary and linguistic impulses'.

In this chapter I want to examine the way in which Hejinian negotiates the 'author function', and its implicit relationship to issues of reading and authority, in response to the need to open up a space in which this tension can be discussed: a space which is, as I want to make clear, quite different to that which Susan Howe chose to occupy. In doing so I want to align her writing more closely with the suggestions about the Language 'mode' that I offered in my first chapter. More specifically, I want to focus upon the significance of Hejinian's *divergence* from this mode. I want to attribute this divergence to her desire to find ways of articulating her own struggle with the significance of an authorial presence.

Of the three poets considered at length in this work, and, in fact, of the roll-call of experimental women poets anthologised in key texts such as *In the American Tree* and *Out of Everywhere*, Hejinian participated more actively in the construction of the 'Language mode' than probably any other. Her significance derives from her attempts to simultaneously create a theoretical and practical community, to fulfil the rhetoric of Language writing's own agenda. As well as contributing to collaborative works, she co-edited, with Barret Watten, *Poetics Journal* and was solely responsible for *Tuumba Press*, without which many poets of this period would have not been published. The most renowned example of her own poetics, the essay 'The Rejection of Closure', formed part of the 1984 'Women and Language' issue of *Poetics Journal*.¹ In addition to supporting this discussion of the possibilities of a gendered dynamic for Language writing, Hejinian was also vigorous in attempting to make Language poetry's literal poetic community aware of the gendering of its own practices. This battle was, as the records of her correspondence held in UCSD's Mandeville collection makes clear, lengthy and largely private.²

Although Hejinian was interested in the tension between feminism and experimental writing

¹ The essay has since been anthologised in Bob Perelman's *Writing/ Talks* and Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry*.

² For an account of Hejinian's attempts to do this see (Vickery 1997).

her work cannot be primarily regarded as an example of the fruit that this alliance might bear. Unlike other experimental women poets working to actively construct poetic communities in this period, writers such as Barbara Godard or Kathleen Fraser who edited *Tessera* and *How (ever)* respectively, Hejinian seems to have invested more in exploring the implications of Language writing's practice than of a specifically feminist practice. In 'The Rejection of Closure' essay the 'fruitful conflict or struggle' that Hejinian is aiming to explore in her writing is between 'the natural impulse toward closure [...] and the equal impulse toward a necessarily open ended and continuous response to what's perceived as the "world"'. In this essay the conflict between expansion and contraction, or openness and closure, turns not upon gender politics (Luce Irigaray is, as I have noted above, cited as a possible ally and then dismissed as essentialist in this essay) or upon formal technique, but upon the significance attributable to an *authorial presence*: 'the first [an impulse towards closure] involves the poet with his or her subjective position; the second [the impulse to reject closure] objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself' (Hejinian 1984d, p. 134). The primary tension in Hejinian's work is not between the claims made by Language writing and those by feminism, but between the claims of the self and the claims of the world. Between the tension, again familiar to Susan Howe's work (although now loaded with less ambivalence), between a subjective presence that closes the poem and a subjective absence that opens it to the 'context of ideas'.

Writing, specifically experimental writing, resolves this tension for Hejinian by allowing a way to explore one's place within the world without falling back to the authoritative act of subjective closure: to the claims of the self as it were. 'The Rejection of Closure' has at its basis one of the central tenets of the language-based theories that coalesced around poststructuralism in the late seventies and early eighties, that 'language discovers what one might know' (Hejinian 1984d, p. 138). Hejinian's thesis is that to explore and expand the limitations of language is to explore and expand our experience of life itself. Language is, she writes, 'one of the principal forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless', it is only by virtue of it that we 'negotiate our mentalities and the world; off balance, heavy at the mouth, we are pulled forward' (p. 139). The central and obvious irony to Hejinian's work, however, is that her adherence to these language-based theories, and thus her rejection of ordinary selfhood, is constantly off-set by a desire to articulate the specificity of her *own* subjective experience.

In a more recent essay Hejinian employs the word 'person' to explain this apparent

contradiction, to clarify the distinction that operates in her work between self-founding subjectivity and self knowledge.

The person is the described describer of what it knows by virtue of experience. [...] The idea of the person enters poetics where art and reality, or intentionality and circumstance, meet. It is on the neurotic boundary between art and reality, *between construction and experience*, that the person (or my person) in writing exists.

But if this is where the idea of the person becomes a component in a poetics, it is also the point at which the person enters every day life. *The person is both the agent and the agency of the quotidian* (Hejinian 1991c, p.167 and p.170. italics mine).

Hejinian's aim in writing is to discover the 'agency' that exists in the 'the person's articulation of everyday existence: to exploit the point at which the subject's own self-evident knowledge of experientiality and the subject's discursive constructedness collide. Between 'construction and experience' is the place where the subject knows itself and its relationship to power. In articulating the interplay of these relationships there seems to be, in Hejinian's writing, the opportunity to exercise agency.

Hejinian's two lectures on Gertrude Stein, published in *Temblor* in the same year as 'The Rejection of Closure', explicates her understanding of this sense of textual agency. Drawing heavily upon the theorising of William James and Gertrude Stein, Hejinian explains the relationship between experimental writing and the politics of the subject through a need to radically re-consider, rather than reject, the construction of consciousness and its ordering of reality. Hejinian's reading of Stein and James' particular brand of language-centredness informs her approach to contemporary writing in what she suggests are three clearly demarcated ways. Firstly, it encouraged her to prioritise language in terms of its formal constructions, to 'explore the effect of technical aspects of language [...] and poetic devices'. This formalism was, in turn, a device that allowed her to stress the *experiential* basis of the subject, to examine a 'consciousness based on perception and elaborated by the perceiver in his or her encounter with the world'. Lastly, Hejinian suggests that this language use is 'philosophical, best seen in terms of phenomenology, insofar as it addresses and tests the objective', as it examines the ways in which consciousness of subjectivity is formed (Hejinian 1984e, p.131). Underlying these factors

in this first essay, 'Language and Realism' is, as the title obviously suggests, Hejinian's conviction that her attention to the materiality of language will provide, rather than obscure, the 'realism' of the subject

The formal qualities of Hejinian's writing are thus crucial to her explorations of selfhood 'it is the autonomy of the writing - the high visibility of its devices and even its intrusive strangeness - that authenticates the accuracy of its portrayals and gives the work its authority' (p 130) The work of art is seen to be capable of enacting Shklovsky's formalistic 'defamiliarisation' of our relationship to a sense of self³ The arbitrariness of language as a sign system through which the individual is constructed is realised by Hejinian as a privileging of poetry's ability to enact the radical possibilities that this knowledge implies This making visible the material representations of existence, this privileging of poetry, is constructed as obliquely emancipatory in what it offers to our comprehension of the social

Perhaps it was the discovery that language is an order of reality itself and not a mere mediating medium [] which replaced her [Stein's] commitment to a medical career with a commitment to a literary career In which case, she would have similarly realized that her writing was potentially as social and useful as doctoring might be (p 129)

Consistent with the Language 'mode', Hejinian connects her poetics to a political praxis capable of resonating beyond the text In 'The Rejection of Closure' she explicitly states that 'the "open" text, by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies' (Hejinian 1984d, p 134) Crucially, however, this essay stops short of over-idealising the nature of this active participation 'It is impossible' Hejinian notes in its final pages, 'to discover any string or bundle of words that is entirely free of possible narrative or psychological content Moreover, though the "story" and "tone" of such works may be interpreted differently by different readers, nonetheless the readings differ within *definite limits* While word strings are permissive, they do not license a free-for-all' (p 140, italics mine)

3

Hejman acknowledges her debt to the thinking of Victor Shklovsky (and to Barrett Watten for introducing her to his work) in her introduction to her translation of 'Once Upon a Time' in Watten's *Aerial 8* (Shklovsky, 1995)

Hejinian's own work seems most sensitive to these 'definite limits' of meaning as they affect her ability to articulate the relationship between the self (or the person) and the world. In what have become Hejinian's most discussed texts - *My Life* and *Writing is an Aid to Memory* - the presence of the subjective author is examined and made explicit through an examination of the *constructedness* of the *generic conventions* of authorial expression. In the relatively early *Writing is an Aid to Memory*, for example, Hejinian attempts to trace the complex, shifting and repeatable processes by which we recognise a textual subject as they place retrospective meaning upon themselves and their world. Central to this task is, as the title most clearly implies, a relationship to writing and order. The variegated, and often apparently arbitrary, processes of self-conscious memory - the repetitive and jarring range of emotive, physical and photographic memories, the flow of un- or half- formed words and the constant bombardment of sensual experience evoked by these memories - are placed against the methods employed to regulate this chaos. The authority of knowledge, of writing, of science, of systematic thought, is contrasted against the flood of memories or thoughts that are allowed to construct the poem. The opening of the poem places the authority of tradition or legends against the possibilities for fantasy such constructions also proffer.

apple is shot nod

ness seen know it around saying

think for a hundred years

but and perhaps utter errors direct the point to a meadow

rank fissure up on the pit

arts are several branches of life

little more science is brought where great

need is required (Hejinian, 1978 rpt 1996, unpaginated, stanza 1)

The opening of the poem seems to evoke a version of the legend of William Tell - the shooting of the apple related to the 'nod' of a head.⁴ The story is described as a 'ness' - its specificity has

⁴ According to *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* William Tell was the 'legendary national hero of Switzerland whose deeds appear to be an invention of the 15th century and are paralleled in numerous European myths and legends' (Evans 1981) Tell's successful shooting with a bow and arrow an apple from the head of his own son, when charged to do so by the King of Austria as punishment for an act of treason, led to a rising which eventually established the independence of Switzerland.

been lost and only a vague essence - a descriptive 'ness' remains. Yet the successful rejection of authority that Tell has come to symbolise in legend is only ambiguously accepted by Hejinian in her apparent rejection of the stasis that its cliched status has also come to represent. In being thought and said 'for a hundred years', so my reading of the poem implies, the legend has come to be emptied of meaning. Its complex and mythic relation to time and politics, and its existence as an imaginary or real event with actual players, are placed on a single plane. We should, so the poem suggests, think our way beyond the 'errors' of legend to the 'rank fissure up on the pit' to know what else such closed narratives have concealed and allowed to fester.

Later stanzas are more specific about what forms of organised knowledge are being surpassed through Hejinian's desire, in the poem, to record more faithfully the relationship between writing and memory. The diary, that most feminised and least public of genres and source of self-knowledge, is mocked for its limitations.

diary us a few hoops

hap as up-and-morrow

we lost the familiar stumbling blocks

who fill life with just one side of it (stanza 1)

Hejinian rejects the noun in favour of a verb - 'diary us a few hoops/ hap us up and morrow' - to emphasise the distinction between her active inscribing of self and the more stabilising self-narrative of the diarist. The 'familiar stumbling blocks', the conventional markers of self and narrative, have been 'lost' because they can relate only one side of life. *Writing is an Aid to Memory* is characteristic of Hejinian's intent to articulate the 'the ellipsis' which 'makes its promise leaving us to get out/ dreams think of how we thought/ fluster usually bright of water' instead of the solidity of the diary which offers only 'ruse views/ gulls puff' (stanza 2 and stanza 4).

Hejinian's attempt to mediate the tension between the circumstances which determine the subject and instances of subjective cognition is constructed as primarily textual. Her articulation of self depends for significance upon its manipulation of the generic conventions of self-narrative. It is these conventions that determine the 'definite limits' of meaning and reading that inform the subject's ability to place a communicable meaning upon the world. My contention is not that



Hejinian 'liberates' her writing from these limits, however, but that she seeks to make them visible as the structures which influence her *own* ability to place significance upon the authorial self. Therein lies the central assertion of this chapter: that Hejinian's writing complicates Barthes' notion of the 'writerly' text in order to find ways of articulating the actual writer's claims upon agency.

The first section in this chapter does two things. Firstly, it examines the very different ways in which three Hejinian texts position the reader. I contend that in Hejinian's work the relationship between reader and author is explicitly foregrounded as a thematic, rather than purely formal, construct. I argue that in these poems the reader is positioned by a metatext rather than by the formal experimentation of the writing. Secondly, my reading of the subject positions created in Hejinian's writing is contrasted against the political claims made on behalf of these positions in the critical response that her work received. This contrast highlights the limiting assumptions which support these claims. Chief among these is the notion that experimental writing and autobiography are necessarily mutually exclusive, and that the former occupies a privileged space for challenging the ideological assumptions of the latter. The second section demonstrates this point by examining contemporary research which complicates the assumption that autobiography requires the kind of 'passive reading' implicitly attributed to it by some critiques of Hejinian's work. This argument is demonstrated in my reading of *My Life*, which, I contend, is as concerned with renarrativising the subject as it is with deconstructing it. The relationship between the work of Jean Francois Lyotard and Hejinian is invoked as suggestive of the significance which Hejinian assigns to her writing's refusal to settle within a single category of generic conventions, either those of autobiography or Language writing. This resistance is read as a strategy by which Hejinian aims to enact her struggle between experience and construction, between the claims of the world and the claims of the self; it allows her a way of negotiating her own sense of textual agency. I conclude the chapter with a reading of *Oxota* in which I contend that this textual agency actually directly seeks to minimise the liberatory positions offered to the reader in the text.

Section One. A Pause, A Rose, Something on Paper

Part One. Regenerating Genre

One of the central aims of the chapter, and indeed the thesis, is to critically examine the ways in which the ‘difficult’ text has been able to claim an active, politically efficacious, readership for itself. My interest has been in exploring, instead, the political implications of the positions seemingly offered to the reader by the text. Hejinian’s contention, that the meaning of the text is attributed not through an unlicensed ‘free-for-all’ but through precisely ‘defined limits’, suggests one way in which these positions can be analysed. The most obvious way to scrutinise the relationship between the reader and these ‘limits’ is through addressing the relationship between the text and what Frederic Jameson describes in *The Political Unconscious* as its ‘social contract’: its generic status (Jameson 1981, p.106). Cultural Studies discourses, in more recent attempts to account for the social and political significance of reading the literary text, have focused upon the significance of this contract. David Morley, for example, who drew upon Stuart Hall’s ‘Encoding/Decoding’ model of cultural consumption for his own ground breaking study of the *Nationwide* audience, has suggested that this model’s ability to allow the critic to ‘re-examine the notion of the way in which a particular text constructs its own internal reader’ relies upon an examination of the text’s relationship to *genre*.⁵ It is genre, Morley suggests, that constitutes a ‘set of rules for the production of meaning - rules governing the combination of signs into specific patterns which regulate the production of texts by authors and the reading of texts by an audience’ (Morley 1993, p.128 and p120).

Autobiography is the genre which Hejinian’s self-narrating writing most clearly and consistently draws upon.⁶ The ‘rules governing’ the way in which the reader combines its ‘signs into specific patterns’ appear to have been very clearly defined by twentieth century critical thought. Philip Lejeune’s now canonical definition of autobiography, for example, focuses precisely on the relationship between the reader and the writer. In ‘The Autobiographical Pact’

⁵ More recent commentators have since suggested some of the problems that this model of Stuart Hall’s may be encumbered with. See (Fiske 1987).

⁶ Autobiography and lyric poetry are not wholly distinct. Celeste Schenck has, for example, contended that autobiography and lyric poetry offer women similar textual possibilities, that both ‘record the negotiation of the female-self-in-process between the historical fact of displacement and the possibilities of textual self presence’ (Schenck 1988, p.286). It is precisely this type of negotiation that I am attributing to Hejinian’s expression of selfhood.

Lejeune suggested that autobiography was specifically based on a bargain between reader and writer in which the reader was promised by the writer to be told the truth about their lives (Lejeune 1989). The relationship between the reader and writer engendered by this pact is commonly understood to have been sanctioned by a position of authorial certainty. A Foucauldian reading of the genre, for example, stresses that it is a result of a process of self-policing that is made meaningful when others are forced to witness it.

What we have come to call truth or what a culture determines to be truth in autobiography, among other discourses, is largely the effect of a long and complex process of authorisation [] this way of contextualising autobiography reveals how intimately it is bound up in the cultural practices of policing and resistance is a kind of writing that is more frequently thought of as simply private (Gilmore 1994b, p 55 and p 56)

Autobiography is, in such a reading, dependent upon our belief in the author's ability to know, and be able to represent, the 'truth' about themselves. The ideological weight that such a belief carries obviously lends itself to the rhetoric of the individual. A rhetoric which has been identified as serving the needs of an autonomous American selfhood. Albert E. Stone's *Autobiographical Occasions and Other Narrative Acts: Visions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw*, for example, demonstrates how the democratic truism attributed to autobiography (anybody can participate in it) is necessarily linked to ideological notions of the striving individual (Stone, 1982, p 9)

My Life, Lyn Hejinian's 'autobiography', can be most clearly read as resisting these notions of authorial certainty. The text develops Hejinian's resistance to referential narratives of containment or chronological ordering in constructing a subject reliant on the fluid and continual movement of self through time and language. The results are poems perspicacious in their ability to depict the way in which an individual is drawn from conflicting and continually shifting threads of narrative, memory, beliefs and language that have only a relational meaning.⁷ *My Life* combines a child's sense of the overwhelming and yet very intimate world, 'What one passes in the Plymouth', with a more sophisticated, and yet never finite, philosophical self reflection about the

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There are two versions, Hejinian re-wrote the original 1978 version of the poem eight years later with an additional eight stanzas, to continue the correspondence between stanzas and years of her life. Citations are from this latter version.

relationship between the individual and meaning - 'to follow the progress of ideas, or that particular line of reasoning, so full of surprises and unexpected correlations, was somehow to take a vacation' (Hejinian 1987b, p 10) In this example Hejinian links the holidaying child's palpable sense of surprise and discovery, 'were we seeing a pattern or merely an appearance of small white sailboats on the bay' with the adult's pleasure in the unexpected twists of knowledge delivered by sustained and dextrous thought This constant ability of the poetry to make manifest, and exploit, the metonymical networks of language - 'metonymic thinking moves [] restlessly, through an associative network, in which associations are compressed rather than elaborated' - seems powerful evidence of the multiple and simultaneous narratives of self upon which we impose a constraining uniformity in more conventional instances of self-narrative (Hejinian 1989, p 38).⁸ Far from reinforcing an authorial position of privileged self knowledge, the poem's opening up of representation to their multiple significations explicitly foregrounds its dependency upon the reader's ability to provide textual and narrative cohesion Commentators have noted the way in which frequently repeated phrases such as 'a pause, a rose, something on paper' (which is the opening coda to the poem) work within the overarching structure of the poem to create an authorial narrative for the reader to work within Marjorie Perloff, for example, suggests that 'the recurrence of these leitmotifs [] has an oddly reassuring effect It is the poet herself who is pausing to put "something on paper", something that is her written offering, her "rose". In the course of *My Life* these phrases become markers, signposts around which much that is confusing in one's life can coalesce' (Perloff 1991, p 167) These frequent phrases, which form a kind of metacommentary for the text, can be most obviously read as seeking to collapse the division between the self-consciousness of the writer and that of the reader to call us back to the central ways in which we attribute meaning to what we are reading

The active reader is thus not simply a tangential result of Hejinian's difficult linguistic innovation or oblique theoretical referencing, but their activity is signalled in quite knowing ways This construction of the reader's identification with the writer also attempts to produce a sense of self identification - they are encouraged to be the writer that they are in the process of identifying with The implications of this sense of joint production is explicitly promoted the text

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David Jarraway's *My Life Through the Eighties* The Exemplary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E of Lyn Hejinian' demonstrates the importance of Hejinian's employment of the possibility of metonymy in her desire to 'remain faithful to the opens of textual production, and that "openness" previously, which promises to extend it to infinity' (Jarraway 1992)

expressively states that ‘A pause, a rose, something on paper’ is ‘a way of saying, I want you too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together, sharing a point of view - so that we are “coming from the same place” ’ (p.21). The relationship between the reader and the text is not the result of the reader’s own creativity in the face of textual difficulty but is a tension which the text is structured around acknowledging and furthering. It is a tension that is thematically foregrounded in ways which can be explicitly related to the aims of Language writing’s desired reading ‘mode’.

Other poems written in the period in which the two versions of *My Life* were produced attest to the specificity of the intimate relationship with the reader that *My Life* was predicated upon. ‘Redo’ and ‘The Guard’ - both published in 1984, the mid point between the first and second *My Life* - are also concerned with the act of self narrative. However, the tone of introspection that these two texts are characterised by defines the relationship with the reader in entirely different ways to *My Life*.⁹ ‘The Guard’ seems to represent the construction of the written self as an act of hesitant authority against a threatening and nihilistic world.¹⁰ The first stanza is poignant and foreboding as it rails, almost lingeringly, on the vague malevolence of transient meanings.

The landscape is a moment of time

that has gotten in position

Why not arrive until dawn. Cannot be taught

and therefore cannot be

what human cunning can conceal (Hejinian 1994, p.11)

The link between being ‘taught’ and the potential for human cunning, in other words between knowledge and its possibilities for a dangerous power, informs the tone of the poem. This first stanza ends by considering the presence of the self within such an inhospitable climate.

⁹ *The Guard* was originally published in 1984 by Hejinian’s own Tuumba Press and *Redo* in the same year by Saltworks Press. My page numbers refer to the anthologised versions of these poems which appear in the *The Cold of Poetry*, published by Sun and Moon in 1994.

¹⁰ Hejinian herself has suggested that ‘The Guard’ represents the ambivalences of her prioritising of language as key to experience. For Hejinian the poem is a reminder that language induces not only a ‘yearning for comprehension, for perfect and complete expression’ but also ‘guards against it’ (Hejinian 1984).

The rubber dawn and its expense.
The silence of the sensible horizon is intelligibly
awkward. The skin containing character.
Some things slip through the mesh
and others go rotten. Nothing
distresses me exactly.
I sleep with self styled procrastination.
Whose next day I don't know personally. (p.14)

The apparent ability to contain an identity is placed under pressure: it is only 'skin' that can contain the character. The inevitable and anonymous fragmentation of identity or meaning either slips away or putrefies, and yet even this cannot pierce the sense of emotional paralysis that informs this section of the poem - 'Nothing/ distresses me exactly'. The shattered self is not loaded here with the delightful and sensuous possibilities that characterise so much of *My Life*, but with an unlocatable sense of impotence.

People like the lock of a pattern. Nature
suggesting surveillance to parents.

But nature, exuberant...
but you...the wind is the oldest unabashed
...nowadays the need to travel is unpleasant...
the porosity of anything (p.23)

The poem's concern about the efficacy of language as a tool for liberation is apparently extended here to include the reader. Hejinian's hesitant response to her dark observation that nature is associated by parents with surveillance, rather than with exuberance, seems to include the reader, 'but you', and only the wind continues unabashed. The 'porosity' of anything, what in *My Life* was a pleasurable 'permeable constructedness', is seen in this poem to be unhappily uncertain: '...nowadays the need to travel is unpleasant'. Stasis seems a preferable alternative to the risks that openness, 'porosity', can bring.

'Redo' shares this quietly anxious tone. It is similarly characterised by consternation over the confusions with which the subject articulates and projects a sense of self to its audience.

A nameless crowd (I wonder whose) reminds me
of unmortared masonry. Tomorrow is the same
day in my experience. But sleep
can only give us the pleasure of pleasure

if we're awake (Hejinian 1994, p.92)

The paradoxical nature of self-conscious reflection - if we are thinking about something are we still living it or do we interrupt it? - becomes rather insidious in this citation. The anxiety of the 'nameless crowd', who threaten to topple like 'unmortared masonry', is associatively connected to the inability of the mind to release itself, which makes even the pleasure of sleep questionable. The poem seems explicitly reflective about what it is that *My Life's* projection of self achieves. In the first stanza the poem suggests that 'Her autobiography / is ninety percent picaresque.// While thus moralising all we have done/ is shout/ the name of someone we know' (Hejinian 1994, p.91). A tension is created here between the poem's narrating impulse and its relationship with the reader who, the text seems to fear, may simply be deafened by the personalisation of the account: 'all we have done/ is shout/ the name of someone we know'.

This anxiety over the relationship between the reader of autobiography and the autobiographical writer is played out over and over again in this poem as it surfaces with references to the twin-texts that sandwich its publication - 'As for we who like to think logically - astonished !' (p.100). The inclusive simplicity of the 'original' line in *My Life* ('as for we who "love to be astonished"') becomes something more coldly intellectual. The astonishment is turned against itself; the poem mocks its own claims to embrace the reader. It appears, at times, to scrutinise and worry over the impossible assurances and the inevitable limitations that autobiography brings.

Commitment ? that sort of autobiography.

Confession ? that sort of misunderstanding

- like infidelity to an impossible task.

Who can take it over ? It is as moral
for night to fall. (p.96)

The relationship with the reader, that I have suggested *My Life* constructed, is represented here as quixotically untenable. The poem is unable to be faithful to an attempt at either autobiography or confession as it knows them to be futile. It almost falls into a kind of shamed solipsism, as if realising that in breaking down and complicating its own assumptions then it breaks down and complicates the relationship with the reader, leaving the writer alone. Moreover, the poem also knows that it shares this control over the meaning that the poem finally delivers with the reader who it cannot control. Toward the end of the poem Hejinian writes 'People / think I have written an autobiography/ but my candour is false (I hear a few shots slouching at my realism)' (p.105). It is as if the limitations of autobiography are being acknowledged, that we as readers are being warned that we cannot trust the apparent candour of *My Life*. At the same time the poem seems to be aware of the reader as an adversarial presence - that the reader versed in the tenets of experimental writing will be critical of the realism that either autobiography, in the case of *My Life*, or poetic self analysis, in the case of 'Redo', seem to demand.

The reader is positioned by these two poems as a force to be viewed warily. Their intervention in the creation of textual meaning is treated with suspicion. This apparent meta-commentary upon poetical autobiography suggests a sensitivity in the text to the reading assumptions and contexts in which it is being read. 'Redo' and 'The Guard' actually seem to suggest that Hejinian's 'rejection of closure' is as potentially dangerous or threatening as it is emancipatory: the loss of authorial control seemingly implied by the active reader is not viewed as emancipatory. These interpretations reinforce my reading of *My Life* that suggests that the reader-relationship depicted by the text is as much a result of explicit theme as it is of difficult form. This relationship between the reader and the writer seems to be a site of some contention for Hejinian, as she strives to promote it but is also aware of its equivocations, of the risks to self, that such practices may also involve.

Section One. Part Two

Reading in the Language Mode.

The emerging body of Hejinian criticism has, however, focused not upon 'Redo' and 'The Guard's' wary desire for a textual self but upon *My Life*'s more confident manipulation of this construction. Criticism has centrally stressed the political implications of Hejinian's subversion of the generic conventions of autobiography. A central critical approach has stressed Hejinian's use of specifically feminised/ feminist tropes that are perceived to subvert the more masculinist assumptions of the genre. The critic Hilary Clark, for example, suggests that Hejinian renarrates herself 'specifically [to] show us the ways by which a woman writer remembers when she challenges dominant discursive practices and traditional notions of what is significant and worthy of inclusion in the writing of a life' (Clark 1991, p.316). Similarly, Craig Douglas Dworkin has argued that the ' "small squares" of Hejinian's fragmented text correspond to the patchwork aesthetic that some critics have also identified with women's writing'. This fragmented style, Dworkin goes on to argue, allows the reader to 'luxuriate in the *romance of the vanished*' rather than 'long for the telos of a unified, encapsulated story' (Douglas Dworkin 1995, p.67 and p.79).

The activity of this liberated reader, luxuriating in textual absences, is given even greater significance in the critical readings which Howe's writing received from writers associated with the Language mode. An essay on *My Life* by the critic Juliana Spahr couples Hejinian's subversion of autobiography with the significance of her authorial deconstructions. Spahr begins by suggesting that Hejinian is able to formulate the types of postmodern political agency that have been described by theorists such as Judith Butler: 'instead of holding onto given categories of subjectivity for the sake of political agency, Butler urges an examination of the systems that have constructed these categories [...] Her answer is that the political and agency are the "effort to resignify the subject as a site of resignification" [...] Hejinian's work is in many ways an active resignification' (Spahr 1996, p.144). Spahr's approach here is broadly analogous to my own, in that she is bringing to bear postmodern feminist theories of the self onto Language poetry's treatment of the same.

Spahr extends these claims to agency, however, when she argues that *My Life's* attempts to conjoin the writer and the reader has fundamental political implications for the latter and that 'ignoring readerly agency has been a frequent limitation in the way in which literary criticism figures the relationship between the postmodern and the political'. Hejinian's text overcomes these aporias of politicising the postmodern, Spahr suggests, by constructing a 'model of subjectivity [which] denies essentialist notions of the subject at the same time that it *cultivates readerly agency* by opening up an *anarchic space for reader response*' (p.148, italics mine). Spahr proposes that the active reading, which the innovative text exacts, provides a 'noncolonized space' in which the reader is equipped to 'more fully exercise agency when encountering the totalitarian technologies' of an existence which is 'continually defined by, and interacts with, the flickering mirage of television images, the almost continual presence of advertising, and the confusion between the real and the unreal as exemplified by advances in virtual reality'. Spahr finally concludes, however, by acknowledging that these utopian possibilities are difficult to translate into more literal political concerns: 'The issue remains whether this agency can be transformed into some other, socially reformative mode. I cannot answer this question or provide empirical evidence of a concrete social change stemming from a reader-centred work' (p.155).

For a writer with Spahr's impeccable pedigree, a graduate of SUNY Buffalo's poetics writing programme (upon which experimental poets such as Charles Bernstein and Susan Howe teach) and a rising star of experimental writing (her text *Response* was selected by Lyn Hejinian to be one of the winners of 1995 National Poetry series) this reading contains few surprises. It appears to be an eloquent articulation of what I have described in my opening chapter as Language writing's poetic mode. A poetic mode, which, I also argued, began producing precisely this type of uncomplicated reading as it became represented within the academy. It is no surprise, then, that Spahr's essay is comfortably lodged in the very mainstream journal *American Literature*. This article also demonstrates the types of assumptions about reading that this mode is dependent upon, and which I am attempting to critique. Spahr's difficulty in linking the 'readerly agency' fostered by Hejinian's writing to a 'socially reformative mode' springs, I would want to argue, from her apparent failure to recognise that the 'uncolonized space' from which Hejinian's text can be 'actively' read is actually the space of *Language writing's poetic mode itself*. Further, her desire for an 'anarchic' reading space, in which we can be free to engage with the text unbounded by 'potentially colonizing' reading assumptions, is quixotic in its implied desire to be free of the

politics of a discursively produced subject position. By failing to interrogate the politics of the reading that she is performing Spahr naturalises the assumptions about reading and writing that lie behind Language writing's own poetic mode. She assumes, for example, that Language writing and autobiography are mutually exclusive and that the former occupies a privileged space for challenging the ideological assumptions with which the latter is assumed to be complicit. What remains unexamined in these assumptions are the actual institutional and social spaces which these writing practices occupy.

In the following section I want to challenge the types of assumptions that Spahr is making here, both about Hejinian's relationship to the active reader and about autobiography itself. I do this not only because, as my reading of 'Redo' and 'The Guard' should have suggested, I think that Hejinian's relationship to the rhetoric of the active reader is more complicated than Spahr's reading implies, but also because I think that the assumptions made about autobiography in Spahr's reading are misleadingly reductive. What I want to do in the next section is to examine contemporary theorisations of autobiography and then to place Hejinian's work in relation to these theories. I want to suggest that Hejinian's relationship to the 'active reader' of the Language mode is actually far more disruptive than Spahr's reading implies.

Section Two. Of Course I Wanted to be Real !

Part One. The Presumptive Reader.

Juliana Spahr's reading of Hejinian suggests that her work is remarkable for its ability to turn autobiography into a convincing response to the crisis facing the fragmenting subject of modernity.¹¹ However, much recent work on feminist autobiography seems similarly aware of the potential in examining the assumptions upon which the representations of experience and the self are founded. Sidonie Smith's work, for example, has celebrated autobiography as a site capable of politicising the needs of the postmodern feminist. Smith's rhetorically persuasive six point 'Autobiographical Manifesto' is suggestive of the possibilities that the generic appropriation of the form might contribute to a feminist strategy, specifically, to a strategy that sought to ground its empowerment of identity in a challenge to the stability of the category that did not result only in an 'endlessly deferred point of departure' (Smith 1993, p.156).

The trajectory of its mappings must be considered in the specific cultural locations of the women who issue the manifesto's call to action.[...] the manifesto engages directly the cultural construction of identities and their sanctioned and legitimated performances, engaging the systems of identification pressing specific collocations on specific persons [...] it insists on new interpretations, as a means of wresting power, resisting universalised repetitions that essentialise, naturalize, totalise the subject. (p.160 and p.163)

In Smith's hands autobiography becomes an example of the type of locally specific and constructivist/ postmodern strategy of self that, as I have already noted, is particularly pertinent for describing the work of women Language writers.

Juliana Spahr is right, however, when she suggests that such strategies can fail to acknowledge the importance of the activity of the reader (consumer or viewer) in realising these

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Spahr suggests that feminism and postmodernism are caught in a 'double bind' with regard to the possibilities of autobiography. She suggests that 'it has been common to argue that the literature we call postmodern - because of its delegitimisation of essentialist concepts of the subject - denies agency, thereby denying the possibility of political action to those subjects who most need agency to overcome social inequalities. One the other hand, those who have defended the necessity of a postmodern feminism have tended to ignore or de-emphasise the autobiographical form.' (p.140) I would want to suggest that recent works such as Leigh Gilmore, Kathleen Ashley and Gerald Peter's *Autobiography and Postmodernism* have gone some way in meeting this

aims. Although Sidonie Smith, for example, is aware of the dialogism that her venture implicitly requires when she suggests that her aim is to 'explore how the excluded and colourful have used autobiography as a means of "talking back" ' 'When these subjects enter the scene of autobiographical writing, they engage dialogically with the cacophonous voices of cultural discourse, what Bakhtin calls productive and unpredictable heteroglossia' she does not seem to allow for these multitudinous voices of cultural discourse to include that of the reader realising the text (p 10 & p 21). The relationship with the reader, and their importance to the political praxis of the text, remains untheorised in Smith's postmodernist appropriation of autobiography.¹²

Criticism which *does* attempt to account for the activity of the reader of the genre actually appears suspicious of the necessity of postmodern theorising at all. Autobiography is read as a shared site of empowerment for both reader and writer. Julia Swindell's edited collection *The Uses of Autobiography*, for instance, is premised on the conviction that 'to articulate the experience of oppression first hand is a precondition for social and political change [...] collective testimony is one of the best means of achieving this, so that neither author nor reader sees the autobiographical project as matter of individualism' (Swindell 1995, p. 213).¹³ In this case the relationship between the reader and writer of the autobiography is dependent upon the construction of a subject position which can allow for the shared identification that the narrative possibilities of collective self-empowerment offers.¹⁴

Liz Stanley's sociologically-driven evaluation of autobiographies suggests that this reliance on referentiality and identity, on assuming a common reading ground between the reader and

shortfall

¹² Betty Bergland's essay 'Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the Other', for example, employs Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to describe the existence of the subject of autobiography in the time/ space of the literary text. The political impetus of this activity resides with the construction of an identity by a marginalised author - rather than in any type of Bakhtinian shared dialogue between the author and the reader. The 'other' that Bergland's chronotopic analysis gives voice to is that of silenced America. 'The pattern for imaging of the human being in American literature and autobiography - intrinsically chronotopic - excludes the Other. A chronotopic analysis, especially in the context of cultural discourses on race, gender, and ethnicity, suggests ways to interrogate subject positions elevated in the culture that ensure certain social and judicial relations' (Bergland, 1994, p. 158-9).

Although other feminists have explored the potential for a dialogic reading of a text that acknowledges the reader as part of its 'power dynamic' - for example, Lyn Pearce's *Reading Dialogics* and Anne Herrmann's *The Dialogic and Difference 'An'Other Woman' in Virginia Woolf and Christa Woolf* - this has yet to include an analysis of autobiography.

¹³ Swindell was a contributor to *Interpreting Women's Lives*, edited by the Personal Narratives Group. This group share Swindell's conviction that autobiography is crucial to the development of a feminist awareness.

¹⁴ The argument that women's autobiography provides an antidote to narratives of individualism has also been forcefully put in Susan Stanford Friedman's essay 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice' published in the collection edited by Shan Benstock, *The Private Self* (Friedman 1988).

writer, is necessary to understanding the politics of the reading practices which make autobiography so influential. Stanley suggests that the theoretical trend among some feminist autobiographers to challenge the basis of this common ground is part of the construction of a 'meta-narrative' of academic autobiographical conventions that 'systematically creates subordinate voices, in which only particular kinds of theoretical readings are provided, in which reading is treated as a transparent and objective activity, in which only particular kinds of autobiographies are subject to inquiry and inclusion' (Stanley 1992, p.101).¹⁵ In place of this approach Stanley theorises the importance of understanding the activity of what she describes as the 'presumptive', potentially subversive and always challenging, reader.

The presumptive reader is a common reader who both does and does not know her place: she rejects her removal from the act of reading in canonical writing, and she knows her centrality to the system of production and consumption of written lives, for without her this dynamic market system would not exist [...] The common reader recognises the power and importance of referentiality in autobiography writing and is capable of reading in an active way, recognising both the frailty of the self and its constitution in and through everyday behaviours, events, persons, of the life. (p.121)

Stanley, in acknowledging that some negotiation of meaning is implicit in all readings, is suggesting that referentiality and identity may be political and rhetorical devices that readers respond to in very specific ways. Hence, the reader of autobiography, in this reading, does not necessarily naively believe that referentiality allows access to the 'truth'. They do not necessarily construct what Language writing's mode implies is a reifying faith in the transparency of language which is complicit with the systems of exchange upon which a largely oppressive capitalism is founded. Rather, the reader of the autobiography knows that referentiality is part of the convention that they are reading, perhaps, even for *which* they are reading. Not only can all reading be performative, therefore, but the discursive concealment of this performativity may have more to do with a politically strategic reading practice than with an affirmation of an essentialist

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Stanley is specific about the canon to which she is referring - Estelle Jelinek's *Women Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980), Donna Stanton's *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography* (1984), Shari Benstock's *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (1988) and Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schneck's *Life Lines: Theorising Women's Autobiography* (1988)

or oppressive articulation of identity. As Philip Lejeune has suggested, the impossibility of autobiography does not make its existence any the less likely or compelling.¹⁶

However appealing Stanley's model of reading may be to many literary feminist's need for pragmatism, it still comes dangerously close to reproducing the totalising assumptions about reading (albeit from the opposing viewpoint) that I am attempting to critique. What is required, of course, is a more specific analysis of how the relationship between autobiography and reading has actually been constructed. John Eakin's works on autobiography are illuminating in this respect. His 1985 work *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention* suggests that autobiography is now seen as the act of inventing, rather than revealing, the self. He suggests that far from invalidating the relationship to empirical reality that the reader may want to invest in the text, that an acknowledgement of invention actually allows the reader to explore the texts and narratives that construct our sense of the self and its relationship to the external and referenced world.

I shall argue that autobiography is not fixed but is an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation and, further, that the self that is at the centre of autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive construct. [...] Adventurous twentieth century autobiographers have shifted the ground of our thinking about autobiographical truth because they readily accept the proposition that fictions and fiction making are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life. [...] They no longer believe that autobiography can offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past; instead it expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself. (Eakin 1985, p.2-5)

Eakin's point, delivered in the early eighties, obviously shares much with Hejinian's questioning of the origins of the self-authenticating subject of autobiography.

Eakin's more recent work, the 1992 *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, reconsiders the ease with which his earlier work dismissed the importance of the referent for the

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Lejeune backtracked from his soundly structuralist theories somewhat in his later works. A second edition of 'The Autobiographical Pact', for example, acknowledges the ambiguous influence of Roland Barthes upon him: 'I believe that when I say 'I' it is I who am speaking: I believe in the holy ghost of the first person. [...] But it also happens that I believe the contrary, or at least claim to believe it.[...] Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject - it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this

autobiographer. Although Eakin still acknowledges that what I am describing as performativity (he describes as invention) is at the basis of the autobiographical self he now suggests that we need to examine why this has not resulted in a more wholesale elision of autobiography and fiction as genres. Eakin's central thesis in this work is that an 'existential imperative, a desire to assert the distinctiveness and the continuity of one's subjectivity (whether made or discovered)' leads authors to continue to produce autobiography. Eakin suggests that although we know that our sense of self is a constant process of recreation this does not necessarily mean that narrating this sense of self has become meaningless, or a process that re-essentialises an originary expressive subject. It is not simply that autobiography remains reliant on theories of selfhood and language that have become increasingly discredited but that this process of discrediting has itself simplified the issues involved: 'poststructuralist criticism of autobiography characteristically - and mistakenly - assumes that an autobiographer's allegiance to referential truth necessarily entails a series of traditional beliefs about self, language and literary form' (p.30).

Other commentators have also attempted to theorise this anxiety about the relationship between authority and intention, or between fact and fiction, in terms of the role that the reader plays in constructing meaning.

If autobiography contains and is what it purports to convey, then it is pointless to worry what an author must attempt or achieve in order to attain the ends of autobiography. It is a mistake even to talk about ends at all from the perspective of the writer of the text [...] It is not a mistake to talk about these things from the problems of the perspectives of the reader, however [...] it is the reader who is forced to decipher issues of priority, intentionality, selfhood. (Loesberg 1981, p.182)

Loesberg's suggestion, that it is irrelevant to worry about an authorial attempt at intentionality in autobiography because this is a judgement that falls to the reader, oversimplifies the issues here. It ignores the significance of the *specific generic context* from which the reader is attempting to make the text legible: it reproduces the notion of the all-powerful reader that I have been attempting to challenge. Eakin counters these problems by suggesting that it is more helpful to understand referentiality as a strategic construct, that *both* author and reader *seek* in

autobiography, than as its point of closure or authority.

Although Loesberg deconstructs the critic's preoccupation with the relation to the text, with intention, with sincerity, this deconstruction in no way prevents such readings from being enacted. Instead this recurring pattern he detects in the criticism testifies to the fact that the critic's concern with reference, with the author's intention, is built into the very structure of autobiography that we experience when we read such texts. The conceptual impasse is inescapable, in doubling the autobiographer's quest for origins the reader begins to look like a dog chasing its own tails. [...] Loesberg's purpose in describing the reader's tendency to project into an extra textual realm of authorial intention is to warn against it. To the contrary, I am arguing that this proto-autobiographical tendency - *this identification of the reader with autobiographer - constitutes the fundamental motive for the reader's interest in autobiography itself* (Eakin 1992, p.35 and p.36, italics mine).

To recognise that referentiality and identification are a part of the contractual deal of the genre, are *conventions* (or motives, in Eakin's terms), is to place Julia Swindells' claims about autobiography, for example, in a new light. The construction of an empowering feminist identity which Swindells suggests that autobiography can provide does not necessarily imply the return of a universalised and oppressive subject position. Swindells' work can be read instead as part of a larger project that focuses on the cultural reasons why these reading practices remain in place and retain their validity.

The 'dutiful daughter' is a way of registering a shared experience and common condition of family duty and shared constraint. This then provides them with the basis for a political strategy, in which the writing and reading of autobiography becomes part of the process of consciousness-raising, whereby the *perception* of what constitutes a common condition begins to form a precondition for social and political change. (Swindells 1995, p.206)

As Swindells' italicised *perception* makes clear, a referential and mutual language can be a useful strategy rather than a return to a position of exclusionary authority which feminists can no longer afford to maintain.

Reading the political significance of Hejinian's deconstruction of authorial authority in *My Life* in this light, changes the terms of the debate. The significance of making the reader aware of the constructed and linguistic basis of subjectivity has a necessarily ambiguous political status: it is not clearly either emancipatory or repressive. If it is the case, as I have tried to demonstrate above, that the contemporary reader actually knows the conventions of autobiographical writing to be just that, and that, as a genre, it is defined in practice by its relationship to its own internal instabilities and contradictions, then it is possible to argue that the 'liberation' of the reader into this knowledge is a gain taken from ground that did not seem truly contested. The act of readerly participation that Juliana Spahr, for example, makes so much of, cannot simply be assumed to be emancipatory since the reader is potentially being placed under a fragmentary pressure by the writerly plurality upon which the production of the text's meaning is so self-consciously reliant. This decentring may actually issue a challenge to reading practices whose negotiated stability may have, in some circumstances, served very precise and emancipatory political purposes, rather than simply capital's demand for an exclusionary and repetitive narrative of individualism.

Section Two, Part Two.

Reasoning with Lyotard.

My return to an analysis of Hejinian's relationship to the generic conventions of *My Life* seems, then, to require me to be much more specific about exactly how (and where and by whom) this text is being read. What becomes clear when the text is approached in this way is that an inversion of the apparent terms by which this argument has been conducted is required. If I am arguing that the effects of genre are, in part, dependent upon the reading practices of the historically located addressee, then it should be stressed that the reader of *My Life* is not, primarily, the reader of autobiography at all, but is the reader of Language writing. Indeed, that this should be so is, as I argued in my first chapter, actually the *point* of Language writing's construction of a poetic mode.

A recent essay by the critic Christopher Beach reiterates this point with regards to Hejinian's writing. Beach contrasts Hejinian with the more mainstream poet Stephen Dobyns in order to

affirm the inextricability of Hejinian from her audience. He suggests that it is the readings and institutions that support the avant-garde text that maintain its radical and oppositional status.

What is most concretely manifested as a stylistic difference between poets and poetic schools (that is, mainstream, experimental) is equally a difference between larger social formations, between the ways in which “audiences are composed around individual authors” and in which they understand or interpret the “attitude toward reception” formulated by a particular poetic text (Beach 1997, p.45).¹⁷

The act of reading Hejinian’s text *outside* of the sanctioned institutions which support writers such as Dobyns, Beach argues (via Silliman), ‘indicates a resistance to entrenched ideological and aesthetic formations that have changed little over the past forty years [...] Hejinian wins no prizes and continues to publish in small presses because her poetry and that of other language poets can occupy no already created symbolic or discursive space’ (p.72).

Although Beach is sensitive to the problems of constructing a binarised relationship between Language writing and reading, and mainstream writing and reading, his central thesis still relies upon viewing Language writing as occupying an oppositional and uncommodified space. He defends the avant-garde status of Hejinian’s texts not because of the implications of its aesthetic forms ‘but in terms of its contestatory strategies and cultural positionings [...] there are real consequences to a poetic practice that attacks bourgeois notions of the subject and this subject’s relation to discursive formations’ (p.72). It is not the innovative style of Hejinian’s poetry *per se* that allows it its revolutionary status, Beach seems to be arguing, but its construction of an alternative reading community.

Before examining the way in which *My Life* relates to this reading community, however, I must suggest a caveat that further complicates the issues here. Beach’s contention, that Hejinian claims a radical audience space, (which is an obvious reiteration of Language writing’s aspirations for its poetic mode), does not actually seem to accurately describe how Hejinian’s writing is now being read. In claiming that Hejinian, like other Language poets, occupies ‘no already created symbolic or discursive space’ Beach seems to exaggerate their marginality. He suggests, for example, that Hejinian ‘wins no prizes’ when not only has she actually been the recipient of

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Citations in Beach’s text are from Ron Silliman’s *The New Sentence* (Silliman 1977, p. 31).

Fellowships from the California Arts Council and the National Endowment of the Arts and been awarded Leningrad's E-E Award for Independent Literature in 1989, but she has also *sat* on awards boards - both the NEA and the National Poetry Series. Likewise, he suggests that Hejinian 'continues to publish in small presses' whereas in reality she has, like so many other experimental and modernist poets, benefited from the increasing size of Douglas Messerli's Sun and Moon Press. Moreover, as the blurb inside the back cover of the second edition of *My Life* proclaims, her work has begun to be absorbed into the teaching academy: 'upon its first publication in 1980 *My Life* achieved international acclaim and quickly sold out. The second edition is now in its third print and is taught in high schools, colleges and universities throughout the United States and America'.

However, as essays such as Spahr's and Beach's demonstrate, even when Hejinian is being read *within* the academy, she is being read through the rhetoric of the Language mode, even though it is a mode that can not easily claim for itself a radical or counter-ideological space. Indeed, as my discussion of Hank Lazer's work suggested in chapter one, the reader of the Language text within an educational setting has to be informed of Language reading practices before the text can be meaningfully approached. It is the way in which Hejinian's writing negotiates this ambivalent positioning of the Language 'mode' (and what it implies for reading) that I want to finally examine in the last section of this chapter. I want to suggest that Hejinian's writing disrupts the mode within which it is most easily positioned; that her work is more complicated than simply an 'attack [on] bourgeois notions of the subject and this subject's relation to discursive formations' because it is also an attempt to *reconstruct* the subject in the face of these formations (Beach 1997, p.72).

This disruption, and reconstruction, is itself part of the inevitable fracturing of Language writing's claims for its own poetic mode. In *The Marginalisation of Poetry* Bob Perelman, for example, notes that the dichotomy between the 'rubble' of Jameson's snapped signifiers and the radical autonomy of Silliman's new sentence can no longer be usefully maintained. He suggests that Hejinian's autobiographical works mark a place where this tension can be felt, where the need to re-narrativise and (even re-identify) with the subject in the text asserts itself.

Let me conclude by reiterating that Jameson and Silliman both make wide theoretical claims; both are trying to fight the random parataxis of commodification with a more

committed, more oppositional parataxis - the positing of structural similarities across categories. While Hejinian's use of parataxis co-exists more amicably with narrative, her sentences are also committed to breaking up any smooth narrative plane. De-narrativisation is a necessary part of construction in these wider paratactic arguments. But this process needs to be seen for the combined reading and writing practice that it is: renarrativisation is also necessary. If we try to separate out the results of these practices, we are left with fictions, metaphorical condensations: the purely autonomous, politically efficacious new sentence on the one hand and the rubble of snapped signifying chains on the other (Perelman 1996, p.78).

It is the way in which Hejinian's renarrativisation actually *challenges* some of the central tenets of Language writing's early rhetorical claims, a process that Perelman seems to be alluding to here, that I want to now begin to explore.

My Life enacts this desire for narrative in its clear insistence that there is, or at least there is an acceptable desire for, a humanist or 'real' centre to the poem. It is this, the role of desire and the pleasure of identification that the text displays, that Hejinian's generic allegiance to autobiography most obviously demonstrates.

It is precisely a special way of writing
that requires realism. This will keep
me truthful and do me good. Across
the street in the pawing wind a herd
of clouds pastures in the vacant lot.
Night after night, in poetic society,
line gathering and sentence har -
vesting. Of course I wanted to be real ! Words are guards,
so words are wives. The story of the Emperor's New Clothes
is about mass delusion and the power of advertising (p.101)

This citation is taken from one of the additional eight stanzas which Hejinian wrote for the second edition of the poem and which are meant to represent the eight years of Hejinian's life that passed

between the two publications. Like much from these supplementary stanza's it can be read through its retrospective analysis of the effects which narrating her life, in *My Life*, has given to the poet. Hejinian is both admitting her desire for a sense of self and also acknowledging that the production of this 'realist' self is an effect of writing, one which is as much about form as innovation is. Far from decrying realism as naive or reactionary, then, this stanza elucidates its continued attractions and compares it to the poetic society, 'across the street', that is made to sound, with its 'pawing wind' and 'clouds pastures' almost sheeplike in its monotony. 'Of course', a narratorial voice sharply interjects, 'I wanted to be real !' Words share, the text then seems to immediately suggest, the same bad press as the stereotypical wife: their control over us prevents us from experiencing and exploring the freedom that we desire. Yet the irony that this enigmatic coupling is also steeped in (the reader knows Hejinian is unlikely to participate in such a cliched and sexist image of marriage) implies that this is an image of words or wives which is quite misplaced; that their apparently custodial role over us is something that we actually choose and find more pleasurable than its alternatives - that they are something that can allow us to be 'real'.

The simple finality of Hejinian's judgement on the children's story of the Emperor's New Clothes turns upon the same point of finely tuned irony. The fairytale *is* about 'mass delusion and the power of advertising' but to know only this is to forget that, as Hejinian suggests in the first of these final eight stanzas, 'We like the tailor and we like the child, but we do not like the naked emperor' (p.92). Hejinian does not simply reject the act of mass delusion - 'we like the tailor', because this is as enjoyable as the unmasking of delusion - 'we like the child'. What Hejinian seems to object to is the vanity of those who think that they can control these things, that they can be made this simple or stable - 'we do not like the Emperor.'

What Hejinian seems to be advocating in place of the Manichean either/or choice between recognising artifice or being seduced by mass delusion (and there is an obvious analogy here between the binarised construction of mainstream versus innovative poetics) are the intricacies and pleasures that exist within the place of tension between the two. *My Life* can be placed within the breach I have described in my first chapter. A breach that operates between the rhetoric of the active reader of the disruptive text, which dominated early Language writing, and the actual complications, and acts of re-narrativisation and re-identification, that the work of specific writers has involved. The subject that Hejinian renarrativises in her text challenges the assumptions of Language writing's politics because, like the 'perception' of commonality that Julia Swindells

ascribes to feminist autobiography, it is not based on the commodification or exclusions that have been associated with the narrative of the individual heroic self of American autobiography. Rather, the self in Hejinian's text is associated with pleasure, with play, with intimacy, and these things are represented as capable of isolating and understanding their own ideological implications, rather than being weighed down by them.

Hejinian's contradictory relationship to these generic conventions maybe theorised in potentially significant ways. In 'The Law of Genre' Derrida suggests that genre is useful because it allows for 'the identifiable recurrence of a common trait by which one recognises or should recognise, a membership in a class'. However, he also suggests that this central characteristic of genre can itself be defined only against the continual threat of its own negation. Genre is both an act of power, 'as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impunity, anomaly or monstrosity', and an acknowledgement of the inevitability that these norms will be disrupted, 'suppose the possibility for the condition of the law were the a priori of a counter law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order and reason?' (Derrida 1980, p.203-4). Derrida counters his own inability to decipher the status of Blanchot's *La Folie du Jour* by turning to the generic characterisations of the text: 'it is thus impossible to decide whether an event, account, account of an event or event of accounting took place [...] faced with this type of difficulty [...] one might be tempted to take recourse in the law or rights which govern the published texts' (p.204). For it is only these laws and rights that allow subversion, the anxiety Derrida ascribes to his own reading, to exist: the 'sophisticated transgressions, all the infinitesimal subversions that may captivate you are not possible except within this enclosure for which these transgressions and subversions moreover maintain an essential need in order to take place' (p.219).

Hejinian's simultaneous fulfilment and transgression of the diverse generic expectations of autobiography *and* Language writing may seek to make apparent the reader and writer's reliance upon this unreliable contractual relationship with genre. In a recent conference paper Hejinian seemed to suggest the significance that she thinks accrues in making manifest such tensions between reading/ writing positions. The paper, entitled 'Reason', explores a poetics that can retain political meaning in the face of the 'dilemmas' of a postmodern deconstruction. The phrase 'along comes something-- *launched in context*' threads throughout the paper as an echo of Hejinian's attempt to conjoin articulation and context in ways that can avoid both the emptiness of a

postmodern negativity and the positivist assumptions that have been constructed as the alternative. One way of reconciling this all too familiar tension, Hejinian suggests, is through the use of a 'reason' which can operate 'in the border between concepts -- and again between several interdependent pairs of concepts. *Reason* may even constitute such a border zone' (Hejinian 1998, p.1). For Hejinian the activity of reason makes our relationship with 'context' a continual and active process: 'context is a past with a future. That is the sense of the phrase *this is happening*. That is what gives us a sense of *reason*'. This action in itself allows for 'a way of knowing the world and others without seeking to reduce them to objects of knowledge' (p.6 and p.7).

In the footnotes to the written version of this paper Hejinian refers to the significance of Jean Francois Lyotard's work *The Differend* to the ideas being rehearsed within it. Lyotard's explication of the 'Differend', of 'phrases in dispute', elucidates the ideas discussed in Hejinian's paper in slightly less abstract ways. Central to Lyotard's thesis in this text is the conviction that an articulation, a 'phrase', cannot be re-presented so much as re-enacted: it has a singularity that is not reproducible. The meaning of the phrase 'even the most ordinary one, is constituted according to a set of rules (its regimen). There are a number of phrase regimens [...] Phrases from heterogeneous regimes cannot be translated from one into the other' (Lyotard 1988, p.xii). These phrase regimens - or genres as they are later referred to - provide the medium through which phrases can be meaningfully enacted, connected to each other and through this to their context: 'reality is not what is "given" to this or that "subject", it is a state of the referent (that about which one speaks) which results from the effectuation of establishment procedures, defined by a unanimously agreed-upon protocol' (p.4).

There exists, however, no meta-language between these different genres that can order their various functions, so they exist in a state of tension, each competing for the authority to dictate the meaning of the phrase in question: 'there are stakes tied to genres of discourse. When these stakes are attained, we talk about success. There is conflict, therefore. The conflict, though, is not between humans or between any other entities; rather these result from phrases. [...] No matter what its regime, every phrase is in principle what is at stake in a difference between genres of discourse' (p.137-138). The differend is Lyotard's description for the point at which the continual friction between phrase regimes becomes visible. It is the point at which the 'action' of context is made manifest, it thus 'provides a mechanism of description that will allow the event to be presented in its singularity rather than suppressed in re-presentation' (Readings 1991, p.108). For

Lyotard, art is significant because it can 'bear witness to the differend', it can make apparent the instability of genre.

When Cezanne picks up his paintbrush, what is at stake in painting is put into question; when Schonenburg sits at his piano, what is at stake in music, when Joyce grabs hold of his pen, what is at stake in literature. Not only are new strategies for "gaining" tried out, but the nature of the "success" is questioned [...] A painting will be good (will have realised its ends, have come near them) if it obliges the addressee to ask about what it consists in. Everything is political if politics is the possibility of the differend on the occasion of the slightest linkage. (p.139)

By questioning the status of meaning then art gives rise to the possibility of the 'differend', to the possibility of an active meaning that does not attempt to reconcile itself within a single phrase regime but can acknowledge that it exists in a state of irreconcilable tension.

Lyotard's 'differend' functions like Hejinian's 'reason': both operate by making explicit the process of continual struggle, the uncertain borders, through and against which meaning is made. Neither seeks resolution because to do so would be to privilege one phrase regime over another, would be to lose the dynamism of movement that context demands. In terms of my contentions about Hejinian's work this definition of 'reason' functions as an alternative description of the struggle between experience and construction that I have attributed to her work. It can be used to describe her negotiation of the contradictory narratives of agency and of determination that dominate contemporary thought. What I want to do in the rest of the chapter is to explore how Hejinian's later work enacts the 'differend' in politically significant ways. What I want to particularly highlight is what this enactment means for the way in which the reader is constructed by this writing.

Conclusion. 'Too Soon for Song'

I want to conclude this chapter by examining the ways in which Hejinian's later work has used this irreconcilable tension between different phrase regimes to articulate, and to come to terms with, an experience of profound cultural dislocation. *Oxota*, published in 1991, was written as an account of the seven trips, including two lengthy solo visits, that Hejinian has made to the Soviet Union. Although, like much of her work, this text is explicit about the significance of its generic status, the genre being explored is not autobiography but the novel form: it is, its subtitle announces, 'A Short Russian Novel'. The novel form used is specifically derived from Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. The canonical status of this text in Russian literature cannot be overestimated. It 'stands in a proud position at the very head of modern Russian literature, first born in the grand series of nineteenth century realist novels for which that culture is so highly esteemed [...] Any educated Russian will tell you that Pushkin is the father of their literature [...] he or she will probably add that *Eugene Onegin* is his greatest work' (Briggs 1992, p.1).

In the most superficial sense Hejinian was using this work to knowingly borrow aspects of the definitive literary 'Russian-ness' that it has accrued as, in attempting to describe the specificity of her experience of Russia, it became apparent to her that her interest in Anglo-American literary forms of self-reflection was inappropriate. In an interview published in 1996 Hejinian describes her reasons for using the verse form of *Eugene Onegin*: 'it seemed like the perfect vehicle for what I was trying to do - it is concise (elegant even) but allows room for speculation and digression. And it rhymes with Pushkin's Russian work, which I wanted to imitate in other ways as well - by including social commentary, self-examination, literary discussion, by writing a "comedy of manners", and all the while indulging in metaphysics' (Hejinian 1996c, p.129). The scrupulous observation of social mores that the formal and thematic structure of *Eugene Onegin* was seen to allow for is heightened in *Oxota* by a self-conscious drawing upon broader Russian literary tropes. These tropes were taken not only from the written literary tradition of Pushkin but from the anecdotal imaginary of Russian companions: 'When I mentioned to Russian friends that I was going to write a Russian novel, they understood that this was a trope but they also wanted to make sure I included the appropriate and accurately Russian elements. So they told me many stories, true and apocryphal - but all of them typically Russian stories that "had" to be included in a Russian novel' (p.129).

This novel, which is written without the familiar frameworks of narrative or even punctuation, is held together by these ‘typically Russian stories’, by a record of the activities and conversations of named protagonists, and by exhaustive descriptions of an immediate environment. These three things, although in quite different ways, place the book firmly within its complicated historical context as each registers the ambivalences of Russia’s reaction to the advance of the dual forces of Glasnost and Perestroika. What I am particularly interested in examining is the way in which Hejinian finds meaning for herself in relation to this context.

The comic book figure of the ‘colonel’, for example, plays a ubiquitous role in Russia’s urban myths ‘because’, Hejinian suggested in the 1996 interview, ‘so many of the men in the generation just before mine were in the military and ended up as colonels’ (p.129). The colonel is used as a recurring narrative motif that marks the uncertainties of a changing social order. He is a ‘sentimental and duckfooted’ character, he represents a benign image of the ineptness of the Russian military. He tells his wife in Chapter Twelve, for example, that ‘they were cutting his pay to/ cover the cost of a panzer tank he’d lost in a manoeuvre’ (Hejinian 1991b, p11 and p.22). The descriptions of his debasement appear to be nostalgic for a fading status quo. His sense of guilelessness is reinforced as most of his interactions focus, in an avuncular way, upon his ability to respond to the needs of children. One story - interspersed over three chapters - features him watching a porcelain washtub descending an escalator. The story, in a way familiar to other accounts, details his increasing passivity.

But what of the intolerable bathos of the colonel

The washtub slipped

Momentous shift

This was a crime in life now substantiated by a crime in art

A nationalist was going by a guise - the same quivering

the washtub idle lightened sped

items rise, ripen, and must fall

The washtub overtook the colonel (p.49)

The enigmatic description of the washtub as an item that is associated with the flux of change, it will ‘rise, ripen and must fall’, also seems to underline, as it physically overtakes him, the receding

authority of the colonel. His bathetic narrative in this excerpt is juxtaposed against a more malevolent image of rising power, the 'nationalist [...] going by a guise'.

The fear of violence, nationalism and anti-Semitism, that this episode seems more broadly linked to in the text, is given a more explicit grounding in the narrative of the character Gavronsky, which is similarly strung throughout various chapters of the novel. Gavronsky is a 'real' person, an associate of the narrator's friends, and his uneasy relationship with the changing political climate of the country is consequently described more candidly. He is a painter who is stabbed by a 'nationalist' activist. The obscure events surrounding the stabbing (the motive, for example, is never made wholly clear), the ineffectual police investigation and, finally a hundred pages later, the solving of the crime by his mother and friend Katya are presented as indicative of Russia's growing fear of lawlessness: 'On Gerstsena where Gavronsky lay awkward guys in boots were/ pretending to investigate [...] Katya called to say that Gavronsky has muttered that like Trotsky/ he would die for three days' (p.54- p.55).

Gavrosnky's aggrandising and erroneous prediction of his own death suggests another narrative of Russian life which, although given but a bare mention in this particular saga, is thematically significant. As Gavronsky slowly convalesces, his wife Gavronskaya, emerges as a character and in Chapter 110, entitled 'Repairs to the Painter's Studio', the different social roles occupied by these two characters is made plain: 'Gavronsky's studio was to be seized but old/ Gavronskaya was out hunting' (p.125). The notion of the woman as 'hunter', as provider, against the odds, of food, is repeated constantly in the novel.

The title of the book means in Russian 'the hunt' and Hejinian's descriptions of domestic hardship makes it clear that the battle against the scarcity of consumables - of paper, of chicken, of chairs - is not experienced as discomfort so much as an organising principle of life, 'the word *hunt* is not the shadow of an accident / That hunger had no exotic antecedent', that places a more fundamental set of priorities upon Hejinian's concern with the phenomenological (p.150).

Over the years I have conspired - many plots resulting in no

US Soviet anthologies

I've smelled the cabbage - to prepare the salad you crush it in
your hands

I've smelled the wet, the bed - the conspiratorial tone and leg

and wool blanket (p.37)

Most obviously these types of descriptions further demonstrate Hejinian's ability to render the mundane significant through her painstaking attention to the ways in which the material or tactile - the smell of the blanket, the feel of the salad - are actually a necessary part of the grander conceptual and political consciousness that failed plots and conspiratorial tones require.

However, these meticulous descriptions of food, cooking, flats and streets also signify a more complex relationship between Hejinian and the changing culture within which she is immersed.

Slivers of meat whittled from a frozen slab stored on the
windowsill

But with an incomplete gesture an unfinished phrase

We are among things on which reality has been slowly settling
and is then dusted away

An hour after power soup, pieces of an unfamiliar fish and
pickles scattered over rice

[...]

They are enclosed in such simple understanding that going
out right then for milk involved an unintelligible belief in
everything

I simply couldn't manage the incorporation of what I know -
or was in the process of knowing (p.22)

The fusing of the quotidian and the conceptual that is so integral to Hejinian's writing - 'they are enclosed in such simple understanding that going / out right then for milk involved an unintelligible belief in/ everything' - is placed under strain in this text, 'I simply couldn't manage the incorporation of what I know'. It is as if the narrator is relying on the knowable knowledge of frozen meat, rice, and pickle, to grasp what can't be so easily known by, or about, the culture which she is describing. The minutiae of life is focused upon because it both registers a sense of alienation and, so I am contending, offers a route by which this alienation can be overcome, by which Hejinian will be able to complete the gesture or finish the phrase.

The association in Hejinian's writing between her visits to Russia and her awareness of the cultural specificity of her own assumptions about personhood features frequently in her writing of the early nineties. In her essay 'The Person and Description', for example, she opens by noting that 'the English word *self* has no real Russian equivalent, and thus the self [] as I think I know it, is not everywhere a certain thing [] when speaking Russian a self is felt but has no proper name, or the self occurs only in or as a context but is insufficiently stable to occur independently as a noun' (Hejinian 1991c, p 166 and p 167). Similarly, in *Leninograd: American Writers in the Soviet Union*, an account of visits to Russia written by a group of Language poets, Hejinian describes the differences between American and Russian selfhood 'subjectivity is not the basis for being a Russian person. Our independent separate singularity can hardly be spoken of, but Arkaddi said, "many people wish it" "You know" I said, "many of *us* wish to overcome it. We think that if we surpass or supersede the individual self we can achieve community"' (Hejinian 1991d, p 34)¹⁸

In *Oxota* this shared desire to 'overcome' self in order to achieve community, which has been such a central ideological plank of Language poetics, is given a quite different emphasis. The decenteredness which the text relates is *not voluntary*, it does not come from the assured deconstructions of identity performed so exactly by *My Life*, for example, but from an experience of displacement that is imposed by profound cultural differences. This is a sense of 'strangeness' that is fascinating and yet extremely perturbing. 'If each day were new a person would be incomprehensible/ To misunderstand it was to be rejected/ The person left out, in its unSoviet sensation/ Many things left in observation' (p 72). This rather poignant description of the rejection that inevitably results from unintelligibility is also suggestive of the strategy employed by Hejinian, described above, for coping with this experience, the sensations of the 'unSoviet' person may be 'left out' but other things are 'left in observation'.

A more clearly foregrounded tactic in Hejinian's attempts to assimilate Russian personhood involves the representation of writing itself. 'A person's hypersensitivity is /no longer witty/ And in the Russian novel is an obverse of a person/ A complete entity with a voice its own droning with its nose/ pressed against the wall' (p 14). The constant process of having to negotiate

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This text is collaborative and framed in the familiar rhetoric of the Language mode. 'The authors of *Leninograd* have sought to ground the literary movement known as "Language poetry" in a sense of community and to connect it to progressive politics and new social theory' (Hejinian 1991, p1). The fragmentation of the individual authorial voices enacted by this text is carried literally to the page where each author is represented by a different visual icon that in itself evokes the radical agricultural and industrial revolutions of Russia's 'five year plans'.

changing expectations of selfhood are frequently linked in *Oxota* to changing expectations of writing. The realisation that hypersensitivity is no longer ‘witty’, for example, is comprehended through the generic characteristics of dominant Russian literary forms. The conventions of selfhood are perceived to be inextricable from their formal constructions.

No form at all - it’s impossible to imagine its being seen from
above

Nor sense of time because work is only done discontinuously

I had no sense of making an impression

[...]

In the evenings particularly we made notes and took dictation

in anticipation of writing a short Russian novel, something

neither invented nor constructed but moving through

that time as I experienced it unable to take part

personally in the hunting (p.12)

The text suggests that writing the ‘short Russian novel’ overcomes the impotence of formlessness that the chapter opens by describing. It enacts the protagonist’s experience of ‘moving through’ something that she is ‘unable to take part / personally in’, and in doing so allows her to articulate, and assuage, her own isolation. The description of this process as something that is ‘neither invented nor constructed’ seems particularly relevant. Again, Hejinian seems to be invoking the generic limits of the text as structures that allow her to describe the tension between the chimerical freedom of pure invention and the passivity of being externally constructed. Between, in this case, articulating an ‘American’ self that will not be understood and articulating a ‘Russian’ self that she feels estranged from. Writing the text seems to provide Hejinian with a way of exerting an *agency* over her displacement, an agency that is not self founding but which depends for significance upon the very cultural conventions which it feels challenged by.¹⁹ In terms of

¹⁹

In the interview published in 1996 Hejinian explicitly says that the novel was being used to navigate a sense of cultural alienation: “I’ve spent a long time in the Russian part of what used to be the Soviet Union [...] At first I had a sense of familiarity with what I was seeing [...] At that time the Soviet Union was the other great superpower [...] a nation in the same condition as the one I had just come from. I arrived with that assumption and saw things initially from that point of view. But I soon began to realize that they were, in fact, utterly unfamiliar, and not only unfamiliar but different in a profound way. [...] I’m interested also in the experience of strangeness in other contexts. But actually to experience strangeness in a situation of daily living as I did in

Hejinian's own theoretical armoury, writing the text within, and against, the conventions of Russian literary impersonality allows her to exist within the *differend*, to 'bear witness' to the significance of the contradictory phrase regimes of opposing cultures that she is living between.

The importance of this narrative strand in the novel, of Hejinian's coming stalwartly to terms with a different kind of selfhood, is also significant for the way in which the *reader* is being constructed in this novel. The very first chapter announces, with an almost camp sense of performance, its relationship with the reader.

We must learnt to endure the insecurity as we read
 The felt need for a love intrigue
 There is no person - he or she was appeased and withdrawn
 There is relationship but it lacks simplicity
 People are very aggressive and every week more so
 The Soviet colonel appearing in such of our stories
 He is sentimental and duckfooted
 He is held fast, he is in his principles
 But here is a small piece of the truth - I am glad to greet you
 There, just with a few simple words it is possible to say the
 Truth (p.11)

The chapter most obviously introduces the types of thematic readings that the text proffers, the colonel and his uncertain status in Russian life are immediately featured. However, the very incongruity of using the colonel as an introduction to the text also presents the reader with the defamiliarising process that they are clearly being expected to undergo as they are candidly warned that 'We must learnt to endure the insecurity as we read/ The felt need for a love intrigue/

There is no person - / he or she was appeased and withdrawn/ There is relationship but it lacks simplicity'. Not only does this introduction prepare the reader for the unknown but it also makes explicit that they will *not* be guided through it. The small piece of truth that the text *is* able to offer - 'I am glad to greet you' - actually seems a decorously stark curtailment of the expectations of the kind of metanarrative that *My Life*, for example, provided. The text and its

negotiation of self, I am suggesting, isn't about the reader (or even about Language poetics) but is about Hejinian's attempts to come to terms with her own sense of cultural displacement.

The most obvious example of this marginalising of the significance of the 'reader' as a textual entity lies in the very generic conventions chosen to structure the novel. The text is based upon the conventions of the Russian novel, upon a 'social contract', that the reader (of the text in English, anyway) is not necessarily expected to be familiar with, hence the process of defamiliarisation which I have suggested that the first chapter intends to introduce the reader to. The foregrounding of the self in this text is not about providing a site for readerly praxis. Hejinian is, I want to suggest, attempting to understand the complicated constraints through which her own agency is produced, she is not attempting to replicate the same processes for the reader.

The final book to the poem contains only a short coda. Interestingly, it has only 11 lines, Pushkin's 14 line form is no longer being utilised. It is as if the text is slipping into the kind of metacommentary, the direct address to the reader, that I have suggested was so resolutely rejected throughout the rest of the book. It is worth quoting in full because of this.

Say a name and someone appears, someone without the same
name

Then it's quiet

We cross some distance in the pale pulverisations of the rosy
marsh

Mist on dusts or orange light, partial preparations

We will find what we want

Describer's hunter, narrator's hunt

Half-visible, emerging, merged

A silent gesture, not still, we switch

Then the light disperses, but the time's condensed

And song ?

Too soon (p.292)

The suddenly deeply lyrical tone of the stanza seems to describe the process that the book has undergone; the displacement of the self as it has slipped into its surroundings. More significantly, the narrator, the describer, claims possession of this process and goes on to suggest that, through its own hunt, it has 'half-visible' emerged, merged. The writing provides an opportunity for the self to be slowly, and differently, recovered. The self is emerging not from some textual ploy but from a disquieting experience of social marginalisation that it found impossible to assimilate. The novel offers itself, at its end, as self-reflection rather than as site of political praxis or readerly intervention: as the very last two lines suggest, it is still too soon for song.

Chapter Four. Politics and People Watching: Leslie Scalapino's Shaping of the Social.

Introduction. Fictionalizing Overtly is the Same as Living

The poet Leslie Scalapino's contribution to the debate occurring in the eighties over the efficacy of textual practice for a feminist praxis was, like Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian's, celebratory. Scalapino maintained that experimental textual practices did have specific political implications. Her questioning of how 'phenomena appear to unfold', she explains in her work of the same name, 'creates a perspective that is socially democratic, individual (in the sense of specific) and limitless' (Scalapino 1989, p.119). This valorisation of the possibilities of textual innovation differed in intent, however, from that of either Susan Howe or Lyn Hejinian. In her contribution to the encyclopaedic *Contemporary Poets* Scalapino suggests that 'if there were one sentence written on my work, I would like it to be, "Leslie Scalapino has made lots of changes and does not avoid reality"' (Shoptaw 1996, p.959). It is the significance which Scalapino's work attributes to its construction of a relationship between constantly shifting linguistic innovations and an external 'reality' that this chapter centrally explores.

In the opening chapter to the thesis I cited Rae Armantrout's 1992 rebuttal of Ron Silliman's contention, that non experimental poetic forms may better serve identities experiencing marginality than experimental ones, to support my assertion that many women writers associated with the Language movement identified the questioning of linguistic assumptions with an emancipatory poetic practice. This challenge by Armantrout to Silliman's *Socialist Review* article actually echoed a dialogue between Silliman and Scalapino that had been published the previous year in *Poetics Journal* 9. In this exchange Scalapino pre-empts Armantrout's assertion that a deconstructive poetic writing offers a 'moment of freedom' for women who 'as outsiders [...] might, in fact, be well positioned to appreciate the constructedness of the identity', when she suggests that 'those in social power and those without it might be equally capable of questioning their own subjectivity. But those who are without social power are less inclined to see reality as orderly: for example less inclined to see the social construct as unified' (Armantrout 1992, p.8) and (Scalapino 1991b, p.52). Like Armantrout, Scalapino is critical of Silliman for not acknowledging the insights that the experience of exclusion may confer when he defines, according to Scalapino, 'innovation as the repository of white men who are supposedly free of connection' (Scalapino 1991b, p.53).

In Scalapino's first letter to Ron Silliman (in the debate published in *Poetics Journal 9*) she acknowledges that she shares with him the desire for a poetics that can '“deconstruct” our illusion or constructions of reality'. At the end of the letter, however, she appears to problematise what this shared conviction actually means.

I'm defining narrative as 'constructing'

My premise, in general and in writing, is that I do not think that there is a man, or woman, or society, social construction: though it is there. It is not there. (Scalapino 1991b, p.52 and p.53).

This blend of the theoretically obvious and the boldly implausible is characteristic of Scalapino's writing. In simultaneously accepting and rejecting that we are constructed through narratives of identity, for example, Scalapino requires us to accept a paradox. This paradox is indicative of her conviction that it is impossible to isolate the constructedness of our existence - to know it 'there', as it were - because to do so would be to suggest that such a realm, a realm beyond these structures, could be produced by language.

In this sense Scalapino is reiterating the agenda which I have suggested is central to the work of women Language writers. She contends that as we can know nothing beyond our relationship with language then we must find within *it* the potential to enact social change. An essay in her 1989 anthology *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold*, for example, demonstrates that, like Hejinian, she was deeply influenced by the radical poetics of Gertrude Stein which stressed the linguistic basis of our relationship with reality.

The way things are seen in a time is that period of time; and it is the composition of that time. The way things are seen is unique in any moment, as a new formation of events, objects and cultural abstraction.

The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes a living thing they are doing. Nothing else is different, of that

almost any one can be certain. The time when and the time in that composition is the natural phenomenon of that composition.

[Citation footnoted from Gertrude Stein's 'Composition as Explanation', *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York, 1962)] (Scalapino 1989, p.27).

Whereas Hejinian understands this turn to language as proffering the possibility for creating a more vibrant form of 'realism', Scalapino seeks, instead, to exploit the implication that the text is *already* its own reality. Her insistence in the citation from *Poetics Journal 9*, for example, that 'social constructions' are both 'there' and 'not there' can be read as part of her attempt to overcome what she perceives to be the artificial division between representation and reality. In other words, Scalapino takes the realisation that social constructions are necessarily mediated through language to mean that these vehicles of mediation are themselves the central constituents of experience: 'fictionalizing overtly is the same as living' (Scalapino 1996e, p.6).

One of the dominant characteristics of Scalapino's 'fictionalizing' is its flatness, the meaning of events is gained from their relational positioning, rather than through any attempt to emotionally heighten them. This largely uncompromising resistance to the lure of the subjective extends to her treatment of an authorial presence. Her presentation of subjectivity is often 'not there' because it is perceived to be inextricably wound into the processes of producing the text itself, it exists only in its moment of production: 'deciphering oneself entails what one is; the concept of that entails the action of what the text is. We mime the simulacra, "syntax mimes space", in order to get at the real.' (Scalapino 1989, p.30).

This 'action' of the text, consistent with what I have suggested is the Language mode's central rhetorical axiom, is perceived to be the effect of reading as much as it is of writing. In a *Talisman* interview with Edward Foster given in 1992 Scalapino describes the interdependency of reading and writing. What is also suggested in this description is that readerly activity is seen to usurp the possibility for an authorial presence. The authorial self is displaced by the text's demand that it is its own reality:

A location is created in which the perceiver is the center. It's the self in that you're inside of that perception and *you're creating it by reading it*. It's watching what the mind is doing

and *trying to collapse the distinctions, all kinds of distinctions*. (Scalapino 1992b, p.32, italics mine)

As Scalapino says more explicitly about the work of Barrett Watten, the subject is removed from the text 'by the very conditions of communication, without which reading or hearing cannot take place. The reader is implicated in the structure of the writer's displacement, and the effaced intentions of the work are the reader being taken into account' (Scalapino 1993, p.25). Hence, more than either Susan Howe or Lyn Hejinian, Scalapino comes very close to the Language mode at its most 'hyperreal', as described by critics such as Andrew Ross. This writing attempts to render not only the distinction between consumption/ reading and production/ writing obsolete, but the distinction between the text and reality.

In this chapter I want to place this apparent congruity between Scalapino's writing and the Language mode under closer scrutiny, and to align it with the broader questions of my thesis. I want to examine how Scalapino's refusal to make distinctions between writing and action, between the inner and outer world, has affected the construction of the subject in her writing. Scalapino's lack of interiority is explored in this chapter not through the assumption that this absence allows for readerly participation, but through what it actually implies for Scalapino's ability to invest the subject with meaning. I centrally contend that Scalapino's unwillingness to make distinctions between the interiority and the exteriority of the subject allows for a potentially innovative interrogation of its relationship to the politics of public and private space. My aim is to examine how Scalapino's investigation into phenomenology allows the physical world, the world of surfaces and empty meanings in the language of postmodernism, to be rendered up to political analysis.

The first half of the chapter explores the significance that can be assigned to Scalapino's treatment of the subjective. Its opening section performs a reading of Scalapino's early writing which emphasises her critique of the politicised division between the personal and the public. It places this critique within a tradition of American women's poetry, but also suggests that Scalapino's work deviates from this tradition because of its reluctance to attribute an internal expression, a personal meaning, to the individual's experience of the external world. The following section examines the critical meanings attributed to Scalapino's apparent reluctance to explore a subjective viewpoint. It explicates very different interpretations of Scalapino's writing

to support my assertion that meanings for the experimental text are determined as much by the reading practices brought to bear upon it, as by its formal qualities. This argument, however, that nothing inheres in these texts which demands an emancipatory reading practice, is not an attempt to evacuate the texts of meaning: it is not meant to undermine the significance of Scalapino's formalism or to set up a Language versus non-Language reading dichotomy. What the body of this section actually highlights are the points of congruity suggested by these readings. I centrally suggest that they share a concern to read Scalapino's writing through its relationship with the social and 'material' realm, rather than through its ability to formally disrupt the more abstract symbolic order.

The second half of the chapter examines the significance of Scalapino's treatment of this public and visible realm. Scalapino's writing is read, in the first section, in conjunction with the theories of spatiality that were emerging concurrently with her work. I suggest that her writing proffers an analysis of the subject that is sensitive to the primacy of its physical location. I go on to contend that in acknowledging the importance of this subjective positioning then Scalapino's writing can be read as offering an alternative to the types of subject positions created by some modernist and avant-garde poets. In the concluding section to the chapter I examine how Scalapino's move to prose can be read as part of this faltering disillusionment with modernist/avant-garde paradigms. I note how much of this later prose writing appears concerned with explicit exegesis, with providing her readership with an explanatory structure in which the texts can be meaningfully located. The chapter ends by questioning what this structure, this provision of a reading mode as it were, implies for Scalapino's broader aims.

Section One. We Mime the Simulacra**Part One. States of Obscenity**

Although Scalapino's later poetics suggest a congruity with the tenets of the Language mode, her published writing career actually began, like Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian's, in the mid-seventies and took place outside of this theoretical framework. Some of the work published in Scalapino's first collection *O and Other O Poems*, in particular, displays an emotive narrative that cannot be easily reconciled with the apparent disavowal of the articulation of subjectivity to which her later poetics seem so committed. The poem 'Strawberries' from this collection ends with the type of epiphany, the effects of which Language poetry was elsewhere beginning to critically question.

But those summer days
there was no wind as we lounged

or picked on our knees in the dirt.

We loaded our boxes
with strawberries

until our eyes
were hurt by their red color

The air and our hands
and the hillside turned red.

It was indelible

The road and the fields fused. (Scalapino 1976a, unpaginated)

The narration of self in this very early text appears more concerned with communicating the veracity of the confessional self than in challenging the ideologies underpinning these constructs. The poem's combination of nostalgia, heightened sensitivity, and an affective fallacy makes it more reminiscent of the work of Sylvia Plath or William Carlos Williams than that of Gertrude Stein, which is more often seen to influence the emergence of a feminist experimentalism.

My reference to this early work is not intended, however, simply as an easy jibe against

Scalapino's experimental credentials; I am not trawling through what now seems to be immature work in order to create a 'before' and 'after' picture of a naive and then a knowing writer. What I am actually interested in suggesting, in using early texts such as this, is that Scalapino's oeuvre, like Howe and Hejinian's, resists being read only through what I have suggested is an unconvincing experimental versus traditional divide in readings of contemporary American poetry.

The British critic Clair Wills has also sought ways of overcoming the restrictions which she thinks that the experimental/ non-experimental divide in contemporary poetry places upon our ability to contextualise it.¹ Her 1994 essay 'Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive voice' opens by rehearsing the familiar criticisms ranged against feminist innovation - 'the recurrent fear in discussion's of women's experimental writing is that such formal experimentation will become merely formal, and therefore unable to carry the weight of feminist politics' (Wills 1994, p 37). Wills goes on to argue that such a critique of poetic formalism is reliant on a 'false dichotomy [. . .] between formal and expressive' writing that actually perpetuates a division between the private and public which no longer pertains

However twentieth-century social developments are interpreted, whether positively or negatively, there seems little doubt that there has been a radical transformation of the relations between the public sphere of work and politics, and the private sphere of individual experience and family life [. . .] Thus it is not that 'expressive' poetry falls back on a stable individuality, and experimental work explores the radical absence of subjectivity. Both are responses to the configuring of the relationship between public and private spheres which makes the 'private' lyric impossible, and in effect opens it out towards rhetoric. While the private sphere has been invaded by the public, or the social, at the same time the social has opened up to take note of formerly private concerns, and both modes of poetry reflect in their form the changing nature of this relationship (p 38 and p 39).

Wills demonstrates the way in which experimental writing 'reveals not the absence of a sphere of privacy but the ways in which that private or intimate realm of experience is constructed

¹

Wills explores the limitations that an expressive/ experimental divide in her book *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*. In this text she reverses the terms of the argument somewhat by suggesting that poetry which makes use of the 'expressive voice' is not necessarily reliant on the naively representational (Wills 1993)

“through” the public’ by giving readings of Lyn Hejinian and Denise Riley’s work that are comparable to the kind of reading of *My Life* that I suggested in section two of the chapter above, readings that emphasise not the ‘absence of any form of subjectivity’ in this work but rather ‘the dynamic nature’ of this construction (p.42).

The ‘private’ is, so this argument implies, the privileged realm of the subject. It is not necessarily the realm of the ‘authentic’ or true subject, but it is, nevertheless, posited not so much as one half of a politicised division of experience, than as a place of integrity that experimental writing can usefully rescue from the pressures of mass life: ‘just as mass-culture is lyricised, so the self can emerge through the appropriation, the privatisation of these public discourses’ (p.49-50). Although I agree with Wills that Hejinian’s writing is ‘strongly weighted towards questions of interiority and emotional inwardness’ I want to critically examine the corresponding assumption that this ‘private’ articulation is significant in a way in which writing that does not do this, which *is* concerned with ‘the absence of interiority in contemporary culture (what Baudrillard calls ‘obscenity’ - a state in which nothing remains hidden or concealed)’, is not (p.41). I am interested in exploring the way in which Scalapino negotiates, and politicises, this ‘obscenity’ of contemporary life in which all meaning is public in some way, in which all meaning is surface. My aim is to examine how her investigation into the politics of our experience of the phenomenological world, her often strained negotiation with that which lies ‘outside’ of the subject, turns Baudrillard’s perception of the ‘simulacrum’, that so easily lends itself to political paralysis, into a valuable tool for political *analysis*.²

The attempt to overcome the tension between the inner and outer world recurs throughout many of the poems in this early anthology. The title poem ‘O’, for example, concentrates on attempting to describe the primitively solipsistic sensation of making sound in water.

Whether my arms floated on the surface of the water
of the swimming pool
or beat
slowly back to my side

I always

²

The critic Christopher Norris has been particularly vocal in his criticism of Baudrillard. See (Norris 1989)

uttered the same O, delivered in a monotone, each O
having the same value.

O, I said after a regular interval. Then O. O.

[...]

I was alert not lulled

by the water,

But my limbs

dislodged and then fluttered out from my body.

My bathing suit began to fill. (Scalapino 1976a, unpaginated)

This sense of a fragmenting physical self, in the face of the articulation of an inner self, can be read as a fairly standard poetic theme for American women poets. Scalapino's attempt here to broach, or at least to understand, the Cartesian divisions of mind and body, thought and emotion, is a concern shared by, amongst others, those most canonised of American women poets, Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich.

However, Scalapino also deviates from the tradition of Dickinson and Rich because of her refusal to explore the implications of these divisions from a position of privileged self-knowledge. Criticism such as Wendy Martin's *An American Triptych*, has, for example, suggested that (along with the work of Anne Bradstreet) Dickinson and Rich 'chronicle the shifts in the status of American women from private companion to participant in a wider public life, their poetry records their *deeply felt personal responses to their worlds*, ranging from resigned acceptance of traditional religion to public criticism of the culture that shapes and limits their experience' (Martin 1984, p.6, italics mine). It is this tendency of American women poets to interiorise their relationship to the politics of the public sphere that I am suggesting that Scalapino can be read as subverting.³

In the same year as *O and Other Poems* Sand Dollar published Scalapino's *The Woman Who*

³

Readings that stress the woman poet's negotiation of the political underpinnings of the divisions between mind and body, public and private through the subjective have dominated work written in this area for the past three decades. Work such as Jan Montefiore's *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* and Liz Yorke's *Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry* are both typical in that they explore these issues through the intimate relationship between women's poetry and feminist identity politics (Montefiore 1987; Yorke 1991)

*Could Read the Minds of Dogs.*⁴ The formal characteristics of this poem already register quite dramatic changes in the poet's interests in the possibilities of experimentalism. As the fantastic title implies, this text was more concerned with presenting what is unsettling and threatening in the public sphere than in attempting to control these fears through a narrated and subject-led poetics. As the presence of the subjective recedes, the tension between the inner and outer world develops into an interest in the political tensions in the divisions between the public and private.

'one night, running after her thru the park', the man said to me
(and he kept using the word 'her', tho he was actually referring to me)

'One night, running after her thru the park', the man said to me
(and he kept using the word 'her', tho he was actually referring to me)

, 'I found, that the deeper I followed her into the park
(aware, having just left my bed, - after finding that she had left me, -
and gone out looking for her, that the passers-by has begun to stare,
since I was calling her name) ; far from seeming
to lose contact with my bed in my room, I was like a water lily',
he said, (smiling at me), 'or a lotus, with a stem attached deep in
the bed of a lake. meanwhile, I was running (altho it seemed like
floating) with my head thrown back, and calling out very loudly LESLIE'.

(Scalapino 1976b, unpaginated)

The suggestion of urban and domestic conflict that this stanza of the poem relates - as the man chases the woman he is aware, in turn, of being watched - is characteristic of the single page snapshots of which the poem is comprised. The vaguely malevolent vista of the text emerges not simply from the description of a night-time pursuit but from its fusion with the fantastic. The man running and shouting is also not present at all - has, in fact, remained rooted in the bed which the woman chose to leave. The suggestion of narrative that the knowing tone of the woman's

4

This poem, along with other early poems such as 'Instead of an Animal' (published by Cloud Marauder Press in 1978) and 'This Eating and Drinking' (published by Timbuktu in 1979), was later collected in Scalapino's second collection by North Point Press *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is*, in 1982 (Scalapino 1982). I am citing from the original version here.

narratorial 'I' carries in this stanza - 'he kept using the word 'her' tho he was referring to me'- is disturbed by this imposition of the surreal, her control over that which surrounds her is thrown into doubt. The reach of the 'smiling' man (who has, this conversation seems to suggest, caught up with 'Leslie') encompasses, quite literally, the entire stanza. The disruptive images of this poem have the effect of denaturalising the physical activities of the protagonists in the text: to make us examine the power relations that are actually being signified. It is not only that the woman's relationship with the public sphere is an unsafe one, but that the power relations it contains are inescapable.

Scalapino's interrogation of the ambivalence of social constructions of sexuality and identity is, however, more nuanced than simply a polemic against their masculinist excesses. The disruptive presence of the libidinous woman is also explored, and once again estrangement is used to highlight (and subvert) the repressive effects of social constructions and expectations.

How can I help myself, as one woman said to me about wanting

to have intercourse with strange men, from thinking of a man

How can I help myself, as one woman said to me about wanting
to have intercourse with strange men, from thinking of a man
(someone whom I don't know) as being like a seal. I mean I see a man
(in a crowd such as a theatre) as having the body of a seal in the way
a man would, say, be in bed with someone, kissing and barking,
which is the way a seal will bark and leap on his partly-fused hind limbs.
Yes, Am I not bound, I guess, (I say to myself) to regard him tenderly,
to concentrate on the man's trunk instead of his face, which in this case,
is so impassive. Seriously, I am fascinated by the way a seal moves.
(Scalapino 1976b, unpaginated)

With the intimate tone of the confidante this stanza negotiates the complexity of a woman talking frankly about her own erotic and esoteric desires. This stanza shares the same formulaic presentation as the others in the poem. The first two lines are repeated, without spaces, and are

consequently drawn into beginning the narrative of the stanza. In this case these first two lines suggest the hesitations of the recorded speaker, the hiatuses suggesting what they are afraid to admit. However, when these lines are more coherently repeated they flow, with sudden confidence, into the outlandish and even self-consciously shocking. Here the presence of the bizarre - the woman envisaging a man who arouses her as a seal - actually works to normalise the potentially estranging effect of her candidness, to confirm rather than interrupt the existence of a narratorial 'I' and its confidently articulated desires. The 'shock' of the woman's expression of a public and voracious desire - '(someone whom I don't know)' [...] / '(In a crowd such as a theatre)' - is lost next to the admission that she wants this lover to possess 'the body of a seal in some way.' This sense of alienation, what would be recognised by Scalapino's later colleagues as the 'defamiliarisation' which Language poetry drew upon from Russian formalism, is here used as part of a narrative.⁵ Scalapino's use of this estranging technique disrupts not the articulation of a speaking 'I', but the ability of public space to exclude the unruly desire that this 'I' expresses. This desire subverts this space simply because it challenges normative gender codes, it is about the woman's physical self-fulfilment and will not be rendered acceptable by more cerebral narratives of Romantic love: she imagines her lover's unrestrained eagerness for her and concentrates on his 'trunk instead of his face'. The earnest intimacy of the final phrase of the stanza, as the speaker solicits us to believe what is now presented as quite reasonable, 'Seriously, I am fascinated by the way a seal moves', emphasises Scalapino's ability to render the shocking acceptable.

The self is primarily positioned in this writing through its relationship to the politics of public space. The writing displays little interest in analysing or constructing an interior narrative through which this relationship can be made meaningful. Scalapino's interest in the ambiguous and contradictory politics of the subject (as something she both protects and questions) focuses on its interaction with the public politics of the external world. Her reluctance to explore interiority, as I want to go on and demonstrate further in this chapter, can be read not as a denial of the politics of the subject, but as an attempt to radically refuse the implications that the divisions

5

The importance of Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation to the poetics of writers such as Lyn Hejinian and Barret Watten has already been discussed. That Scalapino should have also been influenced by this is often (probably correctly) assumed. In her blurb on the back cover of *Crowd and not evening or light*, for example, Lyn Hejinian writes, 'The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky long ago pointed out that the familiar, in its familiarity, become invisible - automatized as he put it - and that it is the role of art to make the world visible again. It is Leslie Scalapino's discovery that anything *seen*, in being seen, becomes unfamiliar. The resulting disorientation is not distance from the living but involvement with it.'

between private and public have had upon it. I want to examine, in the second half of the chapter, what this refusal to accept these divisions means for the wider questions of the thesis. What does it contribute, in other words, to a postmodern reading of the politics of self? Before beginning this analysis I want to examine the meanings attributed to this aspect of Scalapino's work in her critical reception.

Section One, Part Two.

Singers or Storytellers ?

Scalapino has not yet begun to receive the wide scale critical attention that Howe and Hejinian (both of whom supply highly complimentary blurbs for her poetic collections) have recently secured.⁶ The critical attention which she has received from other innovative writers seems to have been largely limited to the essays contained in the special Scalapino edition of *Talisman* published in 1992 and to a number of reviews. This work often centrally focused on the significance of the activity of reading; Scalapino's work became a site upon which the textual politics of the Language agenda could be played out. Three of the four essays contained in this edition of *Talisman* broadly follow this line of inquiry.⁷ Stephen Ratcliffe's essay illuminates his understanding of the significance of reading Scalapino through citations from her work.

6

Scalapino is not alone in this - the acceptance of Language writing into the broader critical academy that has taken place over the last decade has made 'stars' out of only a few of the many available participants. The reasons why Scalapino has received less attention than either Howe or Hejinian is not really clear. It can be most obviously attributed to the fact that her work is generally less accessible than theirs - and so its relationship to broader debates (and thus its all important transition to a wider audience) failed to register in quite the same way. What is more clear, however, is that although Scalapino may not carry the burgeoning cultural authority of either Hejinian or Howe she was still active in the West Coast movement. She is a prolific writer who regularly contributed to the creative journals of the period ('small mags' such as *Tembler*, *Conjunctions*, *Hambone*, *Credences* and *Epoch* all carry her poetry) and a relatively active publisher and editor (she was the founder of O books and editor of three important O anthologies).

7

Because of the length and depth of these pieces I am treating them as critical essays, however, they also all seem to serve as reviews of *The Return of Painting*, *The Pearl*, and *Orion: A Trilogy* which had been published the previous year.

The ones who are the audience are hearing *the enactment -- and the cars coursing on the overpass by the cafe to it*. The writing makes what is seen or known about (through hearing or reading) that much more present, as thinking makes it so *On her part. And theirs*.

Geared to this -- writing an act one does complement to being. Completely involved at the place where the mind sets in motion, that is. The one who is reading [italics in original - Ratcliffe provides a footnote explaining that 'passages in italics are taken from Leslie Scalapino, *The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion: A Trilogy* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1991)'] (Ratcliffe 1992, p.61).

Ratcliffe's reading simulates the textual dynamics that are being described, it *enacts* the poetics with which it is engaged by weaving them through the argument/ observations so that they form a self-sufficient dialogue. The synchronicity of the reader and the writer is unhesitating - 'completely involved at the place where the mind sets in motion, that is. The one who is reading'. What this apparent blurring of reader/ writer positioning most roundly demonstrates is the potential circularity of reading the text through an awareness that in doing so one *becomes* the text: the essay is hermetic, and does little but affirm its own existence as such.⁸

Bruce Campbell's essay, although attaining more critical distance from Scalapino's work than this, presents a similar intimacy between the Language mode and Scalapino's poetic aims. He begins by suggesting that the central 'contradiction' to Scalapino's work, that it cannot approach what it examines because of its concern to 'be' what it examines, makes the reader responsible for realising the significance of the poem's formal innovations.

In other words if the perceiving individual cannot change things while absorbed, it is nonetheless possible that others may. Note that 'someone' would not be the person who is speaking [...] we see the effect others have but not the effect we do (Campbell 1992, p.54).

Campbell also suggests that one of the effects of Scalapino's reluctance to provide her reader with 'definitions' which are 'part of the administration of society' which 'might be said to have been

8

The fact that Stephen Ratcliffe and Leslie Scalapino edited a collection of work together in the year in which this essay was published may be relevant to the apparent congruity that this essay suggests. *Talking in Tranquillity: Interviews with Ted Berrigan* was published by Scalapino's own O Books in 1992.

corrupted by insider trading', is a radical resistance to the commodification of meaning which determines contemporary art production. (p.56)

'nothing', instead of necessarily being a limit to the narrative (or, for that matter, a limit to language, thought, etc) may occur as a term of the 'narrative'.

The result mirrors the situation of the writer. Where once the arts might have stood for the bohemian, the unacceptable, or the eccentric, art now occupies an over-determined place in society. Consequently, any possible critique has been neutralised in advance. In this sense, Scalapino is brought to assert that 'writing isn't anything' [...]

That is, where to be nothing is, on the one hand, to be of no importance, it is, on the other, to be inexhaustible. We might note, too, the expression of resistance varies throughout time. That is, it is an act equally expressive of resistance when the poet, in a time when culture valorises the spiritual in art, insists on the thingness of her work as it is when culture valorises the commodification and concreteness of art, asserts that 'writing isn't anything' (p.59)

Hence Scalapino's denial of meaning, her assertion of 'nothingness', is seen to subvert the empty exchange value that Campbell perceives as accompanying the commodification of art in a capitalist era.

An essay in the same journal by Barrett Watten also suggests the influence of the Language mode. According to Watten, Scalapino's 'radical scepticism about the transparency of the exchange between producer and consumer' blurs the distinction between the reader and the writer (Watten 1992, p.49).

There is an indeterminacy of the narrator's position that allows for an identification by the reader of the events without any mediation. It is as if the description predicated on the event were the voice of the writer as the experience of the reader. These things seem to happen because they are not propositionally tied to an assertion of fact through a stable identity of the narrator. (p.51)

Scalapino's ability to disrupt the reification of the self and other is expedited through an

'economic analogy' which is 'directed toward the understanding of social position through processes of failed objectification'. The subject in Scalapino's text is again positioned against the easy reductivism of self as symbolic unit for exchange (p.52).

Watten's account of the significance of the relationship between the market and the text is, however, more cautious and historically specific than Campbell's. It recognises, for example, that Scalapino's texts attempt to locate their need to question the ideological structures of exchange in the specific material conditions of life - 'that this quality of absence in the reified world is the determining condition of contemporary social life is explicitly detailed in the novel' (p.52). Watten's reading goes on, more problematically I think, to endow these texts with a potential significance that extends beyond their overt thematic and formal concerns.

One wonders what the "larger" implications of recent work would be if its unstated but formally articulated claims for agency were translated into cultural or political projects on other scales. If distance from the economic in Surrealism predicated human freedom in Existentialist method, what would the reciprocities of subject and object in recent work lead to if given full opportunity to develop its full cultural and political implications ? (p.52)

Watten insinuates that Scalapino's writing offers contemporary culture and politics a parallel intellectual incitement to that which surrealism offered existentialism. For Watten the value of Scalapino's texts lies not in their simple reiteration of the 'heroic distancing' of the surrealist avant-garde of Breton and Satre, but in their demand for new forms of subject/object relations: a demand that is a response to the fragmented and consumption led patterns of our everyday life.

These readings of Scalapino's disruption to the self and linguistic exchange as potentially subversive echo the observations of the arch-postmodernist Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's formulation of hyperreality, in which any distinction between the real and the imaginary becomes impossible, results from Western capitalism's dependence upon consumption. The individual's agency resides in their ability to consume, they are in 'in no way a universal being, but rather a social and political being and a productive force, as such the consumer revives fundamental historical problems: those concerning the ownership of the means of consumption (and no longer the means of production), those regarding economic responsibility' (Baudrillard 1988, p.54). However, in his later work, Baudrillard replaces the potentially subversive authority, with which

the consuming subject is potentially invested, with a more pessimistic and ultimately conservative acceptance of their limited capabilities. The 'forced silence of the masses in the mass media', he suggests in his essay from the mid-eighties 'The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media', is not a sign of 'passivity and of alienation, but to the contrary an original strategy, an original response in the form of a challenge' (Baudrillard 1988, p.208). To withhold subjective participation from the machinations of consumption is, according to Baudrillard, to subvert the system.

To a system whose argument is oppression and repression, the strategic resistance is to demand the liberating rights of the subject. But this seems rather to reflect on an earlier phase of the system; and even if we are still confronted with it, it is no longer a strategic territory: the present argument of the system is to maximise speech, to maximise the production of meaning, of participation. And so the strategic resistance is the refusal of meaning and the refusal of speech [...] it is the actual strategy of the masses (p.219).

Campbell and Watten read Scalapino's writing as resonating not only with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality but also with his assertion that passivity - the refusal to allow the subject to participate - comprises a strategy that can subvert the alienating commodification of the subject. The potential of the subject (producer/consumer) to be 'active' *within* the terms of capitalist culture, the type of argument attributed in my first chapter to theorists as varied as Daniel Miller, Theresa De Lauretis and Stuart Hall, is seemingly being rejected by these critics. The realm of the avant-garde is prescribed as a necessary antidote to the passive apolitical nature of commodification.

The claims made on behalf of the efficacy of this realm, that the now predictable transformation of the reader/ consumer into the writer/producer has social implications that extend beyond the act of reading, seems reliant on the existence of a connection between the 'formally articulated claims for agency' that the text presents and 'larger' 'political and cultural implications' that are not fully explained or described in either essay. Such a prescription, to reiterate one of the central contentions of the thesis, assumes that the reader is self-reflexive about the meanings which they attribute to the text, about the political implications of reading, but it fails to examine how this self-reflexivity has been produced. In short, it assumes that the reader

is reading in the Language mode (i.e. is reading this text according to Language writing's theoretical stance), but is not explicit about either how this mode is perpetuated or what such a perpetuation in itself means. The rest of the chapter seeks to examine alternative ways of attributing meaning to this writing, and the readings it seems to demand.

The publication of Scalapino's 1985 text *that they were at the beach* resulted in a number of very varied reviews. I want to examine these, and to contrast the readings given to this text by critics who apparently condone the Language mode against readings given by those who do not. My aim in doing so is twofold. Most obviously, I am seeking to demonstrate that no reading mode can make exhaustive claims upon the meanings that Scalapino's writing yields. However, I also want to go beyond this negative claim and to suggest the types of *shared* conclusions that I think can be inferred from these readings.

Although Scalapino's work received a relatively limited amount of critical attention from Language writers publishing in journals associated with the movement, broader indicators of how her work was being disseminated are available from the reviews her work attracted during the late eighties and early nineties. The collections of Scalapino's poems that North Point Press began publishing in 1982 with *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is* seemed to have facilitated this process. Amongst the reviews of the next collection, *that they were at the beach*, published three years later, were four reviews appearing in journals with little explicit interest in experimental verse. Although Scalapino's work did not necessarily continue to build upon this relatively high profile (much of which could be attributed to her choice of publishers rather than any intrinsic fascination her work held for print media at this time) these reviews are of interest because they provided her work with a hypothetical readership (the reader of the review) that was largely outside of the Language mode.

Not all of the discussions of Scalapino's work that were taking place outside of her established community, however, radically challenged its assumptions. Edith Jarolim's essay 'No Satisfaction: The Poetry of Leslie Scalapino' published in *North Dakota Quarterly*, for example, is an attempt to reinvent Scalapino (for those who do not know her work) as a popular writer. Interestingly, this attempt involves including, rather than dismissing, the complex reading skills which these texts seem to demand. The essay is the result of Jarolim's surprise at seeing *that they were at the beach* 'in the display rack of the 5th Avenue B. Dalton in New York' (Jarolim 1987, p.268). Although Jarolim is aware that the incongruity of the text's commercial placing may be

the consequence of a successful publishing strategy, its appearance still motivates her to consider ways of reading Scalapino within a popular context. The explication of Scalapino's poetics that follows packages innovative poetics as attractively as possible: the reading contexts and political implications of these texts are thrown into a new, and more accessible, light.

Jarolim is swift to suggest that the central effect of Scalapino's formalism is the involvement of the reader: 'You wanted some easy answers this time, some nice explanations for all that's preceded ? Ha' (p.271). The text's demand for readerly participation is perceived to result in a sexualisation of the act of reading itself. Jarolim, it seems, finds Barthes' *jouissance* in a poetics whose form and content combine to offer both frustration and release.

If Scalapino is extremely skilled at getting the reader involved with the text, her particular contribution to the participatory aesthetic shared by the language poets is her sexualisation of this process through a unique fusion of content and form. In Scalapino's poetry, the lack of linguistic satisfaction, that is, fulfilment of conventional linguistic expectations, may be seen as giving rise to a sexual tension, which prevails in the poetry even where the subject matter is not - although it often is - explicitly sexual. (p.271-2)

Jarolim popularises this reading by comparing it to the writing of Kathy Acker, 'whose texts are nothing if not sexualised and also partake in a new wave or punk aesthetic' (p.274). Scalapino's texts are seen as more radical than Acker's, however, precisely because of the reader's activity, it is this that offers the freedom and the adventure into the unknown that the erotic constantly requires to be renewed.

The shock value of Acker's appropriation of the standard language of male-directed pornography to a female persona has worn off by now, and its value as a vehicle for exploring female sexuality has been concomitantly eroded. Scalapino is often explicit, but always in a context of strangeness or indirection which lends excitement by virtue of distance and what could be described as room to fill in the blanks. In her poetry, female sexuality is a given; it doesn't require overassertion. Active reader-involved textuality vs, the missionary textuality of passive reading: each to her own. (p.274)

Jarolim's reading, although sharing a similar premise to Watten's, manages to extrapolate from its reading strategies and effects that are appropriate for the differing text (and audience) being addressed. For Jarolim, the creative labour of the reader allows for an analogous subversion of the sexual, rather than the economic, realm.

This collection was also reviewed in the mainstream *American Poetry Review* by Marjorie Perloff, who was, as I have already noted, a key player in the advancement of both a political agenda and an historical genealogy for experimental writing. The review holds little surprises. Like Barrett Watten's *Talisman* essay, and the Jarolim essay above, it convincingly argues for the inextricability of the alienation that Scalapino's poetics perform and the landscape that they are describing.

It is the unrelatedness of life in the modern city, the failure of its settings and its daily 'events' to come together, that is Scalapino's subject. [...] Rhythmic identity depends upon the carefully controlled repetition of highly selected, condensed verbal units, upon interruption and resumption, as if we were listening to a slightly staticky radio (Perloff 1986, p.45).

The staticky radio sensation of reading *that they were at the beach* echoes, for Perloff, the dehumanising nature of urban experience. What Perloff's review, like Jarolim's essay, suggests is that the significance attributed to the readerly activity that this text produces is not necessarily limited to the circularity proposed by Stephen Ratcliffe or the bleak negativity of Bruce Campbell's suggestion that 'nothing' can be subversive. Although all of the critical works I have examined so far are highly self-reflexive about their own reading practices in Jarolim and Perloff (and, in part at least, in Watten), this consciousness is made to relate to a politically charged social world. The self-awareness that this text fosters is made significant through its negotiation of the text's relationship with a broader political context - not simply through its ability to disrupt the means by which this context is known.

All the essays and reviews I have cited so far are, however, supported by readings that seek to find meaningful congruity between a poem's form and content. The conviction that the two are inseparable can in itself be attributed to a reading position that prioritises language as the primary organising principle of experience, a theoretical position that not all readers of Scalapino's writing

chose to occupy. Other reviews of this collection, instead of exhorting symbiosis between form and content, for example, enact and describe strategies of accommodation. Such strategies understand the formal challenges of these 'staticky' texts not as a 'mirror' held to the activity of the reader, but as something which needs to be overcome in order to identify and construct meaning for this writing.

The central example of this process of seeking identification, rather than acknowledging the importance of alienation, from Scalapino's writing, occurs in the treatment of the subject. Whereas the consensus for Ratcliffe, Campbell and Watten had been that the expressive 'I' exists only in its self-martyred or deconstructed form, for reviewers Mark Jarman and Gary Lenhart the subject remains the focal point. Jarman, in a review of twelve poetry books for *The Hudson Review* entitled 'Singers and Storytellers', suggests that 'the poetry of Leslie Scalapino [...] is like the poetry of the Language school generally; that is it is the form of the lyric [...] and furthermore, despite the apparent Derridean blurring of genres in assuming that Scalapino's paragraphs are poetry (not a new idea, anyway), there is still a central intelligence in her poetry which speaks with a lyric voice.' Jarman reads the poems in the collection as touching on those keystones of the confessional lyric, even if their form appears to eschew this, the poems are about 'childhood and adolescence, sexuality, often faceless but lyrically repetitive'. For him, 'the fragmentation of the writing itself, often imageless, flat and redundant', far from suggesting an absence or denial of subjectivity, actually 'provide the very chinks that allow us a partial view' of the self that Jarman maintains the texts conceal (Jarman 1986, p.335).

In his review of Scalapino's *that they were at the beach* published in *American Book Review* Gary Lenhart similarly suggests, although in a less obvious attempt to court controversy, that 'individualism was the subject and method of Leslie Scalapino's poems, poems in which the loneliness of the individual weighs heavily on every line'.⁹ The weight that Lenhart attributes to Scalapino's anxiety over selfhood is not, however, the burden of an ideological structure that it is painful, or even dangerous, to relinquish. It is, rather, the 'spare, quiet and intensely self-conscious voice of Scalapino's sexual and social discomfort [which] strikes me as authentic and even profound' Lenhart, like Jarman, insists that Scalapino's texts are built around a prelinguistic

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This desire to avoid controversy that Lenhart's engaged and engaging review displays is not, however, necessarily typical of *American Book Review's* attitude to the work of experimental poetry. It was in the pages of this journal that Fred Moramarco published his somewhat damning, and very contentious, review of Carla Harryman's *Animal Instincts* (Moramarco 1991).

subject which is unwittingly, even anxiously, betrayed by the writing. Again, Lenhart opposes the formal qualities of Scalapino's text against the expressivism he finds there.

It is this pervasive and undeniable intensity that makes her poems moving and credible, rather than her methods, which contribute nothing new to the cinematic frames of the nouveau roman. Small Borgesian fictions, narratives that don't add to an actuality but repeat, splice and reshuffle constituents, her poems don't close in on an event but concentrate on the telling, getting farther from any reality except the page until they undermine the reliability of all report and keep us guessing what is the case. Scalapino never transcends her art to confuse it with life. But her poems compel because of the unremitting intensity of the emotion. (Lenhart 1987, p. 14)

The assumption that the poems have a 'real' story outside of themselves to narrate bears heavily on this reading until the point where Lenhart actually seems to be reading Scalapino's texts through an exact inversion of the aims of her poetics as I outlined them in my introduction. Lenhart knows that the poem is fracturing his expectations of poetic mimesis, but for him this resistance to representation signifies the failure of the art to reach life - and not the refusal to recognise any distinction between the two. The effects of reading this text for Lenhart are thus quite different to those described by the writers in *Talisman* or Edith Jarolim. It is neither pleasurable play nor radical empowerment that Lenhart describes, but, rather, 'frustration and anxiety [...] In a world where everybody is a stranger, destined to remain ghostly, passive and foreign, every experience reminds one of another; or was it something I saw in a movie or a dream stripped of all contingent?' The explicit reliance on the reader providing the significance for the images that populate these poems removes any significance from them for Lenhart - they become as insubstantial and fretful as half-memories without contexts (p. 14).

What is so interesting about both of these readings is that, although the poetics brought to bear upon them are quite distinct from those I have attributed to Scalapino, both Lenhart and Jarman *like* the text which they are reviewing. In both cases it is able to fulfil the critical criteria through which it is being read. What the articulation of these pleasurable responses to the text also emphasise is that Jarman and Lenhart, although probably closer to each other than they are to Scalapino, are not measuring the poems with identical yardsticks. Jarman finds it sophisticated and

witty, it reminds him, he finally admits, of T.S Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday'. Lenhart, on the other hand, seems interested not in the poem's classical urbanity but seeks, and is moved by, the poem's emotional intensity. Interestingly, the tone of both writers becomes tinged with a criticism of the same failure - the failure of the poem to formally innovate. Jarman is unimpressed by Scalapino's generic blurrings and Lenhart by her sequential narrative frames - for both these are over familiar devices. What this irony serves to reinforce is not only the comprehensive effect that Pound's modernist edicts have finally had but also, perhaps more seriously, that the distinctions between what is innovative and traditional in contemporary American poetry are in themselves so contested as to be almost meaningless (or, rather, non-consensually meaningful) when taken out of the context of the interpretative community, the reading mode, within which the specific text is situated.

What this variety of readings most obviously suggests is that it is impossible to designate a single 'effect' that this work has upon the reader, emancipatory or otherwise. What they also suggest is that an apparent division of priorities exists between reading practices which are self-reflexive about their own significance and reading practices that continue to search for (and find) referential significance in the relationship between the text and the external world. However, as I have already implied, these priorities are neither mutually exclusive or dichotomously drawn along a Language/ non Language 'party' line. Scalapino's writing seems able to sustain (even simultaneously) *both* types of readings. Edith Jarolim attributes the significance of her readerly activity to the poem's ability to formulate unconventional sexual narratives; Mark Jarman, conversely, attributes his to the anxiety of the anonymity of contemporary urban life. It is the significance of Scalapino's ability to encourage these readings (supported by very different agendas) to locate the text's formal disruptions within the social realm that I am interested in examining throughout the rest of this chapter.

Section Two: How Shall I be a Mirror to Modernity ?**Part One. Spatial Politics and Modernism.**

Many of the poems included in the collection *that they were at the beach* (the text reviewed by Jarolim et al) can be read as negotiating the relationship between public space and the positioning of the self. For example, the first poem in the collection, 'buildings are at the far end', explores the physical relationship between individuals and their environment in very literal ways. Scalapino's interrogation of the spatial construction of social inequality in this poem is concerned with the tensions within urban spaces: with industrial parks, with children playing on bicycles, with train stations, with high rise buildings, with docks and with wastelands.

Scalapino details, with often minute precision, who moves, how they move, who looks, how they look, who or what is foregrounded and in what way, within a specific urban location.

I work, yet seeing a delivery driver in the sweltering weather I had the sense that he'd come to an area that is vacant. Like a dock or a pier, it didn't have any shade or people - and therefore the duties of the driver are undefined, in terms of the work he's doing.

Yet there's a sense of people - not being there, the area in the sun being remote - but being in an industrial area anyway in sports car, or ordinary cars.

The others in an industrial park, and the driver of the van isolated. (p.3)

This stanza, like most of the poem, seems to be about the way in which social class defines our possession of the world. The delivery driver exists in a space that affords neither protection, company or definition: he works alone, unknown and without shade. The physical vulnerability of his 'sweltering' isolation is contrasted to the existence of those who can afford to construct their own space, who can afford to be invisible. They travel in 'sports' or 'ordinary cars' and their occupation of their industrial space can be sensed rather than seen, they are remote from the van driver and the sun. Private space, Scalapino implies, is not only the enclosed world of the

domestic but is also the ensconced world of class privilege.

This impetus to situate politics within the *local*, as a direct response to the dangers of the universal, was, as I noted in my first chapter, seized upon by many feminist thinkers in the eighties as a way of retaining the political validity of the subject in a non-totalising way. This preoccupation with the local was concurrently supported by an interest in acknowledging the importance of *space* itself as a theoretical category. To think spatially became yet another way of filling in the blanks of a phallogocentric epistemology, another way of denaturalising the exclusionary assumptions that lay beneath the narratives of the modern.

It is time which is aligned with history, progress, civilization and politics and transcendence and coded masculine. And it is the opposites of these things which have in the tradition of western thought, been coded feminine. The exercise of rescuing space from its position in this formulation of stasis, passivity and depoliticisation, therefore, connects directly with a philosophical debate in which gendering and the construction of gender relations are central (Massey 1994, p.6).

This citation is from the introduction to the influential postmodern geographer Doreen Massey's 1994 collection *Space, Place and Gender*. Massey has consistently argued that it is only through recognising the inextricability of the ideological from the spatial (both that the spatial is an ideological construct and that ideology is constructed along the spatial) that the relationship between the material and the conceptual can be fully understood.

Massey is aware that this apparent theoretical panacea is mired in the familiarly ambivalent politics that dominate postmodern thought which, in trying to escape from the pitfalls of modernity, also risks losing its emancipatory narratives. She is keen that her work on the local retains its sense of the political, that it is attuned to the significance of its 'interconnectedness' with broader power relations. This is so crucial, she suggests, because spatiality has implications not only for the study of the global economy (as the significance of the local and global are seen to supersede that of the Nation) but in the playing out of social identities themselves. The intimate relationship between spatiality and identity has been most apparent in the West, Massey suggests, in the 'culturally specific distinctions between public and private. The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control

on identity' (p.179).

Edward Soja, another significant postmodern geographer, observes that the ability of the patriarchy to maintain these once foundational regulatory divisions between the public and private has now been placed under pressure. Soja explores this in *The Trialectics of Spatiality* as he attempts to align the possibilities of 'third space' with the aims and successes of postmodern feminism.¹⁰ A feminism which now recognises, and seeks to exploit, the possibilities of woman's entry into the urban: 'Cityspace is no longer just dichotomously gendered or sexed, it is literally and figuratively transgressed with an abundance of sexual possibilities, pleasures, dangers and opportunities that are always both personal and political and, ultimately, never completely knowable from any singular discursive standpoint' (Soja 1996 p.113). As this citation implies, spatially analysing the gender politics of contemporary living is to significantly expand the terms of the debate: is to include what Soja coyly refers to as the 'geography closest in'. To consider the relationship between public space and the individual is to place the *physical body* in a narrative of civic identity from which its importance is too often excluded. Moreover, this placing of the subject in their spatial location challenges the hierarchical discreteness that the ideological categories of modernity were dependent upon: it acknowledges that the hidden politics of the body and the organisation of physical space are crucial to the distribution of power in society.

The recognition of the significance of spatiality, of corporeality in particular, to subjectivity had been explored much earlier by the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty. Although Merleau-Ponty was not explicitly attempting to refute the logocentric-linearity of modern thought he was, nevertheless, significant for acknowledging the 'primacy of perception' to selfhood. Merleau-Ponty argued, in an essay of that name, that the subject can only really be understood through its relationship with the external world within which it is physically placed.

I grasp myself, not as a constituting subject which is transparent to itself, and which constitutes the totality of every possible object of thought and experience, but as a

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Drawing heavily upon the work of Henri Lefebvre Soja argues that spatial thought allows theory to achieve a 'trialectic' that is capable of encompassing the objectivist/materialist emphasis of what he calls 'first' space and the subjectivist/idealist emphasis of what he describes as 'second space'. 'Third space' undoes the tension between the empirical and the conceptual that Soja considers to have crippled modern thought, it allows for an expanse in which 'everything comes together [...]: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, every day life and unending history' (Soja 1996, p.56).

particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects, as a thought in act [...] Thus I can get outside the psychological cogito, without, however, taking myself to be a universal thinker. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p.22)

This philosophical position was not intended to refute the importance of self-reflection, however, but to establish its *grounding*. 'by placing perception at the centre of consciousness I do not claim that consciousness is enclosed in the observation of natural datum. I mean to say that even when we transform our lives in the creation of a culture - and reflection is an acquisition of this culture - we do not suppress our times to time and space; in fact we utilize them.' (p.40)

It is the way in which Scalapino's writing 'utilises' these relationships in order to highlight the primacy of the politics of the physical self that I want to focus upon in this last two sections of the chapter. I want to suggest, in other words, that in *that they were at the beach* Scalapino can be read as investigating what Edward Soja would probably want to describe as 'third space': her presentation of social identities and social 'realities' (where we work, how we work, with whom we work) serves to demonstrate the inextricability of these two categories. The physical description of the driver and his environment manages to seamlessly combine the literal and the abstract - physical description bleeds into social analysis. This analysis makes it clear that the symbiotic relationship of the conceptual and the material is constructed to serve the economic and social needs of those with authority - the van driver's exclusions from physical shelter is part of his class identity.

An examination of the subject's relationship to the divisions between the public and private has been an issue, as I noted in the first section to this chapter, that has resonated within the tradition of American women's poetry as it has been constructed by feminist academics in the past two and a half decades. Elisabeth Frost's brilliant essay on Leslie Scalapino and Harryette Mullen, for example, locates the work of both poets within a contemporary feminist avant-garde tradition seeking to exploit the fissured divisions between the public and private realms - divisions that were still being hotly contested within the avant-garde writing that was taking place in the first half of this century.¹¹ Frost specifically reads the work of Mullen and Scalapino as subverting

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The relationship between the urbanization of public space and the gendering of modernist/ postmodernist is still being widely debated. Baudelaire's 'flaneur' has become a paradigm for masculinity's contested appropriation of this space. Doreen Massey's analysis of this problematic, for example, builds upon the work of art sociologist Janet Wolff who examines the exclusionary significance of the masculine gaze for modernist art (Massey 1994). Another spatial theorist Elizabeth Wilson alternatively suggests that the image of the flaneur is not one of

Gertrude Stein's 'tendency to isolate intimate, personal experience from the public sphere' (p.2). She suggests that both politicise the work of Stein by placing her poetic innovations within the public contexts which Stein herself recoiled from: 'in their recastings of Stein's "modern" vision, Mullen and Scalapino merge public speech and "private" experience -- the language of the public spheres of the street and the marketplace with the experiences of intimacy and the erotic.' (p.4)

In the introduction to Frost's published interview with Scalapino in *Contemporary Literature* she outlines, as I have done in my introduction above, the central tenets to Scalapino's poetics: 'while many similarly postmodern texts thrive on self-reference, Scalapino's work is rarely reflexive, because, in her view, supposed differentiations between the textual and the "real", or internal and external experience, are false - as is the dichotomy between emotion and intellect' (p.2). In the body of her critical essay on Scalapino Frost acknowledges that key to the poet's ability to politicise the ways in which we occupy space is her interrogation of the social and economic politics of seeing and being seen: 'in White America there is seeing and not seeing, awareness and its lack, *depending on one's position as subject or object of the gaze*' (p.36 italics mine).¹² For Frost, Scalapino is significant because of her ability to make these politics visible, to open 'Stein's erotic discourse [...] to the public sphere. One that women have been frequently excluded from, and that women poets, in an effort to combat the lack of value placed on affect and the "personal" have sometimes deliberately shunned' (p. 38). The ways in which the author and reader are positioned by the text - how the politics of Scalapino as *seeing* agent are represented or diverted, how the *gaze* of the reader is accommodated or inverted - are thus crucial to the wider cultural issues of authority and visibility which these texts appear to be negotiating.

Indeed, Frost's placing of Scalapino within the modernist tradition provides a timely reminder of the importance of examining the 'textual politics' of the expression of self in the written text. Feminist critics have begun to argue, as I noted in my first two chapters, that denying the complicated politics of the subject can be as much an act of authority as exploiting the privileges some associate with them. The 'repudiation of the personality' can, as Maud Ellman, suggests, 'revive its power, together with the metaphysics which enshrines it' just as easily as question its ideologically exclusionary assumptions (Ellman 1987, p.6). Hence, I want to specifically

masculine *mastery* but of masculinity in *crisis* (Wilson 1995).

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Frost points out that the 'trope of invisibility and difference has, of course, long been a presence in African-American literature and theory, from W.E.B Du Bios and James Weldon Johnson to Ralph Ellison and, more recently, Michele Wallace'. (p. 36)

foreground the ways in which Scalapino positions herself, constructs an authorial presence, in her subversive reworking of this earlier avant-garde.¹³

The blank tone of the speaker in *that they were at the beach* suggests a lack of any overt subjective presence or emotional investment in the text. The speaker's description of the van driver's social marginalisation is not reducible to the emotions of the observer. However, this lack of identification does not prevent him or her from acknowledging the politics of their own position in the construction of this apparently 'objective' scene. They are part of it and yet are also a privileged observer - 'I work, yet'. At other points in the text this relative positioning of self is used to more explicitly demonstrate the *interconnectedness* of these spaces as the subject moves, associatively, between them.

There's the industrial park near the water. Some people are fired, and money is put into the company.

I was fired - not from there, but the same things occurred - and it comes out of the association of me with the person whom I previously disliked. Where dislike for him was an end in itself. And companies - that are not in the area where I am - are at the far end from me; I'm where I live. People are past me, who don't work there.

Working, but from some place else. (p.10)

The speaking subject's sense of self is pivotal to this stanza, what he/she did and who he/she liked (or rather didn't like), is recognised as affecting how other events are consequently perceived and rendered significant in the text. The almost pained identification or memory that is attributed to this self, 'I was fired [...] the same things occurred', is made safe through the self's physical distancing from these events, which are 'at the far end/ from me; I'm where I live. People are past me, who don't work there'.

The self is located in this text as occupying a position of compromised privilege. Integral to

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Implicit in Frost's suggestion that Mullen and Scalapino move Stein's texts into the social is a consideration of their treatment of the broader politics of the subject that Stein successfully avoided. Frost is well aware of the debates that have raged around Stein's own disavowal of the 'other' in the racial politics of texts such as 'Melanctha'. Her reading of Haryette Mullen's work is especially sensitive to Mullen's reworking of Stein's refusal to interrogate her own position of racial privilege.

its sensitivity to the vulnerabilities of the socially marginalised's relationship to place and identity is its own complex relationship to this vulnerability, what almost appears to be a fear of it.

This is in the area before the train station. there are large buildings with space in between them, and expensive cars are present but not moving.

I'm in one of the buildings in a confined place - a man, who's elsewhere and who was very old, dying, he'd wanted to die and so it's all right. The woman in the domestic setting wishing to feel that way and being very old herself. I walked down the hill, swinging my arms, and am in the train: and am therefore even further away from the woman - one who's not old - who's behind the buildings. (p.9)

The stanza highlights the subject's privileged ability to escape from places of poverty. An escape that is made more acute by its juxtaposition with the restrictions others face. The woman in the 'confined [...] domestic setting' can only escape from the deprivations of old age through death, something that she wishes she could welcome. The speaker's reaction to this is given no interior narrative but the description of their body's movement, the swinging arms as they descend the hill, suggests the contradictory sensations of freedom and guilt that infuse much of the poem. The final reference to the 'one who's not old - who's behind the buildings', who has also been left behind, reinforces this sense of something akin to shame as we are reminded that the limited choices of poverty, of those behind the buildings, are not only about old age.

That Scalapino associates a troubled negotiation of these places of urban tension with a train journey away from them is characteristic of the poem. Her interrogation of the way in which power is spatialised places much emphasis on the authority bestowed by mobility and visibility; hierarchies are controlled by those who can *see* and by those who can move:

[...]In front of that I'm by
the person who's lying near the buildings. People older than I but not
old walking in front of me, the person who's the beggar would just be

seen and not act.

And have been inactive actually in life. Having really occurred (p. 12).

The self in the poem has, of course, complete access to these privileged faculties of the physical, the poem is structured around the narrator's observations about the significance of its own movements and subsequent placing: 'so, I'm in the foreground' , 'I'm walking', 'I had my back to the bus'. Scalapino is aware of the contradiction that the self in her text necessarily embodies, as she strives to both acknowledge the relativity of the placing and actions of self, and yet to avoid becoming, as she quite literally states in later poems in this collection, the text's 'seer'.

Section Two, Part Two.

Poets and Seers.

Many of the poems in *Crowd and not evening or light*, Scalapino's 1992 collection, continue to describe the complex interactions of class and gender in the physical landscape. In poems such as 'The series - as fragile - 2', the second poem in the collection, Scalapino seems to contrast the significance she attributes to her own activity with the acts of consumption and production which surround her. Early in the poem she describes the frustrations, and the accommodating strategies, of every day urban living.

the men - or boys - they are usually - would
 be - rowdy - not being curtailed - which they aren't in
 the jam - leaning out from the souped
 car - freeway - jam - the crowd
 in most - cars - as not being the matter
 of it (Scalapino 1992a, p.11).

The traffic jam does not frustrate the 'men or boys' it has ensnarled, this stanza seems to suggest,

because its public space does not 'curtail' them, they use this enforced encounter with it to articulate their control over it: they are rowdy, they lean out of their cars. Yet Scalapino's apparent critique of these privileged masculine identities in this poem reaches to more sophisticated ends, as the end of this stanza suggests this 'is not the matter of it'.

Scalapino goes on in the poem to investigate the *costs* of this blithe and assertive behaviour.

that it's not a matter - that - one would be
 selling things - and writing this - its as
 not the dichotomy - whether it is - and
 supposing it is - only - the hard - constant
 - trashing of things

or - not

thinking there's something wrong - that is the
 substance of - their - working
 that's that activity - there - in the mere
 hard - trashing - of things - for them to be industrious (p.11)

These stanzas suggest that Scalapino's critique of urban life is not concerned with the differences between 'selling things - and writing', she is not simply holding up the role of art as distinct and sacred compared to that of commerce. What Scalapino seems to be objecting to, in this poem, is that so much of that which is deemed 'industrious' is only about the 'hard trashing of things', a destruction that is dangerous because it doesn't allow for 'thinking there is something wrong' but encourages an acceptance of the status quo.

Although this text hints at an aversion to those 'completely enveloped in the mass', who are without critical thought as it were, the poem actually seems more concerned with critiquing this thought, that can appear to leave the 'masses' so untouched, than in condemning those outside of an intellectual elite. It is as if the text's confidence in its own efficacy is faltering in these later poems - 'How shall I be a mirror to modernity', Scalapino asks at several points, 'being the reverse.' It is not only the difficulties of her ability to emulate William Carlos Williams' narration of America which is aired in this poem, later she talks of 'a writing// a certain flabby - or flaccid

- and/ so the reverse of Rimbaud'. Rimbaud and Williams are conjoined in the poem by virtue of an apparent reversal of what both stand for. Despite the thirty years and the ocean which separated Rimbaud and Williams there is an obvious point of connection: both were in a tradition of avant-garde or modernist writing that sought to relinquish poetic mimesis, to make 'words shed their natural and conventional associations'.¹⁴ Intrinsic to the conviction that language did not transparently reflect the world, for both, was the belief that writing a verse that acted upon this knowledge was potentially revolutionary. Thus Williams, in a letter to Robert Creeley in 1950, talked of his own 'moral programme' to challenge 'bad art': 'to write badly is an offence to the State since the government can never be more than the government of words [...] bad art is that which does not serve in the continual service of cleansing the language of all fixations upon dead, stinking dead, usages of the past' (Allen and Tallman 1973, p.140). Rimbaud, in an even more grandiose move, cast himself as a 'seer' able to renew society through poetry:

for Rimbaud society is to be forged anew through the medium of poetic language. The recognition of a disjunction between words and things no longer generates a feeling of loss and anxiety but provides a sort of mandate for the creative destruction of the world [...] perhaps his most radical idea in this regard is that the concept of genius might actually become the means of *transcending* private egotism; as art flows into life, the acts of genius might in some sense become collective ones' (Nicholls 1995, p.29 and p.32).

The rest of 'The series - as fragile - 2' shifts around critiquing this tradition of poetics left by Williams and Rimbaud. It is as if the moment of renewal to which these modernist writers clung so fervently, allied as it is to a shamanistic or heroic subject position, is acknowledged as having

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The quotation is from Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, cited in Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, (Perloff 1981, p.55). In this work Perloff suggests that Rimbaud was the first 'undecidable' in a tradition which includes Pound, Williams, Stein. A tradition characterised by 'symbolic evocations generated by words on a page no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not.' (p.18) However, Perloff goes on to suggest that much of Williams' work sits uncomfortably within this tradition. Perloff describes the poem 'Asphodel', for example, as 'stately and consistent, an autobiographical lyric in the Romantic tradition' (p.153).

passed, the poem is redolent with a tone of resignation rather than passion.¹⁵ Scalapino's doubts seem aimed not only at her own ability to 'mirror' society but about society's ability to do anything but expedite its own destruction, a destruction that the avant-garde seems unable to significantly arrest. The poem thus moves, a little inexplicably at times, from considering the circularity of 'criticism - and/ as therefore not existing / when/ it comes to something' to the 'deep loneliness' of poverty that exists untouched. To return to Rimbaud to overcome these failures is, the poem suggests, negative or anachronistic.

not go anywhere, though not believing in
 anything - as being real failure - and
 so as literally negative - pushed back to being the
 same as Rimbaud but not in his - period
 - or as the criticism

slum people - not about poverty
 - as that - don't do anything
 - their -
 - as not able - on the
 bottom circumstance - as coming to something
 - as to do that situation - again (p.16)

Again, the paralysis of the socially marginalised is highlighted in Scalapino's spatial overview, 'slum people' are not able to respond or react to their 'bottom circumstance', and poetry offers nothing to alleviate this stasis.

This reading emerges with difficulty from what seems to be an increasingly inaccessible text. It is not the shocking elements of Scalapino's earlier writing that fuels this difficulty, however, but

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Linda Kinnahan's innovative work *The Poetics of the Feminine* explicates the ambivalent position that W. C. Williams now occupies for a tradition of feminist experimental writers, she suggests that he 'stands at a bridge between a Poundian modernism and a female counter strain, a position that is often conflicted and contradictory' (Kinnahan 1994, p.3). One of the central contradictions that Kinnahan is aware of is that although Williams is, for the most part, self reflexive about his own masculinist authority this reflection is, at times, in danger of sounding like complicity. Kinnahan specifically cites Bryce Conrad's condemnation of Williams 'repetition of the founding myth of the patriarchy - Eve got out of Adam's rib' but concludes that 'whether this blind spot bespeaks an anxiety on William's part or a misogynist participation in the tradition of writing history that has neglected women's cultural contribution is difficult to gauge.' (p.117)

a sense of the mundane. The frantic energy that fused the inexplicable images and shifts of attention in Scalapino's early work is now broken into short staccato and unconnected phrases. The poem is constructed around negations that do not clearly prefix anything, and by reversals and digressions that it is often almost impossible to trace. It is as if the style reflects the poem's faltering anxiety about its ability to meaningfully connect with a fragmenting social world. The political significance that Scalapino seems able to attribute to her mapping of the landscape from within which she is writing seems to falter here. Her ability to analyse the spatial and social implications of the individual's physical presence no longer seems to provide her work with sufficient motivation. A more direct address with this physical world seems to be sought.

Conclusion. A Plot in a Continual Series of Actions.

Scalapino's critique of the failure of the authorial paradigms of modernist literature, that I emphasise in my reading of 'The series - as fragile - 2' in *Crowd and Not Evening or Light*, can be seen as influencing some of the work that she has published in the nineties. In this decade Scalapino's writing seems to have changed direction somewhat, as genres other than poetry have come to largely dominate her published oeuvre.¹⁶ In 1991, the year before *Crowd and not evening or light*, *The Return of Painting*, *The Pearl and Orion: A Trilogy* was published. In many ways this work builds upon Scalapino's preoccupation with analysing the relationship between the politics of the subject and the politics of public space.

She had a job which was simple, for money. The job was waiting on guests at the table of a blind ninety-six-year-old woman who was astonishingly perceptive though wealthy from birth. Money from birth is a lack. The young woman had to stay over night, away from home. Waking in the morning to wait on the very old blind woman, only she could see the view, bright blue from their very high building among other high buildings and the Bay. Not wear- // a uniform, she went down and bought a newspaper at the Mark Hopkins Hotel.

There is no low work, but the people recognised the young woman who was not so young, thirty-five, and her function. Wearing her ordinary clothes (Scalapino 1997, p.5-6).¹⁷

In this extract, from 'The Return of Painting', the physical and complicated realities of age, of class, of menial work, of clothes and of 'functions' are brought into play. The younger woman (although 'not so young') waits on the elderly rich woman. Although she is rendered subservient by this relationship (she sleeps away from home, she feels disdained in the hotel shop) the irony

¹⁶ Scalapino did continue to write poetry into the nineties, in 1996 Wesleyan University Press published *New Time*. The text went out of print in 1998. Excerpts from it are available in the journal *Raddle Moon* (vol. 15) and in Maggie O'Sullivan's anthology *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK*

¹⁷ A new edition of this text was brought out in 1997. Citations are from this edition.

of the fact that only *she* can see the view, which the blind woman has paid for, is also recognised.

The work is entitled 'A Novel' and its descriptiveness suggests a more prosaic style than much of Scalapino's earlier writing. One of the central differences between this apparent prosody and her earlier poetry is that, although still concentrating on similar issues, the writing appears less hesitant. The fragmented style that I have attributed to *Crowd and Not Evening or Light* (whose final poem resists printed text entirely in favour of photographs and sometimes near indecipherable written text) is replaced by dense description. This prose does not, however, resolve itself into narrative cohesion, the descriptions it presents are often obfuscatory in their difficulty. Scalapino's poetics, her refusal to adhere to conventional differentiations, are not being relinquished in this writing. As the text itself notes, 'by doing them' then the writing has 'violated' or is 'going against the procedures of the novel' (p.15). What *is* distinctive about this writing, however, is the presence of precisely this type of self-descriptive statement. Scalapino's later writing yields some form of exegesis; many of these later texts present the reader with some insight as to how meaning for them can be formed.

This move toward self-referential explanation is integral to the practices of Language writing. In publishing two collections of critical and theoretical essays Scalapino can be seen as participating in the more specific expansion, and thus complication, of Language writing that, I have suggested, was occurring in the work of individual writers from the mid-eighties onwards. In this respect these texts can be compared to Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birthmark*, and Lyn Hejinian's *Two Stein Talks*. That these acts of explanation preceded a more general public recognition for each poet, indicated most obviously by the publication of early or collected works, is unsurprising.¹⁸ However, what is so interesting about this move in Scalapino's work is that it did not, unlike either Hejinian's or Howe's, explicitly invoke an explanatory subjective presence. In Scalapino's writing the 'metatext' is presented within the more impersonal generic conventions of the novel, the subject remains a physical structure. Following the essay collections, Scalapino published *Defoe*, a 'novel' described by its publishers, Sun and Moon Press, as an 'epic'. The long essay *The Line* and the play *The Weatherman Turns Himself In*, followed in the next two years (Scalapino 1994b; Scalapino 1995b). It is a reading of the most recent of these prose works, *The Front Matter*, *Dead Souls*, that I want to form my final

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In 1994 Sun and Moon Press published a collection of Hejinian's early work *The Cold of Poetry*. In 1996 New Directions published *Frame Structures*, a collection of Howe's early poetry, and Talisman House published *Green and Black* a selection of Scalapino's writing.

conclusion to this chapter. This text clearly places itself in conjunction with Scalapino's other work published in the nineties. Much of *The Line*, for example, is reworked in the later publication and some of the characters (most notably the eponymous protagonist) and settings of *Defoe* reappear within it. It is the 'markers' common to these texts, and what they signify for Scalapino's positioning of self and reader, that I want to examine in this conclusion.

Consistent with Scalapino's other writing, *Front Matter* is concerned with examining urban interactions. It is, according to its dust cover, 'loosely based in LA' and depicts the violence and tensions of the city's underclass.

Defoe turns around from looking at the ocean. Passing the pond, she goes to the latter's (Dead Souls') door.

who's open spread as a clam but away from her. She can't see what's inside the folds of robes, which the boy has just left.

Suited men are outside on the street leaning on cars. One time, a man dark-haired finds her and begins questioning her. His eyes almost closed and his lips parted, the women employees run in little steps even when there's no one apparently watching [...]

His eyes are steely when he opens them on her. He asks whether she knows her employer is a dealer, and regardless she's an accessory unless she's willing to inform for him. (Scalapino 1996c, p.8)

The implication is that Defoe and Dead Souls are prostitutes, and that their 'employer' is a drug dealer. The vulnerability of this combination, reflected by Defoe's passive acceptance of the exposed and silent Dead Soul, is reinforced by the accusatory contempt that the police display toward Defoe. As with Scalapino's earlier work the political underpinnings of these hierarchical relationships are conveyed through a sensitivity to spatial positioning. The 'suited men' lean on cars, the casualness of this posture contrasts against the nervous quick steps of the women whom they may be looking at. When the policeman chooses to look at Defoe then the authority of this gaze is felt to be cold and grippingly visceral.

Both *Defoe* and *Front Matter* present these characters as points of recognition and even identification. They are often occluded, however, by the appearance of the fantastic or the grotesque. These interventions are used, as in earlier texts, to signal the political configurations that construct the individual's relationship to the social. Scalapino's descriptions of what appears to be sexual intercourse for these women, for example, seems to be deliberately estranging in order to highlight the calculated violation that is occurring.

His immense haunches puts the part in, one time.
The wavering bulk moves coming. Then he leaves.

On time, he's straining with his part up in her comes.
His face floats in front of her then. [...]

Defoe goes by some swinging doors to a room one time.
She sees a woman entwined with the immense bulk on
which is the head of the thug. (p.6)

The alienating effect of frank brutality is accentuated by another's witnessing of it. The use of identification and estrangement are demonstrated to be not mutually exclusive.

Frequently, it is not this estrangement that disrupts the local narrative but the attempt to interrogate the relationship between the local and the global. The register of the text shifts abruptly in these instances; it stretches beyond an analysis of the minutiae of the urban, to an analysis of the politics of what we do not see.

The only police came later slowly cruising after the cruising cars packed with boys that went by. The hills were sheets of flames and dissolving frames.

Collapsing locations onto other places scrutinises them.
It doesn't now. Or juxtapose.
[...]

While Bechtel is reconstructing the oil fields ours
have bombed, in the oil fields their foreign workers who're
treated like slaves are executed for sympathizing with their
invaders. (p.20)

In this citation Scalapino apparently brings together an allusion to riot stricken LA with images of burning oil fields and foreign workers, images that obviously bring to mind the Gulf conflict of 1991. This move to scrutinise the politics of location by juxtaposing them with other places, and so connecting them to other events, is not untypical of the text. Its apocalyptic vision of LA is often bolstered with references not only to immediate sources of tension - prostitution, a corrupt police force, even the Rodney King case is apparently referred to - but with the broader acts of violence with which this society is complicit. Scalapino's relationship to the politics of the public sphere now seeks to encompass the dense terrain of the relationship between America's international politics and its domestic and industrial interests. The politics of place is shown to be almost infinitely elastic in this text, as it almost randomly expands to include the global or contracts to include the bodily.

Unlike *Defoe*, which exploits the conventions of first-person fiction, *Front Matter* is constructed around the existence of a third-person narrator who observes and records the interaction of others. This narratorial presence is interrupted not only by that which is alienating, but also by a textual metacommentary. The introduction to the work (and the fact that it is actually described as such is significant of Scalapino's changing attitude to the reader) begins by announcing its own excluded status from the public sphere in which it wants to be perceived as operating. This rejection suggests the existence of a very conscious rift between the way in which Scalapino envisaged the text as being consumed and our actual knowledge of its more limited and conventional presentation in a book form.

The Front Matter, Dead Souls is a serial novel for publication in the newspaper. Its paragraph length chapters can also be published singly on billboards or outdoors as murals. Parts of it were submitted to various newspapers during the election campaign, though not accepted. (p.1)

What this rift signals is a growing awareness in the text that its poetical aims are not automatically enacted by the reader. In place of the belief in the emancipatory difficulty of the Language mode is an acknowledgement of the text as an ongoing and *immediate* performance for the reader who requires something like stage directions in order to understand it. Alongside Scalapino's desire to see the text enter the radically public and politicised space of a newspaper, billboard or mural (although whether this was ever really realistically intended or whether it is an unheightened irony is left typically ambivalent) sits her now familiarly uncompromising poetics.

This is a plot in a continual series of actions. The writing of events is not a representation of these events, actions are not submitted to being made peaceful by doctrine or interpretation, that is, in a fake manner, but artificially by finding their own movement and a dual balance in an impermanence of the structure

The form is to bring (actually to be) 'the American grain' (p 1)

The refusal of these poetics to distinguish between writing and representation occupies a rather paradoxical place here. The ability of the writing to 'be' the American grain is acknowledged to result not from its formal difficulties but from reading practices which it explicitly signals

Our vice president, who links the acceptance of a single mother by the viewers of a TV series, which such is undermining family values to the riots, thinks firing of cities arises from being born

he should be as dumb as cattle

The images of something real is contemplated as seeing which doesn't exist there. Subject it to seeing which may not ever be its occurrence. Then the images that's real exists solely (p 49)

The ineptness of, presumably, George Bush's vice president, Dan Quayle, is associatively connected to the misplaced authority of those able to destroy cities and lives.¹⁹ Scalapino's return to the unjust and calculatedly naive discourses wielded by those in authority, is intimately linked to the potency of image making, to the knowledge that such images are indivisible from our experience of the 'real'. It is precisely this, the way in which material realities are covered over by ideological discourses and events, that Scalapino's texts seem interested in revealing. Although, obviously, the desire to unpick these secreted investments in public politics only becomes significant when shared with the reader, this moment of realisation does not depend upon the reader's response to their formal positioning. The desire of the writing to make visible the material politics of seeing, of identity, of authority, does not depend for significance upon the activity associated with experimental writing, but are written into its narrative. The reader's hoped for response is woven into the text's thematic preoccupations.

Whether the text is *able* to actually elicit these responses is, as the above survey of Scalapino's reviews suggests, something of a moot point. What can be said with more certainty, however, is that this writing, and its uncompromising insistence that 'the outer now current culture' *is* 'the inner self', is less assimilable to other reading practices than much of the work examined in this dissertation (Scalapino 1996c, p.5). Scalapino may, like Hejinian and Howe, provide metatextual guidance but, unlike them, this guidance is rarely demarcated along the already known lines of, for example, autobiography or the critical essay. *Front Matter* may confidently announce itself as a 'serial novel for publication in a newspaper' and later explain that this is because 'it's written chapter by chapter where's there no accumulation in that an event has to come up again/ Bravado is false action, fake. The ego simply being in the reverberation of its reaction' but this explanation, although theoretically familiar in ways already described, does not explicitly *direct* a reading practice (Scalapino 1996c, p.23). The text's movements, from theory, to description, to social/ spatial analysis, are hard to reconcile, even in a subversive or self-conscious way, with the expectation that we are reading a novel to be serialised in a newspaper. Too often the self-description and the text fail to synthesise into a convincing whole; the writing offering moments of illumination and analysis, but not recognition and cohesion.

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I am taking this citation to be referring to the remark reportedly made by Quayle, towards the end of his term in office, that the popular situation comedy *Murphy Brown*, which featured a lone mother, was adding to the moral degeneracy of the country.

The paradoxes of an innovative/postmodern textual praxis for a feminist practice, that I detailed in my introductory chapter, do not appear to be easily resolved in Scalapino's work, even when, ironically, the text is explicit about its theoretical framework. A recent review of *The Front Matter, Dead Souls* in Scalapino's local *Bay Guardian* illuminates this final problematic. The review suggests, in an almost direct contradiction to what Bruce Campbell and Barrett Watten implied was most subversive about Scalapino's writing, that 'the ultimate response to the book would be to not read it at all, to deny it the time and space that it denies its characters' (Winter, 1996). The irony of the fact, that what makes this writing so difficult, so unreadable, is precisely that it *does* give its characters time and space, only reinforces the apparently unbridgeable distance between these two reading positions. The question that this later work of Scalapino's asks most directly is, finally, the question that the thesis answers most indirectly. It is whether this innovative writing, when it cannot be located within feminism's known narratives, can still usefully contribute anything to the construction of its politics, or whether it requires the construction of another reading mode.

Conclusion. Another Reading Mode ?

The single certainty that can be concluded from this work is that the Language mode, and its claims for a textual disruption that result in readerly praxis, can not adequately explain the work of Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino. However, this assertion was always more of a starting than a finishing point. As I suggested in the introduction, I was more interested in examining the *implications* that these claims have had for this work than in disproving their validity. What these claims actually meant in practice, as the first section to each individual chapter aims to have demonstrated, is that what I have been terming the cultural politics of this writing - its relationship to authority, to other reading priorities, to other types of cultural theory, to its own inevitable institutionalisation - were too easily overlooked by a reading practice seemingly more intent on celebration than evaluation. The actual conclusion to the thesis has to begin, therefore, in an examination of what emerged from my critique of these reading practices, in a dissection of what conclusions can be taken from my analysis of the relationship between this writing and its cultural politics. In stepping into this more difficult ground than there are, perhaps obviously, fewer certainties to be claimed. It is possibly easier to begin by examining what *cannot* be concluded.

Firstly, my aim has never been to make exhaustive claims about the efficacy, or even the limitations, of Language writing itself. My interest in that which I designated the Language mode was more concerned to examine, with a specific example, how the 'turn to language' altered the perception of the political remit of literature than in examining the rise and fall of a literary school. This is not to say, however, that I do not think that it is more generally the case that the appeal of Language writing's early rhetoric - like the appeal of poststructuralism itself - is on the wane, and has been for sometime. It is not only that Language writing now, as a literal movement, has all but dissipated but that the writers once collected under its umbrella are multiplying in ever more disparate ways. Indeed, as I noted above, the radical claims that I have been critiquing, although tremendously influential, never really achieved a hegemonic consensus, among either writers or critics. What marks my *own* particular scepticism towards these claims is that it was intended not as a simple refutation of the significance of this writing, but as evidence of the need to re-examine how this significance should be attributed. In critiquing the assumptions of the

Language mode, in attempting to modify the criteria through which this writing is read, my aim was really to mark out the theoretical distance that I think specific writers had travelled. It was part of a concern to place what is so often described as the 'crisis' in the subject or in the author within its cultural context and to examine how this context has now changed. Simply put, I wanted to examine how this sense of crisis has been incorporated by feminist discourses, and consequently by women writers with an investment in them. My interest was in examining how this writing could be read practically read outside of the Language 'moment', what it contributed to the development of discourses beyond those influential upon the mode within which it was initially read.

The obvious consequence of this reluctance to make generalisations about Language writing is that I am also extremely cautious about drawing the conclusions, that my work may tempt, based upon the movement's (or the individual writer's) relationship to issues of gender. The type of conclusion I am alluding to were implied, for example, in Marjorie Perloff's review (cited in my introduction) of the anthology *Out of Everywhere* in *Contemporary Literature*, in which Perloff suggested that women poets were more specifically concerned to place 'selfhood in larger cultural and social perspective', to place less emphasis upon formal technique and more on the issues surrounding the 'historical, the literary and mythological' than their male colleagues (Perloff 1996, p.587). Although it is true that male writers versed in the specifics of postmodern and Marxist theory produced much of the specific theory behind the Language mode, writers such as Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews and Barret Watten, and perhaps it is even true that these writers continued with these preoccupations, or retreated into irony, in ways different to the women poets I have examined, I am not attempting to make any conclusions on these grounds.¹

There are three reasons for this reluctance. Firstly, and most obviously, is the fact that my actual research has not been broad reaching enough to support such contentions. Secondly, is that I think such a claim would necessitate attributing some kind of integrity to the effects that the identity of the movement had on the individual writer that I have been at pains to problematise

¹ Bob Perelman's comparison of Lyn Hejinian and Ron Silliman in *The Marginalisation of Poetry* is instructive of these types of complexities. Perelman notes that the potency of Hejinian's writing derives from the fact that it manages to construct narratives from the 'purely autonomous, politically efficacious new sentence' of Ron Silliman. This act is necessary, Perleman suggests, lest the Language writer be left with only 'fictions, metaphorical condensations' (Perleman 1996, p.78) Yet the fact that this critique is Bob Perelman's, who was active in the construction of the Language mode, as much of this book testifies, complicates any ability to suggest that this act of renarrative is solely about gender.

and qualify. Thirdly, and probably most significantly, my interest has not simply been in examining the work of women poets who *rejected* the influence of the Language mode in *favour* of a specifically gendered writing, although such poets undoubtedly exist. I have been interested in the more complicated juxtapositions and compromises, that the poetics of Howe, Hejinian and Scalapino have all involved, as they brought together Language writing's suspicion of the subject with feminist theory's demand that it be retained.

None of these caveats, however, imply that I think that the writing of Howe, Hejinian or Scalapino is any way enormously exceptional or radically different to the work of many other female experimental poets writing in this period. I cited in my first chapter, for example, the dialogue between Rae Armantrout and Ron Silliman in which Armantrout argued for the potential of bringing together Language writing's critiques and feminist theory. A detailed examination of Armantrout's own work, and its relationship to the lyric, could have been fruitfully analysed within the parameters of this work. Of the other poets and issues who could have been productively studied in the thesis, then Carla Harryman, whose work explicitly foregrounds issues of gender and genre mutability, Joan Rettalack, whose prioritising of the visual reinterprets the politics of reading in new and innovative ways, or Johanna Drucker, whose writing examines selfhood and autobiography, were all potential choices.

The strategies of selfhood adopted by each poet I chose to exemplify my final argument can all be read, so I have been centrally contending, as attempts to accommodate the duelling themes of contemporary thought - of agency and determination. What these acts of reconciliation share, I want to conclude by suggesting, is that the subject which they resulted in was formed through a recognition of the tension, seemingly endemic to literary feminism, between politics and formalism: between the need to understand literature (in Jane Gallop's terms) 'extrinsically' as a culturally located act, or 'intrinsically' as able to interrogate the implications of its own textuality. The writing of each poet examined in the thesis consistently refuses to dichotomise the divisions between the social and the textual, divisions that were actually becoming more fraught as the subject was placed under pressure.

The subject in Susan Howe's writing, for example, is realised through a notion of history that strives to acknowledge this tension between the extrinsic and intrinsic significance of the written word. Howe's histories are at once both actual (archival, physical) and exploitative of the

fact that the meanings within this documentation are as textually unstable as they are physically permanent or culturally powerful. Similarly, Leslie Scalapino's construction of self may be grounded in a heightened awareness of its physical location but this physicality is contrasted not against its written nature but against a privileging of the inner world. Scalapino's investigation into corporeality is mediated by philosophical abstractions that refuse to make such distinctions, which refuse to distinguish between the written text and the physical world it describes. Lyn Hejinian's work negotiates this tension, between the real and the written, most explicitly as the subject narrated in her work emerges from the point of resistance between the experientiality of self knowledge and the generic conventions of the written structures through which culture organises this knowledge.

Hejinian's strategy is also useful, I want to suggest, to explicating further the significance of Howe and Scalapino. Like Hejinian, each of these poets stress the significance of their *writing* practices for their articulation of subjectivity. The generic innovations practised by each allowed them to combine reading expectations, literary histories, 'social contracts', with a challenge to the hierarchical categorisations, and the theories of representation, that writing generically also invokes. Thus, for example, Susan Howe's fusing of the critical essay and the poem aspires, in the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, to present 'textuality (style, rhetoric, image, resistant diction, insouciant tone, weird page space, ploys opening out the book, visual text, multiplex of genres)' as a 'social practice' (DuPlessis 1996, p.24). Leslie Scalapino's shift to the 'serial novel' is similarly accompanied by a self-conscious desire that the text enter (or, rather, be read as entering) the public spaces that are often denied the textual insurrections of the experimental poet.

These reflections on the cultural status of what is being written are increasingly accompanied, in the work of all three poets, by acts of exegesis, as the role of the reader is increasingly narrativised, rather than subversively expected, by the text. This change, which marks the distance between these writers and the rhetoric of the Language mode, can also be read as supporting my contention that this writing can be usefully located *outside* of this rhetoric and within more current debates about the significance of the relationship between subjectivity, literature, and politics. Moreover these narratives, as they increasingly depend upon and entertain popular and less 'difficult' art forms, also suggest a relinquishment of the avant-garde aspirations that informed much early Language writing and that made its relationship to the reader, despite

its own claims, so problematic for so many critics.

What is also obvious at this point, however, is that the thesis is not attempting to argue that these expressions of selfhood, and the different flavour of their overtures to the reader, provide a panacea for the dilemmas of a postmodern literary feminism. The thesis also seeks to make apparent the problems which carrying out this project incurred for these poets. The first, and most simple, is that these strategies did not always succeed; this writing did not always fully address the significance of its own relationship to writing and authority. Although Leslie Scalapino and Lyn Hejinian go some way to acknowledging this central problematic, to finding forms of self-representation appropriate to this paradox that requires selfhood be located before its meanings and authority can be challenged, the same can not be so easily said for the writing of Susan Howe, whose writing is in danger of constructing textuality as something capable of *escaping*, rather than always acknowledging, the significance of its conditions of production. The desire to decentre oneself, to 'sprawl' in the words of Charles Olson, is not the same, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has so explicitly asserted, as experiencing cultural marginality, and the danger of eliding the two is the danger of silencing alterity.

The second problem, and one less easily resolvable, concerns the broader significance attributable to all of this writing. The question that was finally asked at the end of my last chapter also reverberates unanswered in this conclusion. It is whether this writing's interrogation of selfhood, and its knowing relationship to the complexities of politics and textuality, can be meaningfully read *without* the establishment of yet another, different, reading mode: the type of mode that this thesis can actually be read as theorising in many ways. The irony is, of course, that such a reading practice is, perhaps inevitably, in danger of reproducing the same ambivalences I attributed to the Language mode. Although much of the work I have examined may latterly provide a metatext for the reader to work within it is never clear that this can return to it the radical political praxis that was once claimed on its behalf.

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