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“The Mouth Is Just a Body Filled With Imagination”
Experimentation, Hunger and Dreams
in Lyn Hejinian’s and Bernadette Mayer’s Language Poetry

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Work your ass off to change the language

& never get famous

–Bernadette Mayer

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Abstract

This Master's thesis concentrates on the Language poetry of Lyn Hejinian (1941-) and Bernadette Mayer (1945-), specifically focusing on their long poems of the quotidian –*My Life* (1980) and *Midwinter Day* (1982)– but also addressing their remaining literary production when appropriate. Preceded by a general introduction on Language poetry and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement, this study sets to analyze Hejinian's and Mayer's understanding of the relationship between the body and the text, highlighting their insistence on formal structure and their portrayal of hunger and dreams as everyday processes which are, nevertheless, intrinsically related to the power of literature. To pursue these objectives, I base my research on the seminal work of authors such as Jerome J. McGann, Ranjan Ghosh or Ernest Hartmann, among other secondary sources. To conclude, I reflect upon Language poetry's conception of the female experience and its successful empowerment of women writers through acts of creation and experimentation. Privileging the text in itself is, as I demonstrate, a way of successfully transgressing academic and gender hierarchies.

Introduction

After the confessional trend of the 1950s and 1960s, American poetry experienced yet again a change in its conception of the poetic subject. In the case of women authors, especially, this signified the move from an omnipotent, tormented first-person speaker to a more collective, comprehensive realization of the literary “I.” Postconfessionalism (in all its different variants, from the autobiographical exercises of Louise Glück to the historical unorthodoxy of Susan Howe) sets out not only to revert confessional understandings of subjecthood but also to contest the authoritative, hierarchical models of the literary tradition. According to Hejinian, “the individual is a figure that steadfastly, in Western cultures, appears at the apex of hierarchical structures; it stakes its claims on them and establishes itself as their dominating figure” (109). It is from a similar premise that Robert Grenier announced the departure from the speaking subject in his 1971 “On Speech” manifesto and set the foundations for what would later be the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E “school” – the only real subjects in poetry, in his view, are the poem and its language.

Lyn Hejinian (1941-) and Bernadette Mayer (1945-) appeared as women poets in the “world of blatant sexism” (Mayer, *Poetry Foundation* Interview) of the 1970s, a world where even the most acclaimed feminist critics marginalized them for the unconventionality of their works. Their poetry is one of profound experimentation, where orthographical, grammatical and conceptual norms are frequently overlooked and deemed obsolete. Their intention to *change the language* merges with their feminist standpoint, creating a poetic context where “the body of the text” –an eminently female, self-generative and experimental body– is the ultimate adversary of patriarchal forms. Hejinian is socially committed, often integrating the American and Russian reality of Leningrad (where she spent several periods of her life); Mayer is eccentric, witty and voluntarily contradictory. Both of them, within their respective

styles, re-evaluate the female quotidian experience through formal activity and, in Gertrude Stein's fashion, counteract the traditional models of a male-dominated literary canon: "Something I always knew it's all Aristotle's fault," writes Mayer in the preface to her book *Sonnets*. All in all, "their gender-conscious works interrogate the ways in which literary and discursive forces interact with structures of patriarchal power" (Keller 562).

Taking into account these considerations, this Master's thesis provides an introduction to the Language poetry of Hejinian and Mayer through an evaluation of the most remarkable features of their seminal works: the long poems *My Life* (1980) and *Midwinter Day* (1982). In addition, I have aimed to analyze their particular conception of the relationship between the body and the text, concentrating on the realms of hunger and dreams, which curiously stand out in these otherwise heterogeneous works. Hunger and dreams in both poets, as I will argue, express an inherent creative, self-generative and unconscious "appetite" for literature, while offering the possibility of re-incorporating the body in poetry as a textual entity. In order to achieve these objectives, I have revisited the most important part of their extensive oeuvre, alluding to other Language poets' works whenever opportune.

The methodology on which this dissertation is based responds to the necessity of a departure from a conventional treatment of the primary sources. In the absence of a dominant poetic persona, the poem's content loses its traditional relevance and merges with the analysis of formal and linguistic strategies. Indeed, "the fantasy that motivates Language poetry is ... a fantasy of no situation [where] content seems always so punitive" (Izenberg 148). Thus, despite alluding to the psychosocial reality these poems evoke, I have mostly concentrated on a closer reading of the text as an independent, formal entity, whose objective "body" is capable of containing wider social significations. For this, I have resorted to several books and essays by authors such as Jerome G. McGann, Lynn Keller or Michael Greer, who have devoted most of their research to the theoretical aspect of Language Poetry. As can be seen in

the Appendix, moreover, my analyses have depended on a holistic contemplation of Hejinian's and Mayer's works, bearing in mind not only their poems, but also their essayistic, artistic and journalistic contributions and preoccupations. My thematic analysis of *Hunger and Dreams*, finally, is based on several works that acknowledge their intrinsic connection to literature and language, highlighting the ways in which these bodily affects become textual features thanks to Language poets' revalorization of the text *per se*. Crucial for my Master's thesis are, in this light, Ranjan Ghosh's essay "Aesthetics of Hunger: (In)Fusion Approach, Literature and the Other" and Dr. Ernest Hartmann's "Thymophor in Dreams, Poetry, Art and Memory."

To pursue the aims reflected in this introduction, I have organized my dissertation into four different chapters and several subsections. The first chapter provides a general account of Language poetry, focusing on theoretical aspects and literary influences, while giving special importance to the women authors of the Language movement. Secondly, I analyze the relationship between the body and the text that can be extracted from Hejinian's and Mayer's different books of poems and that contradicts Cixous's "textual body." The last two chapters concentrate on Hejinian's and Mayer's "Hunger poems" and "Dream poems," taking into account the theorizations of the first two chapters and comparing both authors whenever possible. Finally, I present the conclusions of my project, which ratify the accomplishment of my aims.

1. An Account of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: Poetry, Theory and Literary

Influences

... those poems with their elegant
turns of phrase, their vivid
imagery, even their conceptual
excellence, often add up to nothing.
Either poetry is as real as, or realer than
life, or it is nothing, a stupid
& stupefying occupation for zombies.

Charles Bernstein, "Reading the Tree" (qtd. in Brill 60)

Radically critical of the "official verse culture" (Izenberg 139) that had been monopolizing American poetry since 1946 –when Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* set the foundations for the 1950s confessional poetics– Charles Bernstein's 'realer than life' poetry intends to liberate the genre from the constraints of the literary academy. "Reading the Tree," the opening poem for this first chapter, epitomizes this disregard for traditionalism while proclaiming the necessity for renovated and disruptive "real" verse forms that would match the poet's social preoccupation. As a matter of fact, Bernstein's critique is performed simultaneously with a "conscious attempt to marry the work of the New American Poetry of the fifties with the poststructural work of the late sixties and seventies" (McGann 3), an amalgamation of counteractive poetic realities that results in what has been repeatedly labelled as Language poetry –or, rather L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, after Bernstein's and Andrews's 1978-1981 literary magazine,¹ in which key figures such as Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, Bob Perelman or Ron Silliman first appeared.

According to Izenberg, "Language poetry has understood itself to be *itself* a social enterprise, a 'provisional institution' that grounds 'an alternative system of valuation'" (133). Language poems, indeed, are capable of creating and re-creating language by exposing

¹ See Appendix II, Figure 1.

² For Language poets, politics, and more concretely –a 'politics of poetry' (Watten)– "means opposition

divergent conceptions of syntactical, grammatical, and even semantic structures –a task that Hejirian sees as intrinsically connected to “human psychological and spiritual conditions” (49). Insofar as it is profoundly anti-hegemonic, Language poetry is socially engaged, political, and thus, *real* in Bernstein’s terms. Very much like the concept of reality, however, Language poetry is elusive: its resistance to categorization constitutes its principal analytical difficulty. As Michael Greer points out in his highly influential work on the subject: “When we turn to the writings on poetry and poetics written by Language poets we notice first of all the *absence* of ... self-conscious identity as ‘a movement’” (340). In addition to this lack of alignment, a problematic and diffuse periodization presents further challenges to Language poetry’s criticism and compilation. There is no current consensus: while Izenberg situates Language poetry’s emergence in 1971, paired to the publication of alternative literary magazines such as *THIS*, *Hills*, *o-blek*, and *Temblor*, other critics such as Arnold have contended that “questions of definition and period are currently unresolved and are likely to remain so” (2).

From its apparently impossible characterization to its radical revisiting of form, Language poetry is decidedly controversial (“oppositional”,² as it has frequently been termed) and profoundly experimental. As has been suggested, it arises partly as a re-politicization of the genre (after the previous unpolitical fashion of American poetry³), partly as a redefinition of the very notions of *language* and *poetry*.

In their successive discussions on poetry, Language poets have come to understand language as a *process*, in contraposition to traditional objectifications of the concept. ‘Language-in-process’ is theoretically able to drive the individual –the poet and the reader–

² For Language poets, politics, and more concretely –a ‘politics of poetry’ (Watten)– “means opposition (contestation) rather than accommodation” (McGann 4).

³ “Confessional poetry was not overtly political, but it participated in the protest against impersonality as a poetic value by reinstating an insistently autobiographical first person engaged in resistance to the pressure to conform” (Parini 635). Language poetry, in turn, is not interested in a politics of the subject, but on wider sociopolitical implications.

towards his/her empowerment and liberation from the authority of traditional language and its “fixed orders” (McGann 21). By extension, experimental poetry attempts to destroy the foundations of hegemony –be academic, social or otherwise:

John Cage⁴ focuses on poetry as a process rather than as a product. In *For the Birds*, he emphasizes that ‘we would not have language if we were not in process. That’s why I insist on the necessity of not letting ourselves be dragged along by language. Words impose feelings on us if we consider them as objects, that is, if we don’t let them, too, be what they are: process’. Language is a process, as well as the product of those very processes of social and economic change. (Brill 57)

Having coded poetic Language as process, the *poem* ceases to be a merely aesthetic tool in the hands of the poet; rather, it becomes the proof that language can be created, produced altogether. For Language poets, poems are “epiphenomenal evidence of a constitutively human capacity for free and creative agency” (Izenberg 136): poems function as examples of the power of the individual to originate a non-restricted and non-restrictive version of language. For Hejninian, in the writing process, the poem becomes a self-conscious entity that matches human psyche: “For the moment, for the writer, the poem *is* a mind” (44). This instance may explain most Language poets’ incursions into considerably lengthy poems or noticeably short ones, echoing the fluctuations of thought and the contradictory possibilities of language. Rae Armantrout’s⁵ “Cover,” as most of her poems do, attempts to dismantle lyric conventions at the same time that it encompasses larger –social– questions:

The man

Slapped her bottom

⁴ One of the most important figures of the post-war avant-garde. Mainly a musician, he composed in prose poem form (“They Come”), which he called “mesostic,” in which an “acrostic” is made from the middle letters of words.

⁵ One of the founding members of the West Coast group of Language poets. According to Stephanie Burt, “William Carlos Williams and Emily Dickinson together taught Armantrout how to dismantle and reassemble the forms of stanzaic lyric” (qtd. in *PoetryFoundation*).

Like a man did

In a video

.....

The idea that they were re-enacting something which had been staged in the first place bothered her. If she wanted to go on, she'd need to ignore this limp chronology. She assumed he was conscious of the same constraint. But she almost always did want to proceed. Procedure! If only either one of them believed in the spontaneity of the original actors and could identify with one. Be one. For this to work, she reasoned, one of us would have to be gone. (*Poetry Foundation*)

Here, the amalgamation of short lines and drastically longer stanzas serves as a testing of the limits of wording and disposition. Moreover, with her exercises in form, Armantrout problematizes the separation between poetry, narrative and theory –as she suggests in several of her poem titles (cf. “Anti-Short Story,” “Background information,” “Natural History”).

This apparent eccentricity of Language poets, along with their multiple self-referential and metapoetic exercises, has prompted several discussions on Language poetry's relationship with theory and poetic criticism. Greer's seminal essay “Ideology and Theory in Recent Experimental Writing” gives an account of Language poetry's theoretical precepts. His conclusions point to a lack of distinction between poetry and criticism, categorizing Language poems as compositions that “often directly and explicitly address ‘theoretical’ issues” (341). Moreover, while discussing the implications of these embedded theoretical allusions, he remarks: “Insofar as ‘theory’ now designates more specifically those texts growing out of post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, one might suggest a provisional historical narrative: it is as though the language poets have worked their way through theory, and then turned, not to philosophy ... but to poetry” (344). Theory, in a way, is impregnated

in language poems but not conceived as a separate entity that needs to be addressed on its own.

Along these lines, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine started with a great concern for a new definition of poetry that progressively developed into an interest to discuss and negotiate poetic reality. When talking about the composition of her essay “If Written is Writing,” –one of her first contributions to the magazine– Hejinian recalls several recommendations on the part of its editors: “The editors of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E proposed that the theory need not be extrinsic to the poetry. They did not require a normalized, expository style” (25). Clearly enough, this affirmation reflects and confirms Greer’s contentions on the subject while setting the foundations for Language poets’ experimental and integrated writing. Later in the essay, Hejinian develops further the relationship between Language poetry and theory by means of a reinterpretation of Bernstein’s ideas:

In various conversations over the years, Charles Bernstein has taken exception to my use of the term theory to apply to anything that poetry does. In part, as I understand him, he objects on the grounds that theory detaches itself from the object of its scrutiny and pretends authority over it. And I suspect he might also share Ludwig Wittgenstein’s view that theory has no practical value (“For me, Wittgenstein is quoted as saying, ‘a theory is without value. A theory gives me nothing’). (355)

Not only Hejinian has noticed Wittgenstein’s critical influence on Language poets’ understanding of theory. According to Brill, many Language poets have pointed to Wittgenstein’s remarks on language “to help clarify their privileging of language as a means towards individual empowerment and societal change” (60).

Wittgenstein's philosophical concept of language as a "form of life" –and I would argue, the motif of 'language games,'⁶ discussed also in his *Philosophical Investigations*– echoes the Language poets' revaluation of language as a self-generative process that finds its roots in human practice. Language, in Wittgenstein's view, is an "embodied, this-wordly, concrete social activity, expressive of human needs" (Bernard Williams qtd. in Tonner 14). This definition matches the aforementioned understandings of language and linguistic behaviors as "social enterprises," as advocated by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school. It also summarizes the individual poems' capacity to reflect the human psyche and thus convey human needs.

As can be seen, the innovativeness of Language poetry does not imply a complete dissociation from the literary past. In addition to postmodernism and post-structuralism, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E "movement"⁷ finds its predecessors in several poetic currents and tendencies, such as the Objectivists, American modernism –where William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein are, perhaps, the clearest influences– and Surrealism.

Objectivism, formerly a philosophical tendency developed by Russian-American Ayn Rand, was progressively transferred to poetry in the hands of –principally– Louis Zukofsky, who co-edited the 1931 number of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Objectivists were significantly influenced by Ezra Pound, making extensive use of free verse (*vers libre*) and focusing on the everyday –quotidian– reality of language. The influence of Objectivism in Language poets seems obvious and direct when analysing the latter's "poems of the quotidian," typically long and narrative poems that focus on the poetic capacities of seemingly unpoetic realities and activities, such as eating, cooking, or cleaning (cf. Chapter 2 of this dissertation). Woods (qtd. in Arnold) "links the Objectivism of Louis Zukofsky and

⁶ "The way to grasp the meaning of a word is to observe its use in the 'language game' in which it is used ... Speaking a language is part of an activity and also a form of life" (Tonner 14).

⁷ Due to the lack of collective consciousness of Language poets, and for the purposes of this dissertation, I will be using terms such as "movement" or "school" between inverted commas in order to highlight their inaccuracy.

George Oppen with Language writing in what he calls a ‘discourse of responsibility ... central to Wood’s thesis is what he calls a ‘fidelity to otherness’. This fidelity helps to define the continuity between Objectivism and Language Writing” (10). In the Language poets’ case, otherness summarizes the unpoetic, the ‘other’ poem, that which is not “workshop poetry.”⁸ Language poets have remained loyal towards what they consider *real*, that is, the quotidian, the mundane, the social and the fragmentary. They have meant to write a poetry that should be understood as separate from the academy’s precepts and requisites. By writing about otherness, they have “othered” themselves –the experimental writing of Mayer and Hejinian signified their marginalization from the work of early feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, who “too often pitted gender identity concerns against experimental approaches” (Tate 43).

Unable and unwilling to identify with the academy and this fraction of early feminist criticism, Hejinian and Mayer have repeatedly recurred to Gertrude Stein as the Modernist source for their particular literary style⁹ and their own experimental feminism. In fact, both Language poets and Stein are able to “rebel against the patriarchal structures of English syntax by dislocating it or discarding it entirely” (Brill 56). Hejinian’s essay “Two Stein Talks” (which first appeared in *Temblor*, spring 1986) constitutes a historical account of Stein’s writing and posits her early influence on the Language poet. In the foreword to this piece of criticism, Hejinian remarks: “Gertrude Stein was a canonical figure in the culture of my father. And, in a profound sense, I credit him not only with the origin of my own interest in Gertrude Stein, but also with a sense of my own artistic possibilities. Thanks to my father’s crediting of Gertrude Stein, a woman, with genius, I took that gender would not be a bar to

⁸ Workshop poetry or “the voice poem” (Brill) refers to post 1960s non-experimental and normally confessional lyric. Adrienne Rich or Judy Grann are examples of this writing mode.

⁹ The second issue of *0 to 9*, a mimeographed magazine founded by Mayer and Vito Acconci in 1967, includes several poems, literary experiments and drawings by Stein, in addition to Mayer’s and other contributors’ work.

my own attempts to be a writer” (84). Indeed, the anti-hegemonic facet of experimentalism cannot possibly escape gender asymmetries.

It was not only Stein that Language poets referenced as a Modernist precursor of their writing. The final form of typical L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E long poems “combines the strengths of prose, epic, and lyric in a genre with extremely fluid conventions” making use of “arbitrary structures and compositional methods” (Keller 561). Perhaps, one of the clearest forerunners of this writing mode is William Carlos Williams, whose “sensitivity to the intractability of language” (Arnold 16) is directly linked to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E experimentation. Williams’s long epic poem, *Paterson*, is an ambitious project that results in a collage of several and divergent forms, lengths and literary styles.¹⁰ Even taking into account the numerous difficulties the poet experimented until the poem’s completion in 1958 (when Book V was published), his statements underlie a preoccupation with language that resembles Language poetry’s 1980 debates on the concept: “But the poem is also the search of the poet for his language, his own language ... I had to write in a certain way to gain a verisimilitude with the object I had in mind” (Williams xiv) *Paterson* shares with Language poetry a formal inquisitiveness that succeeds to debunk traditional understandings of the term, and most importantly, of poetry and its relationship with the poet.

The language

The language is missing them

They die also

Incommunicado

....

They say: the language!

¹⁰ “I write and destroy, write and destroy. It’s all shaped up in outline and intent, the body of the thinking is finished but the technique, the manner and the method are unresolvable to date” (Williams qtd. in MacGowan xi).

–the language
is divorced from their minds,
the language ... the language!

(Williams, Paterson, 11)

It is from William Carlos Williams' examples of non-canonical poetry that Arnold extracts the possible link between Surrealism and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E "movement." "When Ron Silliman cites *Kora in Hell* as a formal precursor to the 'new sentence' ... he intervenes in the politics of canon formation, for the Williams of the improvisations is not the same writer as the Williams known and celebrated for his exemplary American voice" (31). Both the "Williams of improvisations" –the one that could be considered as proto-Language– and Language poets make use of an unorthodox vision of Surrealist writing in their practical experimentation with automatism. Surrealists approximate their internal and external worlds through the use of language: in the case of Language writers, "the lack of fit between the language and the world is similarly animating and meaningful" as Arnold contends (21).

In practice, Bernstein's and Mayer's "Literary Experiments" often offer visions of poetry that could remind the reader of Bretonian dream-invocation and rêve narrative. During the Church Poetry Project Writing Workshop, that took place from 1971 to 1975, Mayer suggested several poetic experiments alluding to dreams and the unconscious: "Dream work: record dreams daily, experiment with translation or transcription of dream thought ... work with the dream until a poem or song emerges from it ... Write dream collaborations in the lune form." Despite the parallelism, and on a deeper analysis, Language poets' understanding of the unconscious is certainly divergent from André Breton's Surrealism, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. The Language unconscious, according to Arnold, is not "unitary or liberatory ... but primarily conflicted, instinctually repetitive" (25). For Language poets, dreams are not invaluable revelations but repetitive actions that serve as pretexts for poetic experimentation.

Moreover, the Language poets' privileging of the sentence (especially Silliman's) and their understanding of theory as embedded in poetry, along with a "reduced account of the poetics and the politics of the European movement" has caused them not to "acknowledge Surrealism as a positive influence," as McGann notes (3).

By giving importance to form and structure, Language poets have inevitably recovered an interest for the material aspect of poetry, rekindling previous discussions on the relationship between the body and the text. Accordingly, Chapter 2 focuses on the "bodily text" and the ways in which this particular form of textual embodiment is reflected in Hejinian's and Mayer's poetry.

2. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry's "Bodily Text": Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer's Quotidian

There is sex at intersections and at vanishing points
A person will always submit to a time and place for this
A novel of non-being, a moan of ink
Lyn Hejinian, *Oxota*

Taking into account L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry's estrangement from the confessional "I," it seems at first striking why such a project –and, especially, its feminisms– would demand a 'return to the body.'¹¹ However, female Language writers such as Hejinian and Mayer, along with newer poets like Rachel Blau DuPlessis, have not hesitated in their reworkings of corporeality. The indeterminacy of the body, indeed, is something that has long excited literary preoccupation. From liberal feminist somatophobia, to French criticism (Hélène Cixous), up to the extensive theorization of Judith Butler (cf. "Bodies that Matter"), the body's resistance to definition calls, at least, for a reconceptualization of the term. As Spivak contends, "there are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body" but, ultimately, "the body as such cannot be thought" (qtd. in Price and Shildrick 8). Be that as it may, all discussions converge in the idea that the body –as a concept– must be other than fleshly materiality (that is, a 'body image'). It is in this point of excess that the body enters the textual domain.¹² In the context of the Language poem, whose form transcends the aesthetic realm into the depiction of a psychosocial reality, the text becomes embodied, "bodily". According to Hejinian, the poem "is a mind" (44), but it must also be a

¹¹ "The return to the body –which involves no unmediated return to a body proper– is a provocative feature of poetry riotously opposing a culture that continues to cast women as certain kinds –peculiarities– of subjects" (Scappettone 181)

¹² "Language and materiality are fully embedded into each other" (Butler 69).

body if the purpose is escaping the Western intellectual tradition that posits the “thinking subject as ... disembodied [and] able to operate in terms of pure mind alone” (Price and Shildrick 1).

It is from this conclusion and Cixous’s *écriture féminine*¹³ that I draw my use of the term “bodily text.” Apart from constituting a playful reversal of her “textual body,”¹⁴ such a construction intends to represent the Language poets’ scepticism before Cixous’s, Wittig’s and Irigaray’s analyses of the body as a text. Rather than positing the body as a source from which the text naturally flows (like ‘mother’s milk,’ see Cixous “The Laugh of the Medusa”), Language poets position the text as an active subject that ultimately ‘leaks’ bodily characteristics through formal experimentation. For women Language poets, thus, the focus of poetic attention and analysis is always the poem and its self-generative capacities, to the detriment of the French feminists’ deified female body. Language poets, in the words of Hejinian, often express a “bodily loyalty” to the text that confirms this same prevalence of the text over the body (27). In her seminal essay “The Rejection of Closure” (1983), Hejinian contends:

The narrow definition of desire, the identification of desire solely with sexuality, and the literalness of the genital model for a woman’s language that some of these writers [French feminists] insist on may be *problematic*. The desire that is stirred by language is located *most interestingly within language itself* ... A central activity of poetic language is formal. (Hejinian 55-56, emphasis mine)

By remarking the importance of language, Hejinian is not discarding the necessity of a revisiting of the body; however, she is certainly advising against theories that advocate for the sexual body’s capacity to construct an inherently feminine poetry. Interestingly, she is not the

¹³ “The term for women’s writing in French feminist theory. It describes how women’s writing is a specific discourse closer to the body ... It includes Annie Leclerc’s deification of woman’s body, the post-Lacanian analysis of Luce Irigaray, and the utopian revisions of Hélène Cixous” (Humm 75)

¹⁴ “Personally, when I write fiction, I write with my body” (Cixous 27)

first in pointing out the problematic connotations of Cixous's *écriture féminine* in the development of feminist literature. In 1981, Ann Rosalind Jones's essay "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of 'L'Écriture Féminine'" listed several objections to Wittig's, Irigaray's and Cixous's theorizations of the body, while at the same time raising several questions that certainly support my argument for Language poetry's 'bodily text' and its reconceptualization of the relationship between the Text and the Body:

Can the body be a source of self-knowledge? Does female sexuality exist prior to or in spite of social experience? Do women in fact experience their bodies purely or essentially, outside the damaging acculturation so sharply analyzed by women in France and elsewhere? The answer is no ... For if we argue for an innate, precultural femininity, where does that position leave us in relation to earlier theories about women's 'nature'? (253)

All in all, feminist attempts to destroy the inherently patriarchal duality nature/culture and the consequent separation mind/body dangerously clash with such understandings of the female material body as the producer of literary knowledge. Texts and poetic language become corporeal (but also mental and social) when their formal aspects reflect such corporeality, mental states or social patterns –long poems of the quotidian, as I will argue, reflect the tedium of everyday routine and the characteristics of the female quotidian body. Notice the importance of the text and its intermingling with the body in several passages of Mayer's long poem *Midwinter Day*:

Marie Maria Callas is having a tantrum in the library

she won't surrender her books

.....

I'd rather live in someplace higher, warmer and a little freer

where money was like matches and *words were wine*

.....
Lewis' mother

says we're snobs and *only think about poetry* / it's true. (45-47, emphasis mine)

Reading Mayer and Hejinian often means encountering oneself with the precepts of the Language project –as can be deduced from these examples, theory certainly underlies their poetry's significations. In this case, their particular perspective on the human relationship with the text –where the text is always prevalent– concentrates itself in blatant assertions such as “she won't surrender her books” or “we're snobs and only think about poetry.” Even though they may apparently seem insignificant, these references pack both poets' work and constitute powerful insights into their poetic stance.

Of course, the reversal of the “textual body” that these poets propose is meant neither to completely discard Cixous's work nor to deny her crucial influence on later criticism. Hers, indeed, are very powerful contentions that attempt to visibilize and empower the female body in a phallogocentric tradition. What is more, the concept of *écriture féminine* is “vital” in Jones's view “as a lens and partial strategy” (253) through which women writers can access divergent subject matters and liberate their literary productions from patriarchal expectations. However, the “textual body” is incompatible with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E project and its aims to situate the text at the centre of analysis.

I have previously highlighted the Language poets' obsession with a language-in-process and their consequent rejection of textual fixation. Following this narrative, textuality becomes “a productivity in process (rather than static form) that destabilizes the fundamental binarisms and logics of Western ideology and metaphysics” (Greer 344). In a similar fashion, the body presented in Language poems is not a rigid, homogeneous or structured body, but a “body-in-process” that clearly resonates in poststructural feminist criticism –Judith Butler's

theorizations on the “interplay between text and physicality” suggest a “multiple and fluid” body reminiscent of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E experimentations (Price and Shildrick 6).

It is from this perspective of fluidity and innovation that Bernadette Mayer must have imagined her “List of Writing Experiments.” More concretely, her final decree (“Work your ass off to change the language & don’t ever get famous”) speaks about her very own “rejection of closure” and the conscious renunciation of convention and academic recognition. “Changing the language” is, for her, not only a way of breaking with the academy’s “narrativized discourse” (McGann 11) but an important reminder of the ‘bodily’ characteristics of the text and its ability to transform itself or be transformed by external forces.

More thorough reflection on the abhorrence of “closed texts” –and, by extension, “closed” representations of the body– has been carried out by Hejinian in her essay collection *The Language of Inquiry*, and especially in the repeatedly quoted “The Rejection of Closure”. In this piece of work, which was originally conceived as a talk for a panel discussion in San Francisco, Hejinian makes an insightful classification of texts according to their “openness” or “closedness.” In her argument, a “closed” text would comprise those narratives, poems, etc. whose elements irremediably coalesce in a concrete point, exclusively allowing a single reading of the work. In a “closed” text, there is no ambiguity: the world and the body are not contemplated in their immensity, but directed towards a common end. On the other hand, the “open” text (identified with the Language text) “is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating” (41). The formal characteristics of a text (its “body”) determine its “closeness” or “openness”:

It is not hard to discover devices –structural devices– that may serve to “open” a poetic text. One set of such devices has to do with arrangement and, particularly, with rearrangement within a work ... The “open text” often emphasizes or

foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product. (43)

Both Hejinian and Mayer experiment with arrangement and rearrangement: their poetry extols the process of composition and the reader's active participation. In what follows, I will comment on several characteristics of Mayer's and Hejinian's lyric poems,¹⁵ paying attention to those examples in which formal experimentation is particularly salient and meaningful.

Bernadette Mayer's 1989 book *Sonnets* reinvents the traditional 14-line sonnet form: a previously canonized body of poetry becomes immensely malleable and innovative, "open," and capable of expressing contemporary bodies and realities. In order to do this, Mayer engages in self-reflexive, intertextual exercises which often combine famous lines from classical poets (cf. Sir Thomas Wyatt and William Shakespeare) with her own mutating and indefinite writing style. Moreover, she freely experiments with punctuation, rhythm, pronominal content and sentence order, giving an impression of poetic bewilderment that has prompted their classification as "anti-sonnets" (Goutzou 1).

For the most part, Mayer maintains the 14-line structure, accentuating metatextuality by explicitly labeling each and every composition as, simply, "Sonnet." Her purpose, ultimately, is to render the reader conscious of textual processes: by maintaining the category of "sonnet" in such experimental compositions, Mayer is able to dismantle the fixed conventions of classical poetry and the academic obsession with close analysis. According to Spahr,

the importance of Mayer's sonnets is in the way they suggest that the sonnet can do much more than perpetuate a lyric subjectivity ... Mayer's twist is to politicize the space of sexuality, to suggest that lyric intimacy is connective in order to rethink

¹⁵ For this part of the dissertation, I will analyze Mayer's [Sonnet] "You jerk you didn't call me up" and Hejinian's "Flagellate", from *Sonnets* and *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*, respectively. See Appendix I, Figures 1 and 2.

the distinction between public and private ... Her sonnets point to *how the sonnet might be a useful place for thinking about sexuality's connections* rather than subjectivity's individualisms. (101, emphasis mine)

Sexuality and the body are central to Mayer's compositions: the sonnet, as a textual category and poetic construction, becomes a locus for 'bodily' discussion. Most importantly, the body in Mayer is clearly social and extends itself to wider problem areas.

Mayer's Sonnet "You jerk you didn't call me up" plays with the traditional visual disposition of the sonnet sequence: instead of being constituted of three quatrains and a rhyming couplet (according to the Shakespearean model) the poem is composed of an unrhymed octave, a quatrain and a final couplet. Interestingly, these divisions escape the habitual rhythm of speech –the last sentence of the octave remains incomplete, echoing the speaker's unconscious and the mind's frequent rambling and wandering. In order to mimic this same chaotic speed of thought, Mayer introduces apparently odd collocations such as "You're drinking your parents to the airport" or "no wonder / the G.I Joe blows it every other time." Her combination of classical and contemporary topics (Latin poet Catullus with 1982 G.I Joe protagonist the Cobra Commander) points to a pastiche-like structure whose principal purpose is not farcical or satirical but formal and experimental, though it is also undoubtedly parodic of specifically male modes of behavior and expectation.

Perhaps, one of the most salient features of this particular poem would be the physical "frontier" ————— (a horizontal, straight line) that allows the poet to introduce two extra verses: "To make love, turn to page 121. To die, turn to page 172." In the different editions of Mayer's book, the poems contained in each of these pages are obviously divergent: this misleading poetic game plays with the formal precepts of the sonnet but also with the material body of the book –and the reader. Page 172, indeed, does not exist in either of its two editions (New Directions and Tender Buttons). The powerful command: "to die, turn to page

172” places the text in the center of analysis as the absence of text means the ultimate absence of life.

As can be imagined, Mayer’s extreme innovation in *Sonnets* has not gone unnoticed within the poetic community. Although repeatedly praised and admired by most critics, her flirtatious distortion of the sonnet sequence also caused negative reactions. In a collaborative e-mail conversation between several poets, as Spahr recalls, Steve Schroer responds to Ron Silliman’s fondness of *Sonnets* by stating: “If you have a question about rhythm, diction, structure, enjambment, or tone ... ask an orangutan. Don’t ask Bernadette Mayer. As for Ron Silliman’s contention that Mayer’s sonnets deserve to be set alongside those of Shakespeare ... I don’t think I can address it without becoming rude” (98). Of course, Mayer’s disruption of poetic form has potential to create anxiety and discomfort –and it has certainly managed to do so.

Radically different from Mayer’s *Sonnets*, but equally experimental, is Hejinian’s latest poetry collection, *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* (2012). Beginning with the title, the author provides “The Book” (the complete “text”) with bodily characteristics –at the same time, the image of the “thousand eyes” seems to allude to Language poetry’s extensive literary experimentation.

At the outset, the work presents itself as an amalgamation of “a thousand” different poetic visions and portrays “a thousand” different formal techniques in poetry writing. Not surprisingly, therefore, Hejinian’s book exploits different formal strategies, stanza patterns and several other poetic devices. Heterogeneity seems the work’s premise: single or two-lined poems intertwine with lengthy accounts of the narrative quotidian and experimental pieces of criticism. In the middle of these, completely incomprehensible but conversation-sounding poems (ipt / tup / tra plafundle / na! flone ir) remind the reader of the creative power of Language:

Silliman's insistence that Hejinian's sentence, seemingly designed to be 'virtually unreadable,' is readable ... looks less like an argument for the existence of a poetic community and more like an attempt to illustrate the fact that 'acceptable' sentences are not the same thing as 'grammatical' ones. This seems like an odd point on which to found a poetic, having nothing to do with meaning whatsoever, but only with grammar ... a rejection of Chomskyan linguistics is something like an obligatory gambit opening in any work of Language poetry. (Izenberg 151)

Hejinian's poem "Flagellate" takes the poet's formal experimentation to its climax. The disposition of the stanzas makes it possible to distinguish between two differentiated parts: a first part composed of 8 lines in which indentation and arrangement fluctuate; and a second part articulated by a "list" of 27 concepts and short phrases, plus an opening command: "Finish the list, patrol" (9). This second section is designed to immediately attract the reader's attention; moreover, its formal similarity to Harman's "ontographies"¹⁶ establishes a feasible link between Language poetry and Object Oriented Ontology, taking into account both projects' stance on everyday matters. OOO proposers have quoted anthropologist Kathleen Stewart in her contention that "ontological constitution may be found in the ordinary affects of everyday life" (qtd. in McNely 140). In a similar way, everyday objects, activities and expressions constitute a large part of Hejinian's poem: "Buckwheat ... Cast pearls before swine ... spatula" (183). According to Harman (qtd. in Bogost 36), ontographies "would deal with a limited number of dynamics that can occur between all different sorts of objects"; in addition, they "involve the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind" (Zabrowski 59). In truth, Hejinian's list of objects and phrases remains unexplained. Its poetical condition, however, presupposes and requires existent relationships between (at least) some of its elements. In a closer analysis, social

¹⁶ "Like a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a compendium, a record of things juxtaposed to demonstrate their overlap and imply interaction through collocation. The simplest approach to such recording is the *list*" (Bogost 38).

inquiries and contemporary conundrums of the human mind reverberate in the objects and actions of the list: “Gigantism / Existence in space / Quitclaim ... Fire-eating, pot-walloping, post-feminist biker chick” ... “Give me a break—authenticity / Judge” (183). Hejinian’s “Flagellate” seems an account of everyday matters’ capacity to combine with and ultimately suggest an underlying wider psychosocial reality.

Finally, Zabrowski posits ontographies’ rhetoric as self-generative: the relationships between the different objects have the ability to expose themselves in the reading-process. Language poems, as I have repeatedly argued, are equally generative, mind-like: their rhetoric is in perpetual process of construction. This may be partly why, in Hejinian’s poem, linguistic constructions often escape normativity and traditional meaning: “I’ve got to list that gum eraser” (183). Meaning, if existent, is found within the totality of the text, and cannot be extracted from “closed” interpretations of single lines.

I have several times suggested that Mayer’s and Hejinian’s insistence on the everyday quotidian arises from their concept of the text and the body. Hejinian’s perspective on the (female) body problematizes sexual desire as the single source of creative impulse: the body, in her view, is often driven and consumed by boredom, tedium, necessity, illness, nausea, hunger, sleepiness, and a long etcetera of everyday affects. As Thrift contends:

I do not want to count the body as separate from the thing world ... Whilst it would be profoundly unwise to ignore the special characteristics of flesh, it would be equally unwise to think that the make-up of the human body stopped there ... Embodiment includes tripping, falling over, and a whole host of other such mistakes. It includes vulnerability, passivity, suffering, even simple hunger. It includes episodes of insomnia, weariness and exhaustion, a sense of insignificance and even sheer indifference to the world. (10)

The body co-evolves with everyday objects and events: Mayer's and Hejinian's poems of the quotidian present an image of the female body in correlation with mistakes, hunger, coffee-cups, infants, dreams, kitchen sinks, libraries and cakes: "The quotidian consists not of things but of *effects playing over* the surfaces of things; it is not beings but a way of being" (Hejinian 358, emphasis mine). This is why, even though these poems create traditional spaces ascribed to women –mainly, the *oikos*– formal experimentation contests the sociopolitical implications of such spaces.¹⁷ In the words of Tate, "Hejinian and Mayer use the long poem to convey the elusive quotidian while engaging with its gendered associations ... Mayer ... tests the long poem's capacity for radical inclusiveness and traces metonymic connections between daily routines and larger social issues" (42).

Ultimately, the long poem reflects on the female body –and the particular body of the poets– while suggesting its position in the social context. Hejinian's *My Life* and Mayer's *Midwinter Day* are book-length poems whose form interacts with their creators' life experiences. Curiously enough, Hejinian's *My Life* was composed by "first writing a one-sentence paragraph, then writing a separate two-sentence paragraph and adding a sentence to the first ... and so on. The total number of paragraphs and the number of sentences in each paragraph coincided with her age" (Keller 561). Consequently, arbitrary formal structures become a generative force while paralleling the poet's 'bodily' experiences to the poem's formal structure. A similar thing happens with Mayer's *Midwinter Day*. In *A Bernadette Mayer Reader*, the poet clarifies this work was written on a single day, on December 22, 1978, at 100 Main Street, in Lenox, Massachusetts (vii). Discovering whether this is true or not is unimportant: the fact that Mayer included this information, however, points again to a formal parallelism with her own lived experience.

¹⁷ Hejinian emphasizes "the pejorative associations that beleaguer female speech and art as a result of women's over-determined relationship to 'the domus.' In choosing nevertheless to focus on the domestic sphere and its dailiness ... Hejinian writes consciously against the binary mindset that perpetuates such associations" (Tate 44).

The similarities between both authors' poems of the quotidian make them immediately suitable for literary comparison. In fact, Hejinian herself points out those similarities in several of her pieces of criticism:

In both *My Life* and 'Resistance,' the structural unit (grossly, the paragraph) was meant to be mimetic of both a space and a time of thinking. In a somewhat different respect, time predetermines the form of Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*. The work begins when the clock is set running (at dawn on December 22, 1978) and ends when the time allotted to the work runs out (late night of the same day). 'It's true,' Mayer has said: 'I have always loved projects of all sorts, including say sorting leaves or whatever projects turn out to be, and in poetry I most especially love having time be the structure which always seems to me to save structure or form from itself because then nothing really has to begin or end.'

(46)

Time in Language poetry associated with repetition, variation and description, since "nothing is too trivial for the honor of inclusion" (Tate 50). Repetition in time emphasizes Mayer's idea of continuity ("nothing has to begin or end") and represents the tedium of everyday routines, while creating a state of hyperfocus or hyperattention (Tate) suitable for poetic creation. Rather than repetition, what we encounter in Language poetry is Steinian insistence¹⁸ on several quotidian aspects that reflect larger sociopolitical issues.

If there is something in the quotidian reality that Mayer and Hejinian obsessively insist on, that would unequivocally be Hunger, on the one hand, and the Unconscious, on the other—concretized in food and dreams. The next two chapters analyze a selection of narrative and

¹⁸ "Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be ... Expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis" (Stein qtd. in Hejinian 47).

lyric poems whose principal concern is the conjunction between bodily and literary hunger,
bodily and literary sleep.

3. “Everything is Edible”¹⁹

3.1. Bodily Hunger, Literary Hunger

To eat everything
All the collected foods even you
And one’s self like the dinosaurs just dying out
In some unaccountable hungry fall
Bernadette Mayer, *Midwinter Day*

Hunger (as a complex bodily process) is an unavoidable member of the quotidian affects; however, it has also proven to represent a locus for metaphorical significations. Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer have developed the concept of hunger in different –and sometimes divergent– ways throughout their work. Perhaps, it is in their most renowned long poems (*Midwinter Day* and *My Life*, respectively) where both authors’ poetry of the quotidian dwells most on the relationship between food and literature, exposing a starving and desiring “bodily” text that problematizes once again the associations between physicality and textuality. As will be discussed further on in the chapter, both poetry collections (especially Mayer’s) seem to suggest a version of hunger that intrinsically relates to the poem and enhances its generative forces. As an active subject, the text is capable of transmitting its own desires and hunger(s); the poet and the reader, on the other hand, are enjoined to chew, digest, spit out or otherwise be nourished by the process of creation.

Central for my argument for a version of hunger located within and emerging from the text –rather than from the body– are Ranjan Ghosh’s theorizations on the aesthetics of hunger:

Literature creates its own hunger, the desire to feed on the “other” and be fed upon.

Hunger is created upon literature, literature is formed out of a hunger to explicate ways of human experience and engagements with emotions. It [literature] is

¹⁹ Mayer, *Midwinter Day*, 66.

anchored in a hunger which is its *eros*, its creative aesthesis, its power of sustenance and motivation. The inherent hunger of literature calls for at once imaginative ventures of cross-disciplinarity and understanding of human values born out of philosophic designs –both conceptual and experiential. (143, emphasis mine)

According to Ghosh, then, there is an inherent creative desire within literature and, by extension, within the text. There is a hunger, an urge to understand and explicate the social reality, a hunger for the quotidian that matches L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E precepts.²⁰ This hunger, an almost erotic or “libidinous” drive, finds its source in a very particular state of “restlessness” engendered by language (Hejinian 52). Hejinian, indeed, speaks of such a desire in terms of a Faustian *rage to know*²¹ –an immensely powerful but nonetheless unfulfilled necessity to create the subject through the text. The clash between the ambition to encompass the totality of existence within language and the consequent “incapacity of language to match the world” is what precisely creates the need to speak about the “hunger” of literature and its never-ending appetites (56).

In order to illustrate literary hunger (which she also identifies with Wordsworth’s *underthirst*²²), Hejinian proceeds to quote Language poet Carla Harryman: “When I’m eating this I want food ... the I expands. The individual is caught in a devouring machine, but she shines like the lone star on the horizon when we enter her thoughts” (55). The individual –the poet, the reader– is trapped in literature’s excessive hunger; however, this bolsters the creative process. In fact, and through the use of formal intervention and experimentation, the *rage to know* becomes rather a successful means in the search for the “open” text: “In being formal, in

²⁰ “The quotidian, the commonplace, preoccupies us manifestly. It is the realm in and on which taking care, both physically and emotionally, occurs” (Hejinian 370)

²¹ “As long as man keeps hearing words / He’s sure that there’s a meaning somewhere” (Goethe qtd in Hejinian 52).

²² “Yet still in me, mingling with this delights, / Was something of stern mood, an *under-thirst* / Of vigour, never utterly asleep” (Wordsworth qtd. in Downey 75, emphasis mine). Term frequently used in Wordsworth’s poems for an unconscious and predominantly interior thirst.

making form distinct, it [the text] opens ... While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things” (Hejinian 56)

While proposing an almost exact argument for literature’s conflict between excess and containment, Ghosh adds to Hejinian’s discussion the clash between traditional ideas and a “hunger of new becoming” that is so noticeable in Language poets.²³ In *Studying Hunger Journals*, a somewhat bizarre and certainly unconventional compound of poetic diaries from 1975, Bernadette Mayer repeatedly manifests her longing preoccupation with formal experimentation and the potential reader-response. While attempting to record what she calls “states of consciousness” (19), she arrives to the conclusion that literature –and its hunger– requires a revisiting of form and language (“the code”):

We asked how to communicate states of consciousness directly through a mass of language without describing or remembering. And, we wind up with the question, who is the YOU in this work. Or why it is there constantly switching. Even though this question seems to lead somewhere else, all my attempts to answer it eventually gave me the clue I needed to *escape the code* & begin to do what I was trying to do. But now, in the middle of the work’s obsession with the concept of YOU, I wrote this: Why *suffer through the code*, it’s a path. *I’m on it, you get it, you get it* ... I’m looking for a language that will carry you to this place! (19)

Mayer, indeed, has devoted most of her work to the creation of a different “code”: by escaping literary and linguistic traditionalisms to the point of deserting grammar and orthographic conventions, she has achieved a literature meant to lead the reader (or, at least, some of her readers) into the subversive path of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. Moreover, she introduces a preoccupation with pronouns and addressees that has also been problematized by

²³ “There is a mourning over the ‘loss’ of traditional ideas into a ‘hunger of a new becoming,’ and it is what makes the experience of reading literature provocative” (Ghosh 148).

Hejinian in several of her works, most remarkably in *Oxota*²⁴: “For Armantrout, pronouns remain a ‘bastion of humanism within the text’, but for Hejinian, they also allow to explore forms of personhood *beyond hierarchies and false promises of unity* ... pronouns, after all, work as substitutes. More important, they allow identities to shift, and they can hide gender or other marks of identity” (Sandler 22-25, emphasis mine). Mayer’s obsession with the pronoun “you” is of an irresolvable nature. For Language poets, indeed, there is no particular addressee, no particular identity circumscribed within this (or any) pronoun. Pronouns, rather, are regarded as compounds of shifting, ‘switching’ identities that suppress any hierarchical relationship within the poem, while hinting at L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E’s blatant rejection of wider hierarchical ‘identities’ and institutions such as the literary academy or patriarchy.²⁵ In response to Adrian Blevin’s article “In Praise of the Sentence,” poet Cathy Park Hong remarks:

They asserted that the “I” in the poem is really a fabrication of the self rather than a direct mirror of the author’s psyche. As Hejinian once wrote, “One is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal.” From these ideas, the Language poets stylistically formed their own versions of what poet Ron Silliman dubbed the “new sentence”: poetic lines that are syntactically fractured, purposefully atonal, averse to the first person.

Unlike in traditional, Chomskyan sentence construction, the first person pronoun in Mayer is rather impressionistic, multiple, oscillating between physicality and abstraction: “At 3:35 a.m. on April 2nd, I recorded that I had eaten too much food / I was waging a constant battle against traditional language” (3). The excess of hunger and the consequent excess of food are directly

²⁴ *Oxota* (1991) subtitled *A Short Russian Novel*, is a 3,780 line poem divided into eight books.

²⁵ “Thus, according to DuPlessis, it is not sufficient to write lyric poems in which a woman’s experiences are the main subject matter of the song; for the very forms of the lyric –including even basic grammatical forms used to represent the presence of a speaker –are themselves indices of a history of male domination. For DuPlessis, this means substituting plural for singular verb tenses or ... rejecting the speaking ‘I’, as she does in a sentence that simultaneously abjures the linguistic technology of the first-person singular pronoun and evokes an action that nonetheless requires a subject” (Ashton 164).

linked with the plight against linguistic conventionality: formal experimentation functions once again as a successful container for the chaotic hunger of literature.

A metatextual and self-reflexive exercise, *Studying Hunger Journals* is also, as its title unequivocally indicates, a journal-like treatise on the effects of hunger and food. Like “sudden change” or “levels of attention,” food comes to be considered an “emerging state of consciousness” (Mayer 1) that is, a state of consciousness which is new to language and poetics. This is also an experiment, a *study*: while equating hunger to any other mind process, Mayer is assessing –and later on, confirming– the viability of the relationship between hunger and literature, food and language. The typically patriarchal duality body/mind is thus blurred, as hunger shifts from embodiment towards disembodiment, from a physiological process to a mental one, from something that *comes from the body* to something that *comes from the text*. Hunger, in this fashion, is turned (as with Hejinian) into a drive to explain human experience through the generative power of the text. The text, in turn, generates such a hunger and contains the necessary “food” for the adequate nourishment of the writer and the reader: “Poetry’s where *you all* find something, maybe *I* could find something *to eat* there, something anyone at all, that didn’t have to be prepared & not a feast, something simple” (Mayer 42-43).

At the same time that she exhibits a personal commitment towards the simplicity of quotidian pleasures, Mayer introduces more problematic images such as the disturbing passages about cannibalism that serve as the closing paragraphs of the journals. Mayer’s *cannibalism* implies a powerful intention to erase the body of the Other, a disconcerting hunger for the Other that nevertheless relates to a concept of desire founded, mainly, on psychoanalytic theory. Going back to Ghosh, hunger of literature involves a “desire to feed on the other and be fed upon” (143). Feeding on the inherent otherness of poetry while at the same time being fed by its materiality and generativity is indeed one of the goals of Language poets, who, as I have argued, display a “fidelity” to the otherness of experimental texts, and

whose works expose a blurring of the limits between text and body, authorship and readership, poet and poem.

Taking this into account, Mayer's several humorous references to Lacan²⁶ in *Studying Hunger Journals* seem no longer arbitrary. According to Lacan, "the goal of one's desire is to return to a primordial re-conflation between the self and the other" (Lacan qtd. in Gardiner 2). It is thus that the Self eats the Other (the text) in an almost-cannibalistic act that confirms the sameness and continuity between both sides of the coin. It is thus that pronouns disappear and lose their meaning, become "one" multiple entity: "So now I must kill & eat him at this spot, so now I must kill & eat you at this spot. *Settles the questions of "you" and "I's"* ... Yet in the end it still makes you scream. I mean 'one.' I have to stop addressing *you* ... I hope the use of the word cannibal, applied to a saint or ordinary person, will not shock a recognizably bourgeois audience ... Anyway, there's *none but a fictional need to worry* (57, emphasis mine).

Bernadette Mayer's experiments are not limited to written poetic exercises.²⁷ The relationship between food and poetry, in which poetry is a locus for nourishment (a continuum of eating the "other" poets, the "other" poems) is graphically explained in her "Idiosyncratic Poetry Guide: A Guide to Daily Poetry Choices"²⁸, where she elaborates (in conjunction with Philip Good and Marie Warsh) a wannabe food pyramid that contains poets' names, poetic tendencies and writing techniques in coexistence with references to everyday foods. The quotidian is again related to larger issues, as "physics," "thinking" and "Gertrude Stein" share their space with "birds" and "tortellini."

²⁶ "Lacan eats up terrific points. Everybody shits. My Imaginary Other is across the street vacuuming & drilling holes & making peculiar smells. Dear Mr. Lacan, so what? Why don't you speak English for a change, for the cause ... Dear Dr. Lacan, My Memory Other tells me your point is well-taken but I don't like to talk to him, usually it's like getting stuck in your own throat, if I eat more I'll choke" (Mayer 42).

²⁷ See Appendix II, Figure 3.

²⁸ See Appendix II, Figure 2.

At first glance, the pyramid presupposes a hierarchical structure: however, and on a closer look, Mayer's disposition for her particular food pyramid is not hierarchical at all. Ironically and almost in a mocking way, Mayer places her own "Experiment List" at the base (identified with "Bread, cereal, rice, pasta group, 6-11 servings") while positioning major L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E influences such as William Carlos Williams or Ezra Pound at the top, under the label "Fats, Oils and Sweets, Use Sparingly." More strikingly, she circumscribes "plagiarism" [sic] both within the base and in the top of the pyramid (both as the least and more important of her particular poetic "foods"). In fact, Mayer has fantasized with the idea of plagiarism²⁹ as a literary device since her early "Writing Experiments" and her *Sonnets*, where she devotes a great amount of poems to "imitations" of Catullus and includes full passages from Shakespeare or Thomas Wyatt without any sort of acknowledgement. In her excessive hunger, Mayer has even appropriated and gobbled the most dreaded and unspeakable literary resource and made it acceptable and poetic: she has eaten, regurgitated, and fused with the Other in her poems.

The next two subsections of my dissertation explore the connection between hunger and literature as reflected in selected passages of Lyn Hejinian's and Bernadette Mayer's long poems *My Life* and *Midwinter Day*, in order to pinpoint both poets' similitudes and differences, both formally and thematically.

²⁹ Talking about Hejinian's *My Life*, Mayer has contended: "*My Life* has so many good lines in it, it's like a trot, it makes you want to *steal from it* or perhaps annotate it & make the compliment (or complement) of imitating it" (*My Life*, back cover).

3.2. The Hunger Poems (I)³⁰ – Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day*: “I love chopping vegetables...”

Selecting a piece of *Midwinter Day* for formal examination is not a straightforward undertaking, not is it to analyze the book on the bases of conventional close-reading. However, although hunger and food are constantly mentioned throughout the poem, it is seemingly in the present excerpt where they acquire greater protagonism. The powerful statement “Everything is edible” introduces Mayer’s intermixing of the quotidian reality of food with broader social issues and a broader understanding of hunger: not only foods, but the totality of life, can be potentially contemplated as a source for nourishment.

Most importantly for the purposes of this Master’s thesis, the author establishes an intimate relationship between food and language by reinstating the possibility of “formally” or “linguistically” experimenting with the former: “I love chopping vegetables where you do something to make something that is one idiosyncratic thing into many things all looking the same or identical, much like the vegetables original seeds. How rapt attention is to doing this *as if it were a story*” (66, emphasis mine). Chopping vegetables, thus, is more or less comparable to deconstructing language in its different unities until the realization that the deconstructed whole, something like Silliman’s “syntactically fractured” sentence, is the “original seed.” In the *hungry* search for this primordial language, Mayer decomposes, deconstructs and reorganizes the poem’s formal characteristics: “Hunger then is aesthetic reordering, a rapport with disciplines and indispensabilities of the medium without being oblivious to the continual striving of aesthetic recreation” (Ghosh 150).

Taking this as the basis, sentences and syntactic units become noticeably long and complex, filled with content words and disruptive of the usual conciseness and simplicity of

³⁰ For the complete poems, see Appendix I, Figures 3 and 4.

contemporary English (the fifth complete sentence of the poem is 22 lines in the New Directions edition). In this excerpt from the poem, formal intervention becomes an external, physical action (“chopping vegetables”) that nevertheless is performed and narrated from within the text. Undoubtedly, this duality echoes Hejinian’s aforementioned contention: “While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things” (56).

Throughout the poem, and especially in this section, similes and metaphors are unconventional, exposing apparently “unnatural” and not so obvious relationships: “cubes or tree rings of carrots *like* the slices of trees that are tables in the library yard” / “canoes of celery *like* the clergy” / “crumpled papers with typographical errors of chopped spinach or greens” (67). As can be seen, Mayer relates every piece of food, every “chopped vegetable” to its alleged counterpart in written language (including literary, biblical, grammatical and orthographical references).

Clearly, these parallelisms and identifications once again explore the relationship between hunger and literature. Food serves as a pretext for the merging of both concepts and for the discussion of social issues: “I remember Bill saying how he and Beverly when they began to be short of money couldn’t understand why Clark wanted to buy Susan a Cuisinart, she said she didn’t want one” (67). A domestic situation, in this case, reflects a preoccupation with a *real* engagement in formal activity (a food processor chops vegetables artificially, systematically, like traditional “closed” forms of poetry) but also a certain rebelliousness towards the woman’s pervading association with the kitchen and the *oikos*.³¹

³¹ “The dismantlings of identity effected by poetics of the Language school never took place outside of sociopolitical circumstances –laterally acknowledged by Ashton as “social contingencies” (168) in which women’s difference continued to matter, often to their detriment . . . That poetic discourse outside the literary mainstream continues to invoke bodily frames erected and leaned upon by the social world may appear to undercut the will of women authors to contest their historical relegation to the *oikos*, *unless one heeds critical nuances embedded in the poetry itself*” (Scappettone 179, emphasis mine).

As in *Studying Hunger Journals*, cannibalism appears in the excerpt to denote an insatiable hunger for the Other that cannot be satisfied by traditional, “rigid” forms: “Unseaworthy boats of rigid turnips in which the survivors resort to cannibalism rather than eat the odoriferous boats” (67). Turnips are not “chopped,” they are whole and unseaworthy, unable to provide survivors with (literary) freedom. The poem, thus, is constructed as a story, a tale or even a fable in which the vegetables’ personification makes their forms and natures fluctuate, intermingling with several other elements: “Moses used to have cauliflower ears, now covered by curls like grated carrots” (67).

Finally, Bernadette Mayer’s obsession with pasta in *Studying Hunger Journals*³² is reiterated in *Midwinter Day* as a reminder that, just as carbohydrates constitute the base of most food pyramids (including her own “Idiosyncratic Poetic Guide”), formal experimentation should constitute the base of poetic knowledge: “The *commas* of the cheapest small onions for the sauce, the olive oil’s drops on the *map* of the pot of tomatoes, *letters* of the *straight pasta* ... We’re *only having spaghetti*” (67).

3.3. The Hunger Poems (II) – Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*: “One begins as a student but becomes a friend of clouds” and “A word to guard continents of fruits and organs”

Hejinian’s references to food and language can be spotted all throughout *My Life*, but they are often disseminated and surrounded by several other issues and preoccupations. This is, indeed, *My Life*’s most salient formal particularity, as the poem³³ –or poem(s)– is

³² “Prince spaghetti. I’m an expert at carbohydrate fuels & could fool you right now into thinking that basketball players, quite naturally, should switch from caviar before the game whose bitter equivalent is steak, to a big bowl of pasta” (*Studying Hunger Journals* 44)

³³ “Whether any of their [Language poets’] works should be classified as long poems is arguable, given the writers’ determination to disrupt literary conventions ... But because the modern long poem combines the

constructed attending to sentences and paragraphs, instead of being organized by conventional thematic unities, in the fashion of Silliman's *Albany*. This is the main reason why, in this analysis, I will be attending to separate sentences, making references to their larger context whenever necessary.

'Albany' is a long prose paragraph made up by one hundred 'new sentences,' to use Silliman's own term, defined in a now well-known (and hotly debated) essay by that name. The 'new sentence' is conceived as an independent unit, neither causally nor temporally related to the sentences that follow it. Like a line in poetry, its length is operative, and its meaning depends on the larger paragraph as organizing system. (Perloff 414-415)

When looking at Hejinian's texts, however, it is important to bear in mind that her "intentionally arbitrary structures and compositional methods render language and form, rather than the desire for a coherent narrative or a unified subject, generative forces" (Keller 562). Hejinian's sentences generate a text that, although not necessarily coherent, conveys a sense of recollection, memory narrative and impeccable formal exercises that ultimately compensate for the lacking thematic consensus. According to calligraphic poet Hank Lazer, "one of the major sources of joy in reading *My Life* comes from the collision of various sentences and subjects. In that very collision –vaguely cubist or collagist– lies the humor and pleasure of this text, which is ... a site for high-energy and linguistic experimentation" (30).

The selected passages correspond to two of the 45 sections of the poem, all of which are headed by a single sentence that reiterates itself in subsequent sections, echoing the continuity and repetition of life. Like in Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, vegetables acquire a central role in their replacement of flowers and other foods: "Cheese makes one thirsty but onions make a worse thirst" (73). The layered structure of onions echoes formal

strengths of prose, epic, and lyric in a genre with extremely fluid conventions, and because the Language writers trace their evolution centrally from Pound and Zufosky as well as from Ashbery and Stein, it seems appropriate to consider their long works as one extension of the collage tradition of the *Cantos* and 'A'" (Keller 561).

experimentation: like in Wordsworth's *underthirst* and Mayer's hunger, again, this reference expresses an internal desire for (poetic) nourishment.

Later sequences such as "I think my interests are much broader than those of people who have been saying the same thing for eight years ... Has the baby enough teeth for an apple" (73) can be certainly paralleled to similar images in Mayer's *Studying Hunger Journals*, where she writes: "I'm chewing just like a baby as though solid food is too much for me ... She refused the baby food & ate the salad without teeth" (33). In the context of the poems' understanding of hunger, these sentences convey the idea of an excessive appetite, an ambition for more and new knowledge, a non-conformist, daring attitude towards traditionalism. Moreover, and if for Mayer the chopped vegetable approximates to the original seed, for Hejinian "The apple in the pie is the pie": the fragmented, "raptured" (97) unit equals the totality without any need for thematic coherence.

When dealing with Language poetry, the reader is involved in a process of 'feeding' and must consequently 'swallow' the disruption of traditional forms: those forms have to "fit" in the reader's mind and this concern is expressed by the author in the following lines: "An extremely pleasant and often comic satisfaction comes from conjunction, the fit, say, of comprehension in a reader's mind to content in a writer's work. But not bitter" (73). There is a particular flavor to comprehension that must not be bitter – there is a path to the understanding of Language poetry that demands "that the reader, deprived of the conventional ordering systems of consistent grammar, syntax, theme, and voice, participate in the construction of the work" (Keller 561). Likewise, linkage between the different sentences is not pre-made by the poet and must be restructured and reordered in the reader's mind.

In "A word to guard continents of fruits and organs," Hejinian relates food to the "bodily" text: "Is this food or sex for thought, a person wonders" – both drives (sexual and hunger) come to be created by the text and recall the almost libidinous *rage to know*.

Like Bernadette Mayer, Hejinian constructs a quotidian reality of “chores” and “groceries” in which, nevertheless, woman’s traditional entrapment within the household is problematized. In both authors, woman’s relationship with food has little or nothing to do with patriarchal ideals of housekeeping: the rapture of phrases and units (97) also signifies the rapture of the *oikos*: Faustina said: When I get home with my groceries you better believe it I’m not unpacking the car – if they want to eat they can carry the things in and I’ve got a lock and chain for the refrigerator to prove it” (96).

4. “The Dark Does Not Invite Common Sense”³⁴

4.1. Dreams, *Thymophor* and Estrangement

The bed is made of sentences which present themselves as what they are

Some soft, some hardly logical, some broken off

Sentences granting freedom to memories and sights

Lyn Hejinian, *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*

The works of Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer devote a great part of their preoccupations to the portrayal of dreams through very particular narratives and imagery. Dreams and the unconscious, in fact, undoubtedly populate their poems and experimentations, to the point of constituting the underlying subject of entire books (cf. Hejinian’s *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* or Mayer’s *Memory*). In the case of their long poems of the quotidian, however, dreams appear intermittently and sometimes almost inadvertently within the totality of everyday affects. But even in those instances where the unconscious acquires greater relevance, Hejinian’s and Mayer’s remains “a kind of writing in which ‘dream’ figures prominently but which cannot be read simply in terms of a poetics of the inner life” (Arnold 55).

These and other Language poets’ “dreamwork” (Mayer, “Experimentations”) bears indeed little resemblance to Surrealist automatism (understood as the suppression of rational consciousness as a writing technique), taking into account its contentions on the relationship between the text and the body: “Automatic poetry issues straight from the entrails of the poet or from any other organ that has stored up reserves” (Arp qtd. in Hopkins 69). Language

³⁴ Lyn Hejinian, *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*, 74.

poets, as I have contended, see the text as the producer of embodiment, and not vice versa. At a first glance, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E “movement” advocates for certain procedures that echo Surrealist automatic writing (cf. Mayer et al’s *The 3:15 Experiment*³⁵): on a deeper reading, however, the goal of Language poets is always formal experimentation, not so much an accurate portrayal of the intricate functioning of the unconscious mind.

As discussed in the introduction, Bretonian Surrealism presents an attitude towards language that seemingly opposes Ron Silliman’s “new sentence” because of its orientation towards the depiction of an “absolute reality”³⁶ or “surreality”. In the first version of Silliman’s “The New Sentence,” published in *Talks: Hills* in 1980, Silliman argues that “the ‘new sentence’ has to do with prose poems, but only some prose poems ... [He] does not address automatism but his critique of the prose poem seems, on the face of it, to be just as applicable to texts generated by this technique” (Arnold 21). Despite Silliman’s apparent reluctance to acknowledge it as a positive model, the influence of Surrealism on Language Poetry’s writing practices is unquestionable. David Arnold, indeed, argues in favor of the potentiality of automatic writing to be controllable and formally directed, following Bruns’s contention that “the unconscious is ... a natural enemy of improvisational desire” (67). The unconscious mind, the “sleep” in Hejinian’s terms, “only exists in memory / it’s imaginary” (*The Book...* 65), and it is through controlled and studied exercises that one can access it for literary practice.

From the premise that not everything can be written,³⁷ but nevertheless attempting to “write what cannot be written” (McGann 11), Language poets focus on the capacity of language and form to project the objective, psychosocial world while creating a certain

³⁵ “*The 3:15 Experiment* comprises the results of an experiment in which the four authors rose at 3:15 a.m. every day in the month of August from the years 1993-2000 and wrote. Some poems, some prose, some *dream-drenched euphoric scrawl*, some divine journaling recording the weird magic of that middle hour” (Waldman).

³⁶ “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak” (Breton 14).

³⁷ “The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable” (Hejinian 56) This view certainly clashes with Surrealist intentions to depict the “absolute reality”.

estrangement in the reader that echoes the impossibility of language to “match the world” (Hejinian 56). The depiction of dreams works arguably well as an estranging practice:

In her essay “Strangeness,” Hejinian defines description as a response to the world not already shaped by everyday assumptions ... citing as examples the narratives of explorers and *descriptions of dreams*. Description thus has a “marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is, toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange” (138). It also links estrangement in art and life, because as her examples show, description for her explicitly relates estranging writing to encounters with strangeness in the world. (Edmond 104)

Formal experiments with description often provoke a feeling of unfamiliarity, but their linguistic potential is tremendously reassuring for Mayer and Hejinian. Both poets’ understanding of dreams, especially considering my previous theorizations on literary hunger and the self-generative text, constructs itself around the necessity for the materialization and verbalization of dreams—a physiological process that Dr. Ernest Hartmann (among others) has concretized as *thymophor*.³⁸ Originally, *thymophor* occurs in dreaming, daydreaming and “creative reverie,” more specifically in “activation patterns during Rem sleep” (187). Language poets’ dreamwork (again, cf. the 3:15 experiment) takes advantage of such brain processes in order to successfully record and describe dreams, while at the same time experimenting with linguistic forms. With the pertinent and necessary literary twist, *thymophor*—which literally refers to the “carrying-over, or translation, of emotion into imagery” (Hartmann 165)—becomes an eminently textual process. Ultimately, it is through the text that one can access the “emotion”, “ardent desire” or “hunger of literature” translated by *thymophor*: the text, again, provides the necessary tools to describe what otherwise cannot be described. Mayer’s “Experimentations” are a great example of the literary use of

³⁸ From the Greek θυμός, *thymos* (emotion) and φόρος, *phoros* (to bear, to carry over).

thymophor and the definitive proof that dreamwork is not automatic in the traditional sense; rather, it involves numerous textual and formal processes: “Experiment with translation or transcription of dream thought ... work with the dream until a poem or song emerges from it.” Dream work may not be a way of representing the poet’s inner world,³⁹ but it certainly confirms literature’s ability to materialize what is not material and embody the experience of dreams through the active, Language text.

Directly in relation with the notion of *thymophor* is T.S. Eliot’s “objective correlative,” as Hartmann asserts. According to Eliot: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”: in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be *the formula for that particular emotion*” (qtd. in Hartmann 168). In Language Poetry, there is no exact formula for the representation of literary desire. Nevertheless, given the text’s capacity for aesthetic reordering, formal experimentation is the most adequate way of playing with the chaotic world of dreams. The “objective correlative” in Mayer’s, Hejinian’s and even Silliman’s work becomes a pervasive set of textual generations that concentrate the “particular emotion” of sleep and give an idea of the insatiable hunger of literature to create the world through the text.⁴⁰

A curious experiment with dreams that acknowledges their never-ending linguistic possibilities and an almost *excessive* desire for continuous reinvention is Hejinian’s collaborative work with poet Bob Perelman⁴¹. Their experiment demonstrates not only the enhanced linguistic opportunities that collaboration implies, but also the possibility of modifying dreams *a posteriori* (in the waking state), confirming previous suspicions that what

³⁹ “Hejinian’s poetic practice rejects the concept of ‘voice’ and ‘all notions of the self as some core reality at the heart of our sense of being. This rejection has been noted by many scholars in her best known poetic work, *My Life*, which Perloff describes as a ‘language field in which identity is less a property of a given character than a fluid state that takes on varying shapes and that hence engages the reader to participate in its *formation and deformation*” (Edmond 102, emphasis mine).

⁴⁰ “If the text represents an “objective correlative,” the correlative for Stein would be the text itself as it generates itself” (McGann “The Grand Heretics of Modern Fiction” 311).

⁴¹ Another of Hejinian’s interesting collaborations is her 50 minute audio-recording with Charles Bernstein. See Appendix II, Figure 4.

interests these poets is not the unconscious from a Surrealist perspective, but formal play and linguistic “perversity.” In the 2009 edition of *Jacket Magazine*, Hejinian explains it thus:

In 1995, Bob Perelman and I came up with an idea for a collaboration. Its guiding constraint delighted us for its transgressivity. Our method would involve changing each other’s dreams. To begin, we would each record a dream and send it to the other, who would then enter the dream – really enter it: not as in “you were in my dream last night, Bob” but right there, dreaming it, too. Fucking with it, if you will. We would each insert sentences, images, even whole paragraphs on new scenes, into the other’s dream ... The terminology of vulgar eroticism is hard to avoid. The project was willfully perverse in conception. And its play – like so much play – was based on a fiction; an impossibility made possible fictively.

Hejinian and Perelman’s collaboration denotes an implicit (and almost erotic) desire –hunger– for language and its oppositional, transgressive power. Within their collaborative poems, there appears also an underlying need for the contestation of the apparently immovable principles of objective reality. Only in fiction, Hejinian asserts, is it possible for two divergent dreamers to dream a single dream. Only in fiction can this dream be accessed, entered, “fucked,” and modified by an external visitor. It is only through dedicated memory and the controlled recollection of the dream that the reverie can be deformed and reformed *a posteriori*.⁴² *Thymophor* represents here the inescapable impulse to translate the dream for the other so as to “play” with it in the waking state. When talking about “The Game,” one of the poems that resulted from the collaboration, Hejinian stresses once again the estranging capacities of dreams and formal experimentation: “There is always something improper –inappropriate, yes, but also unowned – in a dream. ‘The Game’ is, in some senses, about disreification,

⁴² In the words of Bessis: “If enthusiasm and dreams are essential components of creation, it may be possible to generate and control them and so relieve the suffering that often comes with creation” (318).

decommodification – the game of language – or, rather, the game of ‘writing it down’ (*Jacket Magazine*). What resurfaces is, ultimately, form.

In a slightly different light, Hejinian’s *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* and Mayer’s *Memory* recall the dream’s omnipresence in most Language writing. *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* experiments with oneiric, episodic form; however, it detaches itself from Silliman’s “new sentence” and creates a more accessible although equally experimental compound of “a thousand” techniques in poetry writing, as I have previously contended in Chapter 2. “Written over two decades, *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* began as an homage to Scheherazade, the heroine of *The Arabian Nights* ... I see *The Book* as a compendium of ‘night works’: lullabies, bedtime stories, insomniac lyrics, nonsensical mumblings, fairy tales ... dream narratives, erotic or occasionally bawdy ditties, etc.” (Staff). These ‘night works,’ even in those pieces where traditional lyricism is more present, are predominantly essayistic in content, revolving around a certain discomfort towards the impossible definition of “dream.” This, I argue, is also an experiment (can criticism be introduced into the poem?) specially taking into account Hejinian’s poetic theorizations on the sleeping “bodily text”:

Isn’t sleep fitted to this world?

Aren’t dreams a form of internal criticism?

Doesn’t each dream catch a previous day of the world in an act of criticism?

Isn’t this itself dreamed / criticized by an expert? (Hejinian 128).

Criticism merges with the dream and the poem: genre is also a locus for the contestation of traditional / hierarchical forms. In addition, the capacity of dreams to provoke *thymophor* results in an act of internal criticism, as the dream’s description is always reevaluated, corrected and criticized by the dreamer, who is often incapable of effectuating the translation, as can be seen.

Bernadette Mayer’s *Memory*, as its name indicates, is a poetic experiment with

autobiography. Most importantly for this dissertation, it reflects on the limits of the unconscious and the capacity of the text to reproduce states of consciousness, in the fashion of *Studying Hunger Journals*: “In July 1971, Mayer began experimenting with her memory. She shot a roll of 35mm film each day, and kept a rigorous daily journal. The project resulted in a staggering total of 1100 photographs and nearly six hours of recorded poetry” (bernadette-mayer.com). Autobiography and dream imagery are intrinsically related in this book, to the point of physically translating dream imagery into photographic material. Autobiographical memory, according to Hartmann, is inherently connected to the dream: “I have suggested that the dream ... connects new memories with old memory stores, based on emotion, and plays a crucial role in organizing our memory systems in accordance with what is emotionally important” (186). In Mayer’s book, this process is acknowledged several times and represents an excuse for further formal experimentation –Mayer’s typical juxtapositions and endless coordinations become even more complex as dreams and memory are also juxtaposed:

Cause memory & the process of remembering of seeing what’s in sight, what’s data, what comes in for a while for a month & a month’s a good time for an experiment memory stifles dream it shuts dream up ... And dream’s an analogy to reprocessing in process, so rewrite it it’s changed but a memory according to how you record it now & as it could go on forever, this could, dream’s a memory kept in process kept in present by whose consciousness by whose design, so, memory creates an explosion of dream. (128)

The portrayal and discussion of dreams does not escape Hejinian’s and Mayer’s long poems of the quotidian, *My Life* and *Midwinter Day*. The next two subsections analyze two excerpts from these works, in order to assess oneiric relevance within everyday life poetics.

4.2. The Dream Poems (I)⁴³ – Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*: “I could count to zero”

Presented as one of *My Life*’s several “dream descriptions,” Hejinian’s poem “I could count to zero” abandons the tradition of independent, “new” sentences characteristic of Silliman’s style to become a more straightforward and coherent –although formally fragmented and thematically disconcerting– exercise.

As *My Life* progresses, there is, indeed, a certain transition towards the inclusion of less experimental and more accessible constructions. Hence, Part II (*My Life in the Nineties*) maintains the episodic structure of the previous sections while at the same time recovering the thematic unity that was completely discarded in Part I. Even within this overall impression of thematic consensus, form echoes what Mayer would deem “the lune form” (“Experimentations”) that is, the diffuse and inconstant shape dreams normally acquire. Moreover, as in Hejinian’s aforementioned collaboration with Bob Perelman, the dream here intermingles with “waking phrases” (126), *a posteriori* thoughts about the dream that are perceived as disruptive, “unwanted and unwarranted: I am afraid not of their sound (though it’s malignant) but of their banality, their illogicality” (126). There is a certain fear towards the incapability of “waking” language to express the complexity of dreams.⁴⁴ At the same time, “counting to zero” may be possible in the context of oneiric fiction, but not in the objective social world: “Life makes zero mandatory, life makes zero nearly impossible” (126). In the waking state, in “real” life, there is no zero without “one.” For Language poets, this is an ongoing preoccupation, taking into account their blatant rejection of the traditional/confessional “voice poem”: “Language poetry effects a shift of the relationship of

⁴³ For the complete poems, see Appendix I, Figures 5 and 6.

⁴⁴ “Memory of the dream is now a mere abbreviation” (Hejinian 125).

the (writing) subject to poetic discourse, from a notion of the self as the speaker or voice located outside the text, to a notion of the subject *as a constructed moment or effect within various intersecting discourses*” (Greer 343). The dreaming subject, accordingly, becomes a collective, collaborative and fragmented unconscious able to flow through the different phases of the dream: “I interrupt, not to seize power (though in a sense, I do so) but to participate, corroborate, collaborate” (125).

In a very similar way as Robert Grenier did with his “On speech” manifesto (“I hate speech ... To me, all speeches say the same thing”), the “I” that narrates *My Life*, (most specifically its dream descriptions) is everything but a unified object or a producer of speeches⁴⁵. But this introduces an unavoidable conflict: is it possible to think of a poetics of the quotidian, in which dreams are part of the everyday, while at the same time condemning the poetic persona’s intromission into the dream? In Hejinian’s poem, the dream is full of human, mundane interruptions that make the dream’s accurate depiction impossible: “In social stages we make our way adjusting to dreams at break of day disguising as fun our ineptitude” (126). As Edmond contends while analyzing *Oxota*, “the final ... lines articulate the difficulty that Hejinian confronts in including the everyday while maintaining her poetics of estrangement ... While Hejinian ... appears to conflate poetic estrangement with her everyday experience ... she also acknowledges the tension between them” (118). The case of *My Life* and dreams is no different: dreams function as an estranging practice but also as an unquestionable part of personal experiences. Merging both functions is a formal practice.

⁴⁵ Considered the founding manifesto of Language Poetry.

4.3. The Dream Poems (II): Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*: "Stately you came to town in my opening dream..."

Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day* opens with a rather familiar "Stately you came to town in my opening dream ... I saw clearly / You were staying in the *mirror* with me" (1) that cannot but recall James Joyce's extensively quoted "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a *mirror* and a razor lay crossed" (1). As in a dream, the quote is distorted, its elements recontextualized, and its potential meanings are completely divergent from the original. This is indeed one of Mayer's famous inspirations or "plagiarisms": *Ulysses*'s "awaking mountains" (1) are asleep and dreaming in *Midwinter Day*'s "town of mountains," where Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* resonates inescapably. Mayer's is a "*Midwinter Day's Dream*" that recollects her one year of almost compulsive reading of Joyce: "I really enjoyed *Ulysses* ... To read it just like that –I don't think many other people have done, where you just read it from beginning to end– is pretty astonishing. You're all of a sudden *living in a different world*" (Interview with Adam Fitzgerald). Joyce, along with the Dadaist movement, is perhaps one of Mayer's most direct influences. In fact, his ongoing preoccupation for language and dreams (like Mayer, he kept several "dream diaries") certainly resurfaces in the work of Language poets. As Gabler has postulated: "Anticipating long in advance the conceptualizations of present-day theory, he [Joyce] discovered the structural and semiotic strategies of language-encoded texts and experience-encoded reality ... he taught himself to read streets and cities, landscapes ... dreams and memories, the randomness of the everyday ... as texts of their own right" (213).

Mayer's dream is directly linked to memory; moreover, it functions as an omnipresent and all-embracing authoritative text that renders everything else diffuse: "Then I saw / the shawls of the dream as if they were the sky / and the dream's dark vests" (2). As was the case

in Hejinian's poetry, the dream's "shawls" exhibit a capacity to blur the significations of pronouns, provoking the reader's estrangement. Like in *Studying Hunger Journals* or *Memory*, the "I" addresses an undifferentiated, unknown and multiple "you" (cf. "Who is the YOU in this poem?, *Studying Hunger...*). Through the extensive use of the first person subject pronoun, Mayer creates a pervasive sense of repetition that echoes the tedium of everyday tasks, while at the same time exposing the dream's routine-disturbing nature: "Never, since I was born / And for no man or woman I've ever met, / I'll swear to that / Have there been such dreams as I had today / the 22nd day of December" (1). The longest day of the year breaks the monotony of the quotidian by creating a problem of communication. The failure to "say" the dream again provokes anxiety to merge with it, enter it. Progressively, the dream substitutes the poem's hints at reality: "People say, 'What is it?' ... / I'll tell you all about, if I can / *Can I say what I saw* / In sleep and dreams ... / I was alone in the dream's dressing room" (2). *Thymophor*, the need of translating the dream into words, is here solved by the dream's taking over of the narrative and the subject, even to the point of being personified and dressed with "black leather jackets" (2). Until the last page of the book, when night comes again, the dream extends its estranging but creative capacities, opening again the door for formal experimentation: "From dreams I made sentences" (119).

My analyses of both authors pinpoint the prominence that dreams acquire in their respective long poems, as well as in their oeuvre as a whole. Presented as an infinite source of innovation but also as a part of the everyday reality of the *oikos*, dreams (as well as hunger) expose a great potential to disrupt patriarchal conceptions of the home and the female quotidian. All in all, the reader is estranged within the traditionally "comfortable" domestic sphere, which for Hejinian and Mayer becomes a locus for formal unconventionality.

Conclusion

Language poetry is multiple, extensive and formally disconcerting. The lack of consensus between its different practitioners, in addition, complicates even further an accurate, straightforward understanding of its lyric strategies. However, in a literary movement where hierarchies are to be discarded and even despised, the search for accuracy seems the most innocuous of the reader's problems. Several decades after Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews published the last issue of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, the absolute primacy that these authors conferred to the text is still in vogue. In their hands, the author has died, revived and reappeared beneath the poem's formal intricacies, the body has "returned" and found a place to stay within the composition's atypical punctuation and line disposition.

Lyn Hejinian and Bernadette Mayer's poetry emerges from their necessity to portray the quotidian female experience, paired with an extraordinary "hunger" for literature and literary experimentation. Their feminism is also atypical, unaffiliated, but nevertheless unquestionable and salient. From Mayer's disruption of (male) canonical forms in her rough-sex-filled *Sonnets*, to Hejinian's profound admiration for Gertrude Stein's vindication of the woman writer, they have demystified and debunked the patriarchal nature/culture duality by creating an authoritative, self-conscious "female text."

Hejinian's *My Life*, a reinterpretation of Silliman's "new sentence" and a treatise on the repetitive rhythms of the everyday, evades thematic unity and presents the author's own experience without, paradoxically, positioning herself at the center. *Midwinter Day*, on the other hand, continues Bernadette Mayer's intertextual exercises, proving her proficient knowledge of the classics despite her confessed –although visibly humoristic and ironic– abhorrence of them. Humor, indeed, is a crucial element in both poets, who do not hesitate to

include “unpoetic” themes and vocabulary, thus also disrupting poetry’s traditional “closure”. Writing becomes then a process of continuous formal experimentation, to the point of disturbing the apparently immovable bodily affects of *Hunger* and *Dreams*. *Hunger* and *Dreams*, in this light, are linked to the creative impulse and function as textual forces. Even though they may be addressed slightly differently in both poets’ works, they certainly point to the prevalence of a “bodily text”, an active and self-generative entity that parallels human embodied experience.

Lyn Hejinian’s and Bernadette Mayer’s poetry, as I have demonstrated, is combative and literature-centered, fighting against the academy but also against a tradition in which women’s eminently sexual bodies are the focal point of the composition. When the text is the producer of the body, and not vice versa, both the text and the body escape objectification, emphasizing formal processes as the ultimate creators of the poem. In their banishment of “the voice” or workshop poem, Hejinian and Mayer have instead found “the voice” of the text. Even upon completion, the Language text continues being open to experimentation, constituting an everlasting source of creative possibilities.

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Appendix I

Figure 1. Bernadette Mayer, “Sonnet” [You jerk you didn’t call me up] – From *Sonnets* (1989)

You jerk you didn't call me up
I haven't seen you in so long
You probably have a fucking tan
& besides that instead of making love tonight
You're drinking your parents to the airport
I'm through with you bourgeois boys
All you ever do is go back to ancestral comforts
Only money can get—even Catullus was rich but

Nowadays you guys settle for a couch
By a soporific color cable t.v. set
Instead of any arc of love, no wonder
The G.I. Joe team blows it every other time

Wake up! It's the middle of the night
You can either make love or die at the hands of the Cobra Commander

To make love, turn to page 121.
To die, turn to page 172.

Figure 2. Lyn Hejinian, “Flagellate” – From *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* (2012)

Flagellate

Gnomes in blue panties

Hey, sister—don’t squeeze

Potential spinach-lover, lachrymose concert-goer

I like to stamp on corrugations

I’ve got to list that gum eraser

Wild are the wildebeests, rapacious the masked
raccoons that prowl at night

Finish the list, patrol

Gigantism

Existence in space

Quitclaim

Humdinger

Punk

Buckwheat

Individual volition

Rub me with rose water

Cast pearls before swine

Get up steam

Adieu, lambent flame of genius

Fiddledeedee, spatula

Rage, breathe, love-sick turtle-doves

Bartending tiger, unthreaded Abigail

Representative negative wood block Titian seascape

Sink, o sun –noontide, shut up

Waters of bitterness, come down the river

Spaniel servility, pinned braggadocio

Fire-eating, pot-walloping, post-feminist biker chick

Solicitude

Fribble

Inquiry

Napkin and bushel and mañana

Give me a break—authenticity

Judge

Stammer

So please you

Figure 3. The Hunger Poems (I) – Bernadette Mayer’s *Midwinter Day*

I love chopping vegetables where you do something to make something that is one idiosyncratic thing into many things all looking the same or identical, much like the vegetables’ original seeds. How rapt attention is to doing this as if it were a story. I remember Bill saying how he and Beverly when they began to be short of money couldn’t understand why when Clark wanted to buy Susan a Cuisinart, she said she didn’t want one.

Everything is edible. It’s a long story, coins or cubes or tree rings of carrots like the slices of trees that are tables in the library yard, canoes of celery like the clergy or something with strings attached, miniature trees of broccoli and if you are poor enough to want to cook the whole plant, their inevitable tree stumps that look like primitive clouds, Moses used to have cauliflower ears, now covered by curls like grated carrots, last-quarter moons of onions or bloated apostrophes, crumpled papers with typographical errors of chopped spinach or greens, unseaworthy boats of rigid turnips in which the survivors resort to cannibalism rather than eat the odoriferous boats, railroad ties for French fries, sleepers, the third estate, the common people, Oldenburgs to go into stew or a peasantish rich pounded veal where I am crushing flesh between waxed paper with a hammer in the kitchen if I can afford it, the commas of the cheapest small onions for the sauce, the olive oil’s drops on the map of the pot of tomatoes, letters of the straight pasta and the Poons in camera lenses of the lentils, homogenized script of the mass rice, foreplay with the nice knife at butter, my mother used to have a pressure cooker but she made it clear she was afraid it would explode any minute. When she cooked carrots in it she had a bad habit of saying, “It’s too bad, they taste earthy.”

We’re only having spaghetti. Once on my mother’s birthday which was April 4th, we went for a picnic to Clarence Fahnestock State Park and I refused to get out of the car. She also had a habit of regretting she hadn’t married somebody rich, like “the man who used to take me out in a taxi” (66-67)

Figure 4. The Hunger Poems (II) – Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*

One begins as a student but becomes a friend of clouds

Back and backward, why, wide and wider. Such that art is inseparable from the search for reality. The continent is greater than the content. A river nets the peninsula. The garden rooster goes through the goldenrod. I watched a robin worming its way on the ridge, time on the uneven light ledge. There as in that’s their truck there. Where it rested in the weather where it rusted. As one would say, my friends, meaning no possession, and don’t harm my trees. Marigolds, nasturtiums, snapdragons, sweet William, forget-me-nots, replaced by chard, tomatoes, lettuce, garlic, peas, beans, carrots, radishes –but marigolds ... Cheese makes one thirsty but onions make a worse thirst ... I think my interests are much broader than those of people who have been saying the same thing for eight years, or so he said. Has the baby enough teeth for an apple. Juggle, jungle, chuckle. The hummingbird, for all we know, may be singing all day long. We had been in France where every word really was a bird, a thing singing. I laugh as if my pots were clean. The apple in the pie is the pie. An extremely

pleasant and often comic satisfaction comes from conjunction, the fit, say, of comprehension in a reader's mind to content in a writer's work. But not bitter (73).

A word to guard continents of fruits and organs

... A person all partialness and mouth never knows where to begin ... We are ruled by the fantastic laws of clinging. There is pulse on the pit of paradise. The night is rubbed shiny and resembles an egg. Is this food or sex for thought, a person wonders. The woman is the hostess of a bulb, and not its prisoner ... Morphemes of evidence, units of appeal. Its time in spins. I drone the phrase of discontinuity who have the landscape under realism. So I take the pen and paper with me as I set out for a walk, on which I intend to set out a problem, sure that'll work ... They do not speak in sentences but in battlements, of pleasures and of necessities. Things are real separately. And I in the middle ground found therefore solace in the chores. Rendition ... Faustina said, When I get home with my groceries you better believe it I'm not unpacking the car – if they want to eat they can carry the things in and I've got a lock and chain for the refrigerator to prove it ... And the hot dust of the tobacco smoke fills a sound pot, the mouth. As when I read in Charles William Beebe's account of his descent a half-mile deep in a bathysphere the transcribed rapture, the rapture of units – and phrases are units. (95, 96, 97).

Figure 5. The Dream Poems (I) – Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*

I could count to zero

The memory of that dream is now a mere abbreviation. I'm in a tent pitched on a slope looking west with my two cats, now as big as panthers, and a female lion, who has befriended us – or should I say “taken our side” in “another wild kingdom”? Who could argue that selves are pillars alone. Our souls are our copies, they ignore us completely. I interrupt, not to seize power (though, in a sense, I do so) but to participate, corroborate, collaborate. Of course it is pointless to say something that can't be understood, and yet, though you cannot understand my love for you, it is not pointless to tell you of it ... There once was a beautiful princess whose favorite color was red and she lived in a dark forest where only the tiniest flowers grew and they were yellow. The molten metal cooled and was beaten into brittle rattles, while the little children prattled to the kitten and the rattlesnake battled with a turtle. Michael interrupted to say that his friend Ben considered vinyl far superior to CDs, and Rae cracked, “Hurray for crackle.” Sleep receiver of words. In social stages we make our way adjusting to dreams at break of day disguising as fun our ineptitude as we're seized by untested solicitude ... Waking phrases come unwanted, unwarranted: I am afraid not of their sound (though it's malignant) but of their banality, their illogicality. They are unfinished night thoughts, uncut sweeps unchanted gears. Haphazard discernments. No. In what way. In this way. Life makes zero mandatory, life makes zero nearly impossible.

Appendix II

Visual Content

Figure 1. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine, edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews (Number 1, January 1978). Retrieved from Eclipse Archive: <http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/LANGUAGEn1/pictures/001.html>

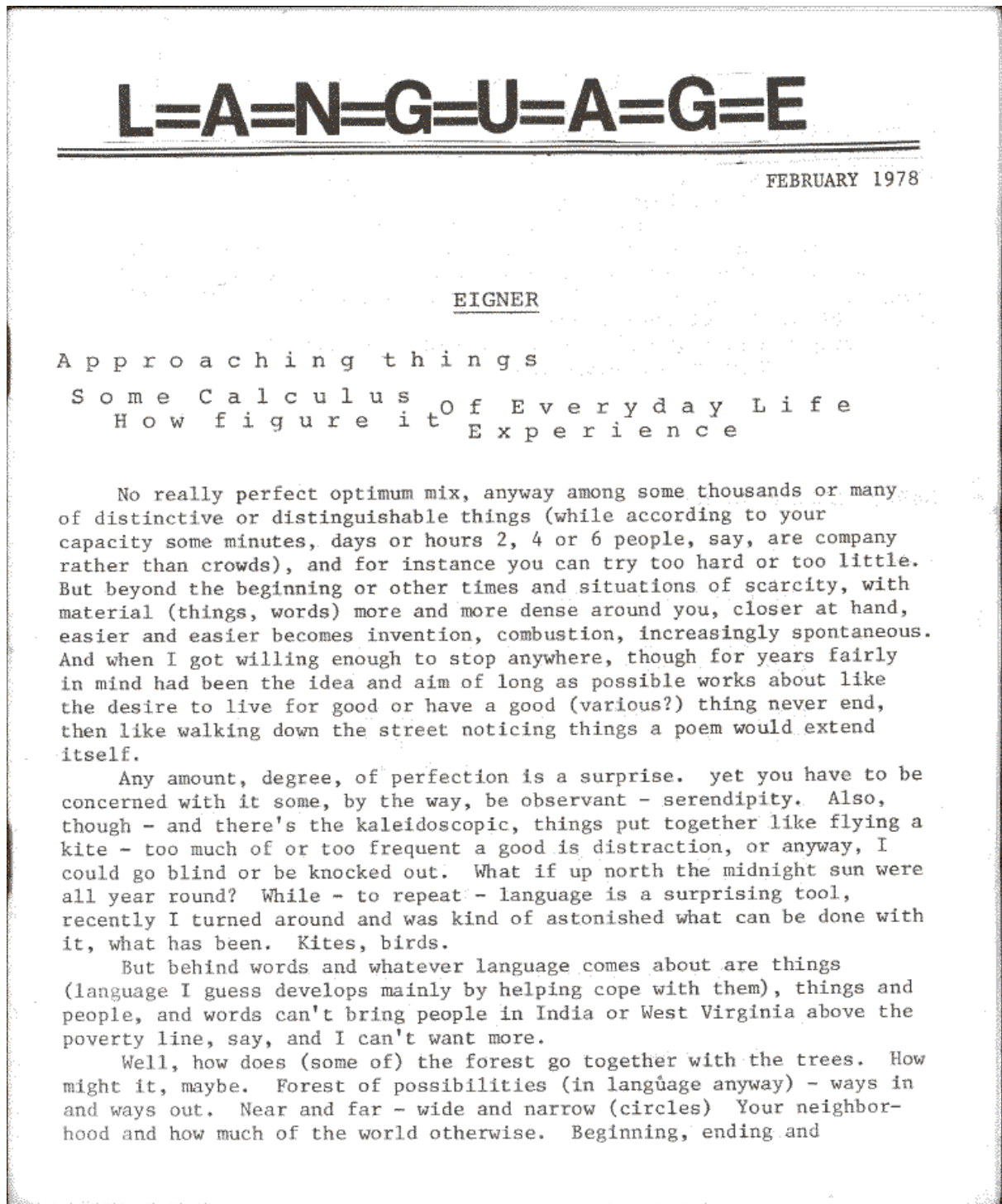


Figure 2. Bernadette Mayer's "Idiosyncratic Poetic Guide / Pyramid" Retrieved from poet Michael Kelleher's Twitter:
<https://twitter.com/pblossomhwy/status/863754059261648896>

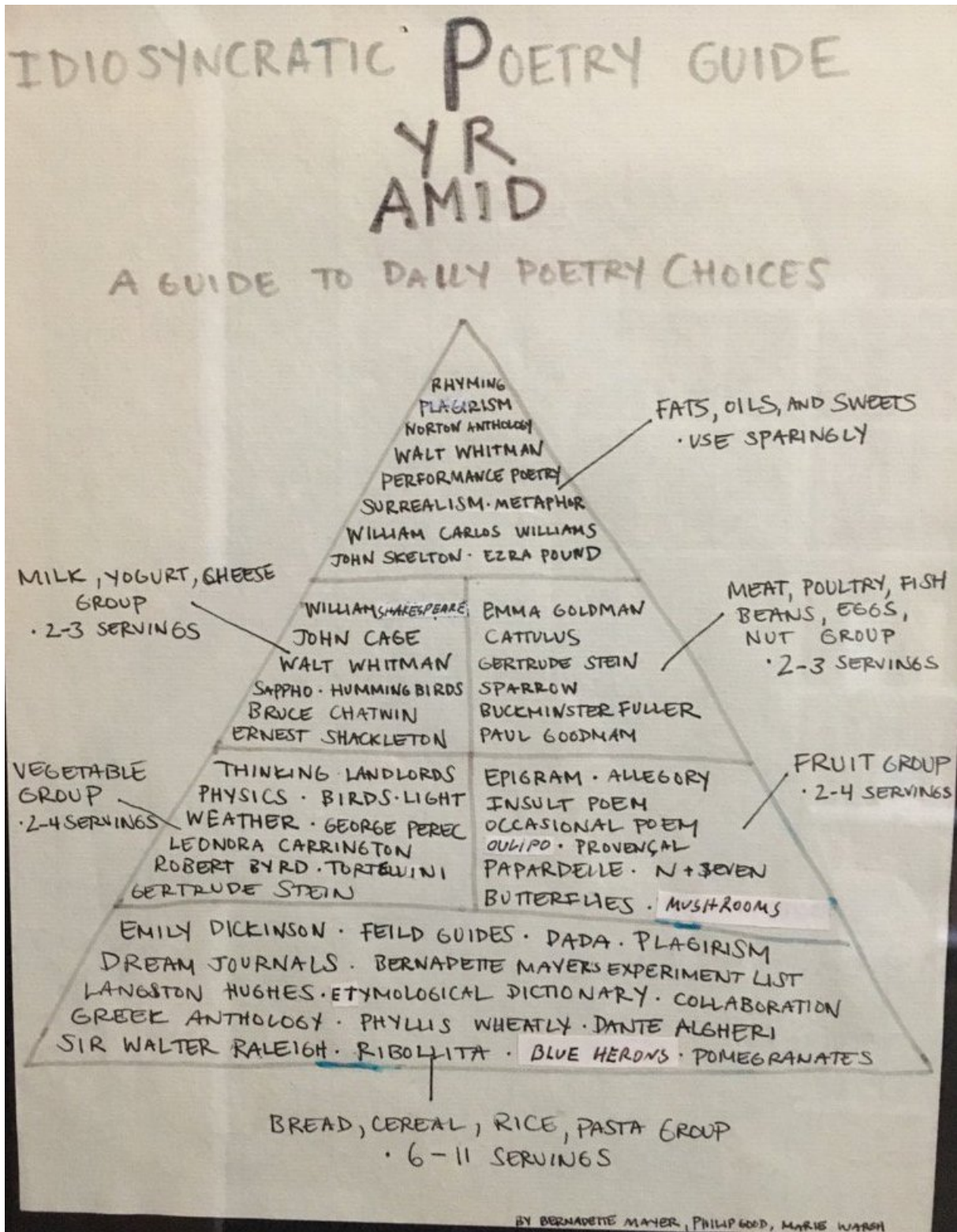


Figure 3. From Bernadette Mayer's *Memory*. Retrieved from Bernadette Mayer's official site: <https://www.bernadette-mayer.com/memory-1>

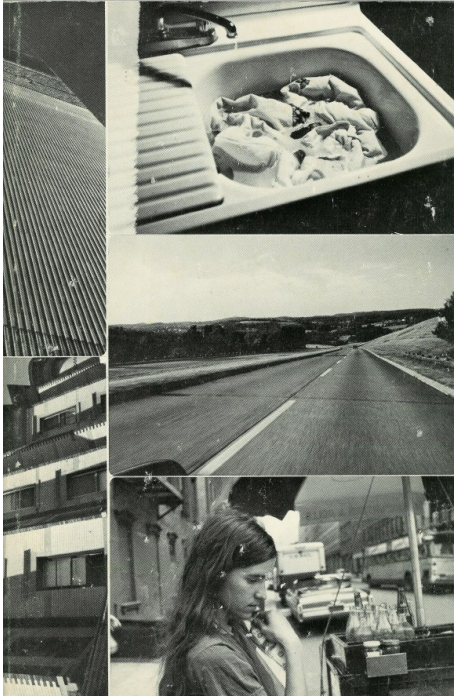


Figure 4. Lyn Hejinian's and Charles Bernstein's Audio Experiment "Guess Language."
YouTube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEwJRsvTo-s>

