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REVIEWS & PRESS

Lyn Hejinian. *A Border Comedy*. Granary Books, 2001.



González, Ray. "The Writing Life: Poetry, Anthologies and Recordings." *The Bloomsbury Review* 22.2 (March/ April 2002).

Lyn Hejinian's amazing reinvention of poetry continues with this book-length poem about every possible visionary moment in the universe. This sounds outrageous, but only Hejinian can pull off such a devastating and fabulous narrative as this.

Kiilebrew, Paul. "Review of *A Border Comedy*." *Jacket Magazine*, (October 2002). (See also *Verse* 19.3 and 20.1.)

In a talk with Craig Dworkin, Lyn Hejinian says that "western science bases its definitions of knowledge on certainties, and certainty requires that something be perceivable repeatedly." She makes this comment as a segue to Gertrude Stein:

"This is interesting in terms of Stein's argument that there is no repetition, which would have to mean there is no certainty, while at the same time she considered herself a realist writer and, like me, she was very enamored of the scientific method: requiring patience, careful observation, an attempt not to over-interpret, to let the thing be itself."

I mention these comments to begin a brief argument whose crux is that Hejinian is less an experimental writer than an investigatory one. I know that I can't really make this distinction—or at least make it airtight—chiefly because these may not be very distinct categories. My sense is that Gertrude Stein was also more investigatory than experimental, or more accurately that she investigated through experiment—using some version of a scientific method. *The Making of Americans* is a great example, a work that's part of Stein's "enormous and spreading study of the relationships of everything to everything else," as Hejinian describes it. This work seems to fall more cleanly into the "investigation" category than something like Ashbery's "Europe," which seems more purely experimental. Perhaps the difference has to do with the structuring of the process; Stein sought to systematically categorize types of people, whereas Ashbery has described "Europe" as "experiments which I thought would perhaps lead to something, but I didn't really intend them to be finished poems." I think I'm distinguishing between a poetic investigation and a poetic experiment based on what the work under consideration expresses as its most fundamental priority: an investigation would seek out the possibilities of

knowledge (and residually, language), while an experiment would seek out the possibilities of language (and residually, knowledge).

I may be forming and clinging to these distinctions to hide a personal discomfort with anti- or non-lyrical poetry, which is another difference between Hejinian's investigations (which are more like lyrical inquiries, as well as inquiries into the lyric) and Ashbery's experiments. Like any border of taste, my discomfort here reveals the limits of my sensibility and intellect. Often, I feel like anti-lyrical poetry would turn these borders against me, implicating me through assumptions of my social, political, and economic standing. What I like about Hejinian is that she tends to accept the borders of taste as a constituent part of a sense of self, and she sees the erosion of the self as concurrent with the individual's ever more common reluctance to disclose, for political or social reasons, borders of taste—I'm okay, you're okay—resulting in the soft-skulled subjectivity(/ liberalism) that was so bemoaned in 1998 by our friends across the Congressional aisle.

The borders of taste, along with other borders (of genre, most obviously), constitute the major "argument" of *A Border Comedy*. I used inverted commas in the last sentence for the same reason they're used on a sign outside a small town in Iowa, which reads: Welcome to "Ames." *A Border Comedy* might be described as recurrent approaches toward narrative that never quite resolve into recurrence, approach, or narrative. Actually, the incapacity to resolve may be the point—so much so that I'm reluctant to write "is the point"—of *A Border Comedy*. The work occurs in fifteen "books," the divisions between which afford the only full stops in the work; there are no periods or stanza breaks, only textual interruptions in the forms of "Morals" and "Tales." I think the implications of this one-long-sentence structure are obvious enough. Curiously, though, Hejinian employs—as she has often done in the past—the traditional habit of capitalizing each line's first letter. One can see how the two might play off each other—a bouquet of cohesive utterances in one long breath that undermines cohesion:

Effacing one distinction only to discover another
A vast difference between two loves
And perhaps this can account for the enormous fear some people have of women
That's easily aroused
By the invisible realities
Between beginning and end
The real plot lying between.

You can see how the lines bleed into one another, though I'd say much of the book feels like the first and last lines compressed: "Effacing one distinction only to discover another... The real plot lying between." In fact, it's tempting to review *A Border Comedy* through a patchwork of lines from the text itself, so often does Hejinian seem to be walking around her book in the reviewer's loafers:

We will know more still when the sentence is done...
My ambition being to unite the process of transformation with that of interpretation...
That's the best way to proceed...
The poem has no horror of dispersal...
Even if only leaving 2% for one to understand...
Though surely everybody gets their information somewhere...
So the story (language) can begin...
Opening...
To narrative...

To derive
Not a long poem but a succession of brief ones
With implied social criticism
Though in a presentation some people might find "extravagant" ...
We will know more still when the sentence is done...
Let's experience interstitiality, a delay...
For example, the phrase...
Humanity is a double placement...
Between...
The attendant dissipation, skywriting...
In a tale very like a number ever to be divided, ever to be coming out...
We will know more still when the sentence is done...
This is an extended act of conjugation

The one complaint I've heard about Lyn Hejinian's work that I can't get around and that irks me for its oafishness is that it's boring, which it certainly can be. Again, this may be a question of the borders of sensibility and intellect, but either way I had to read the book out loud to really find it, and even then I could only see it swirling around itself, hands extended while retreating. I think I was thinking that hearing the book in my own voice would bring some sort of aural sensuality to the heady lines, and if it did, I could only describe the feeling it gave me as decadent indeterminacy, or maybe decadently indeterminate. I originally wrote the previous sentence on the bottom of page 73 of *A Border Comedy*, which contains these lines:

My ambition being to unite the process of transformation with that of interpretation
And if that's taken as didacticism
Then what have you learned from this poem
And what have I learned as I'm writing it.

Original URL:

<http://jacketmagazine.com/19/kill.html>

Staff. "The Year in Books 2001." *Publishers Weekly* (November 19, 2001).

Pleasure, boundary, barbarian, comedy—Hejinian's latest and possibly best book shows us a contemplative path to firmer lexical ground, brilliantly mixing daily reflection with modes of theory, drama, epic, and fable. Yet Hejinian never diminishes the real dangers of actual crossings, and argues forcefully that our mental borders are directly analogous to the physical.

Zaleski, Jeff and Michael Scharf. "Review of *A Border Comedy*." *Publishers Weekly* (September 24, 2001): 89.

"I thought I could, as it were, follow a poem, that kept itself apart from me/ And from itself/ A short lyric of shifts/ A page or two at most/ A poem of metamorphoses, a writing in lost contexts/ I would write a line or two/ No more/ And go away/ And come back another day only to add something that would change everything."

This "lyric of shifts" is the 15-book sequence of Hejinian's marvelous new poem, as close to an ars

poetica as she has come, mixing daily reflection with modes of theory, drama, epic and fable. While this poem has some of the wave-like activity of an Ashbery poem (such as the book-length *Flow Chart*, to which this book is a peer), it doesn't rest anywhere for long, though it sometimes asks that you learn the special meanings of several of its recurring terms—pleasure, boundary, barbarian, comedy, etc. The poem often digresses into mini-essays describing the poet's sense of each, but this is more than a speculative poem, in the manner of Wallace Stevens's later writing, but one that seriously challenges philosophical rhetoric and modes of poetic discourse, one with a particular capacity for creating playful mental architectures—a truly redescriptive, pragmatist exercise. (Nov. 15)

Forecast: Hejinian has published a career's worth of virtuosic long poems, including the early *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (her most "language" school book) and the acknowledged classic *My Life*, among others. This book, the most fluid and natural of the series, has the feel of a career milestone, one that booksellers can press upon the curious but intimidated.