

A Poem of Laughter and Forgetting: Lyn Hejinian's *A Border Comedy*

Poetry at this time, I believe, has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness, and in a complex sense, best captured by another Greek word, *xenos*. It, too, means “stranger” or “foreigner,” but in a sense that complicates the notion as we find it in *barbarous*.

—Lyn Hejinian, “Barbarism”

It seems reasonable to approach Lyn Hejinian's *A Border Comedy* (2001) by first consulting the things she has to say about borders in her book of essays, *The Language of Inquiry*—for example, that they are sites of “encounter” (LI234) and milieus of “experience” (LI327), and that, perhaps more importantly, they are mobile or fluid rather than fixed: “Like the dream landscape, the border landscape is unstable and perpetually incomplete. It is a landscape of discontinuities, incongruities, displacements, dispossession. The border is occupied by ever-shifting images, involving objects and events constantly in need of redefinition and even literal renaming, and viewed against a constantly changing background” (LI327). Borders, in other words, are restless—like language (ML17), or like the writing of *A Border Comedy* itself:¹

I began all this months ago, years maybe—in June, anyway of 1994
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 (BC63)

Why write this way, as if starting the poem over again every “line or two”? Gertrude Stein’s answer is canonical: “Beginning again and again is a natural thing, even when there is a series.” Or imagine a kind of writing that requires that you leave things behind. A “poetics of the frontier,” Hugh Kenner once said, means you can take only very few books with you when setting out for a new world—your bible, maybe *Pilgrim’s Progress*: European literature disappears from memory.² And we know that in composing music and poetry John Cage and Jackson Mac Low took recourse to various forms of chance operations in order to leave themselves behind—to free their compositions from history-laden forms of intentionality hidden in the ego. *A Border Comedy* borders these lines of thought, and also redraws them.

There are closed borders, to be sure, but for Hejinian the border is the type and figure of open form—“not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, that from which something *begins*” (BC18). A border is a crosspoint at which one begins a journey or experience (*Erfahrung*)—setting out on an expedition rather than getting on a train with schedules and destinations: recall those early explorers Hejinian celebrates in “Strangeness” who describe metonymically the particulars of their progress without a sense of an ending or a comprehensive view of what is happening to them or even where they are.³ A border by definition borders a world where everything is otherwise

(“involving objects and events constantly in need of redefinition and even literal renaming”), a no man’s land or perhaps a future in which one can no longer remain oneself but becomes subject to forms estrangement, like the anonymous “magician” who appears early in *A Border Comedy*, who is precisely *not* enclosed by boundaries, limits, definitions, or frames of reference, and who (therefore?) “lived in confusion” (BC13)—and also, it appears, without a self or identity that, as in Paul Ricoeur’s theory, an Aristotelian narrative would confer:⁴

There was no accounting for her mutability since she lived entirely alone
 But the number of events it takes to create the probable sequence
 Necessary to cause a change in any person’s state
 Is far larger than one might think
 Therefore any account of it must be very long
 And during all that time
 Reality moves around
 Changing orientation (BC13-14)

An Aristotelian narrative edits the material of a life in order to make it continuous and coherent; the magician’s life has more in it (more changes) than any narrative can contain. A chronicle is what her life requires (and the chronicle is, in principle, or like time itself, interminable: it may stop but does not end).

An odd figure, this magician, with no audience to fool.⁵ Imagine a magician who dwells, not behind the scenes, manipulating them, but within them as within a “dream landscape” of “ever-shifting images.” Hers is not so much Spenser’s mutability as the one Proteus suffers (or enjoys): Proteus, who is constituted by shape-shifting and so has, strictly speaking, no life one could give an account of, unless it would just be an account of his endless transformations—a progress that would be hard to follow. As Hejinian says, “The history of mutability is very long / And hence it has long sentences, with increase in

semantic duration” (BC21)—rather like *A Border Comedy* itself, whose lines (long and short) form sentences without periods that move digressively or metonymically from one topic to another (“A fable, fate, an infant prophet, or infant bandit, banal, infamous, professing cacophony or blame” [BC21]), resisting (although not entirely defeating) the formation of patterns that would give us the sense of a whole superior to its parts (“the very purpose of pattern is to be reassuring” [BC15]).

One could put the matter technically, as Hejinian does in an interview with reference to seriality: “Time as it divides produces repetitions and permutations; time as it accumulates produces sequences, series” (LI167). *My Life* is structured according to divisions: forty-five sections composed of forty-five sentences corresponding (in the 1987 edition) to forty-five years of the poet’s life. *A Border Comedy*, by contrast, is cumulative. No one wished it longer, but it could have been. Long poems are those one learns to live with.

Cumulative, but of what, exactly? Arguably (if only roughly) a basic unit of *A Border Comedy* (beyond the line and the sentence) is the anecdote, about which the second book of the poem has a good deal to say:

An anecdotal story is merely a span
 Consisting of separate facts
 Each tenuously connected to the next
 What we respond to are the attractiveness of the facts
 And the view each one provides
 There are even such things as philosophical anecdotes
 Going around
 Beautifully feathered and perfectly circling (BC27)

(A “span” is paratactic, like the distance between thumb and forefinger, which is the original meaning of “span.”):

Just as, in the old days (to quote Victor Shklovsky)
 One anecdotal fact would be followed by another
 And many together would make a story
 Consisting of “separate facts tenuously connected”
 And conspired
 Story to story
 To which everyone should add and be added
 And be confused (BC31)

An anecdote is (loosely) a brief story told from below (outside the grand narrator’s panorama) and which, being local and incidental, does not take us very far (“time requires anecdotes to contradict it” [BC12]): it belongs structurally to the “round,” as in a round of ditties, jokes, or drinks that form a momentary circle of companions—“To which everyone should add and be added / And be confused,” no doubt with one another, or maybe like the magician (confusion reigns at every border). Meanwhile philosophical anecdotes are like birds, “Beautifully feathered and perfectly circling,” as if geometrically, or perhaps like birds of prey. Or say that it is in the nature of the anecdote to make its way around by way of recitation: it is (like gossip and the secret) a word-of-mouth genre (BC109).⁶ On Hejinian’s or Shklovsky’s theory, the anecdote is paratactic both in itself—“separate facts tenuously connected” (if at all)—as well as in its connection to other anecdotes, which would at best hang together in the loose and baggy form of a collection not bound by logical or cognitive rules, which is how a serial poem develops (a vast *between* without extremities):

Not to search for the perfect poem, as Spicer said to Robin Blaser
 But to let the writing of the moment go along its own path
 Explore and Retreat
 And never be fully realized (confined) within boundaries of one poem

Or the perimeters of the mental life of one person's day (BC187-88)

As Spicer said: "It does not have to fit together."⁷ (Compare Hejinian on "the chaos that good stories introduce" [BC26].)

Just so, proliferation and mobility (restlessness) are the distinctive features of the form of *A Border Comedy*:

I can say my sentences which I dot by day
 They are full of disjointed dreams, audacities, unsystematic lampoons of
 systems, and all manner of reversed reveries (BC71)

Recall William Carlos Williams: "A poem can be made of anything." *A Border Comedy* seems to be searching for (in order to breach) the limit of this venerable principle. The poem is not governed by any principle of exclusion, much less a principle of identity. Its borders are open to what happens, or fails to happen—"discontinuities, incongruities, displacements, dispossession": imagine a poem as a container of the uncontainable, not to mention the discarded or dispensable ("reversed reveries" defeating their telling):

And so begins a true biography of a true person emitting a story
 Though it comes out strangely
 Lacking in outcome
 Losing face
 Returning to memory in the round clown's face
 All over the map
 With squeak and thump
 Between full stops
 From wing to skin
 And fart to forge
 Without premeditation
 Though the vowel sounds change in self-contained speech

What the true person says is uncontained

The poem walks away and it remains

Then I shout, Hey, get out!

Shit!

And it clears off (BC75)

A certain garrulity is perhaps inevitable (“Excessive difference elicits babble” [BC51]). The “true person” is not opposed to the false friend (“as I’ve said before, there are no opposites” [BC63]), just as the “I” is not opposed to the “not-I” but rather forms relations of proximity, as “From wing to skin / And fart to forge / Without premeditation.” Self-contained speech would presumably have a beginning, middle, and end, but maybe it would just be speech that contains a *self* as opposed to a *person*, as per Hejinian’s distinction in “The Person and Description,” where the “uniqueness of the person” is said to be “very different from his or her essential selfhood” (LI201), which is what poems are sometimes thought to express. In the passage just cited the “poem,” no doubt serial in its construction, wanders off while “the true person” (if that is what *it* is) remains—recall the line cited earlier: “I thought I could...follow a poem that kept itself apart from me” (BC63). Only here the “I” is not a “true person”—“The term ‘I’ is a narrative cliché” (BC47)—but the one who chases “it” away after the poem departs (if that’s how it goes).⁸

Of course one can no more contain these lines in a reading than in a writing of them. Two lines from “The Person” come to mind: “The difficulty of reading is such / that there is no comprehension” (CP152). There is no comprehension, or anyway no comprehensive (much less any certain) reading, because the mutability of contexts confines the construction of meaning to no more than a few lines at a time, destabilizing them in the bargain by depriving them of any standing that an end-point might provide: think of Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*: “it’s the end gives meaning to words.”⁹ Or, in

Hejinian's version: "It's the beginning and end that are sorry messengers / And the bearers of writers' lies / About anything" [BC19]):

My ambition being to unite the process of transformation with that of
 interpretation
 And if that is taken as didacticism
 Then what have you learned from this poem
 And what have I learned as I'm writing it
 Through a sequence of will culminations, in the culminations of will
 Whispering for disturbance
 Of my consciousness (the best partition)
 Which is all that lies between what I did yesterday and what I'll do next
 Plurals increasing—it's all about "them"
 They're more vulnerable than before
 To interpretation, paranoia (BC73)

What would it be to unite "the process of transformation with that of interpretation"? Recall the (by now) well-known statement from "The Refusal of Closure": Whereas the closed text preempts interpretation ("all elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it"), the "'open text,' by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other...hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive.... The 'open text' often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers... (LI43). But when Proteus is driving the motor of composition we may be in danger of falling between the lines. In *A Border Comedy*, at any rate, the reader is hardly or barely in a position to put together what the poet is perpetually setting apart, unless it

is the case that here we have a text so strangely determined that we may begin imagining ghostly inaccessible intentions hovering over and around us at every turn:

Although I feel that I too am being watched
Which may explain something about my poetics (BC89)

The strange line about writing in “a sequence of will culminations, in the culmination of will,” might be thought to suggest the whole art and craft of paranoia, which sees purpose and design, not to mention authority, more vividly in their absence.

And the pleasure of seeing intentionality everywhere is incredible
It makes everything in the universe mental (BC170)

As if to ward off such madness, Hejinian’s advice in “The Rejection of Closure” is that one should read an open text in much the same aleatory manner in which it was composed (not trying to put together what has been decomposed, but composing anew from the material of the text): “Any reading of these works is an improvisation; one moves through the work not in straight lines but in curves, swirls, and across intersections, to words that catch the eye or attract attention repeatedly” (LI44)—words like “paranoia,” for example:

But from your motionless face I suspect you aren’t listening
Just reading
Without reference
The paranoid are afflicted with an overabundance of reference
Reference for which even the plenitude of the world is inadequate
So the language of paranoia lacks world enough to match
But here you come now with a cauliflower (BC156)

However, it is difficult to read *A Border Comedy* without listening or without reference because it is, like the magician’s life, a poem with too many meanings—each

line is an excess of words or, as Lyotard would say, an excess of phrases whose linkages cannot be terminated (“as Lyotard says, for a phrase to be the last one / Another one is needed to declare it” [106]):¹⁰

Thus apples are effortlessly disguised
 As objects of appetite
 That could never be traced back
 Their denarrativization having been achieved
 Through an excess of referential and symbolic detail
 As in a baroque sleep around a medieval dream
 At the end of the day that went by of its own accord....
 Or as one must run through the alphabet to complete a rhyme
 From a great lock of letters
 That recurrently duplicates itself, interminably fissures itself
 And contradicts itself without remaining the same (BC105)

An “excess of referential and symbolic detail,” indeed. A poem not governed by any principle of exclusion defeats the law of the same, or the law of non-contradiction: *This is not an apple*. “It is,” we are told, “the mark of a foreign soul to trust non-rational perceptions” (BC63), but foreign souls (barbarians) is what we are, or what the poem makes of us who lose our way in it. In her essay on “Barbarism” Hejinian cites the critic Marcel Raymond: ““To become a barbarian...is, first of all, to receive sensations and to leave them a certain amount of free play, not to place them in a logical frame-work and not to attribute to them the objects [e. g., apples] that produce them; it is a method of detaching oneself from an inherited civilized form in order to rediscover a greater plasticity and expose oneself to the imprint of things”” (LI335.n4):

That’s why I’ve kept this writing of fifteen books unfinished
 Fifteen underway

I move from one to the next
 In the course of many days adding every day
 A few lines to a book
 Each of which takes a long time and considerable thought
 And that passage of time facilitates forgetting
 Then forgetting makes what's been written unfamiliar
 As if some other writer had been writing
 And each of my returns to each of the books is prompted
 To immediates in a sudden present
 Only pastness, which provides forgetting, can provide it (BC151)

What about this forgetting? Recall the point (or necessity) of leaving things or oneself behind. In a brief review of the poem Jennifer Scappettone says that “*A Border Comedy*’s compositional process results from Hejinian’s enduring interest in the way memory determines pattern (i.e., in pattern’s ‘psychical “pastness”’), and accounts for the work’s disjunction: She adds lines sequentially across the poem’s fifteen books—all simultaneously ‘underway’—in order to tap the lapses generated by time’s passage.”¹¹ As if, in contrast to epic tradition, *A Border Comedy* were a poem composed by forgetting, paradoxically raising amnesia to the level of poetic inspiration and, therefore, to that of poetic experience as well.

For example, one might imagine the poet’s experience of her poem, and hence the reader’s, as that of picking up *found texts*—something similar, perhaps to Louis Zukofsky’s experience of returning after many years to his own earlier writing: “With the years the personal prescriptions for one’s work recedes thankfully, before an interest that *nature as creator* had more of a hand in it than one was aware. The work then owns perhaps something of the look of *found objects* in late exhibits—which arrange themselves as it were, one object near another”; that is, not in a chronological but in a

paratactic or metonymic order—random juxtapositions: “roots that have become sculpture, wood that appears talisman, and so on: charms, amulets maybe, but never really such things since the struggles so to speak that made them do not seem to have human trials and evils—they appear entirely *natural*.”¹²

“Natural” may not exactly be a word in Hejinian’s vocabulary as it is in Zukofsky’s, although of course it is not to be excluded. Forgotten writing is an experience of alterity, as if someone else—some anonymous other—had been writing one’s poem: “Personality has nothing to do with it—subjectivity counts for nothing” (BC153).¹³ Some anonymous other, or perhaps (echoing and even exceeding Cage and Mac Low) mere chance: “If everything that occurred did so through pure chance all movement would take place without transition” (BC174), one event dispatching another, as if the basic unit of time were the interruption, or as if the purpose of time (*pace* Ricoeur) were to dissociate past and future from the present (which is why the figure of lapsing applies equally to time, memory, and desire):

One day after another
 Important things have occurred
 Which immediately afterwards I forget
 As if to alter their effects and write this differently
 It causes me to wonder in a new way, from a new vantage point
 That of forgetting
 About memory and its function in the associative, interpretive linking
 That constitutes what we consider making sense
 Of experience (BC199)

Heidegger thought that having an experience with language does not occur in the speaking of it but rather when words fail or get away from us, going off on their own, to which Derrida added the experience of the pun, which is a word-event whose

intentionality is in the sound-play of language itself—a play that philosophy struggles to suppress in the interest of univocity but which poetry sets free: “Aliquid, nonquid, thought quid, nought” (BC204).¹⁴

Likewise, especially after a certain age, one experiences memory most dramatically not in the possession of it but in its loss (“And here a tale comes to mind and leaves again” [BC98]). The question is whether such a loss is altogether a bad thing. Hejinian seems (in many places) distinctively Nietzschean in her conception (or experience) of forgetting, which is something very close to a creative principle or at the very least a principle (and practice) of freedom from whatever bears down on us from the past and, for all we know, from the future as well, since it is in the future that promises and prophecies fall due.¹⁵ We may think of this as an achievement of Gertrude Stein’s “continuous present.” So in the passage just cited forgetting is, like the border, a starting-point, a beginning, a frontier way of writing differently—an anti-Proustian break with “memory and its function in the associative, interpretive linking / That constitutes what we consider making sense / Of experience.” Not fitting things together but dissociation as from the upright first-person singular and all that goes with it (“I would get rid of *I* if I could” [LI212]):

When I was young, for example, whenever I wrote I was a man
 So I mentally imitated men
 But in the end the form was too hierarchical
 Constructed with too many ups and downs
 And it wasn't that I wanted to be a man in any case but only that I wanted
 freedom
 Without having to sacrifice the disguising conventions and a domestic life
 (BC187)

One can read *A Border Comedy* as a poem of freedom, of diversions, digressions, and dislocations in which everything becomes otherwise than is the case, which means in particular the experience of freedom from categories and distinctions (containments) of every sort. Thus gender-switching (and –blurring) is a recurrent motif in the poem, with its “Lesbian boys” (BC122), its “hotel catering to cross-dressing clientele / Engaged in a play on words” (BC94), its “male woman” and “female man” (BC198). “Writing is cross-dressing” (BC21), as we remember from *My Life*: “As such, a person on paper, I am androgynous” (ML105). The idea is not to be either a man or a woman but to be elusive or evasive (the gist of comedy):¹⁶

The flesh often offers answers that do not answer the question raised
 Will I be happy?
 But that question cannot be addressed to fate
 Or rather, fate can’t answer
 Happiness is gratuitous, free
 A response to chance, to hazard, accident
 And hence it is itself hazardous, precarious (BC181)

Fate is a tragic term (terminal, fixed): instead of a border there is a crossroads where everything turns toward a predetermined end.¹⁷ *A Border Comedy*, by contrast, is a ludic poem filled with outbursts of craziness—

She must see herself (from front and back) and profit by it
 Plotting a delightful break-out from culture’s close quarters
 By dipping her hands in mayonnaise and running them over her buttocks
 (BC115)

—among other bodily rebellions: “And then a slender woman appeared in a narrative sentence and loudly farted” (BC123). (There is surely more farting and pissing in *A*

Border Comedy than in any other poem in modern memory.) Not surprisingly Leo Tolstoy arrives to complain—

It's clear he doesn't like *A Border Comedy*
 He says it's an awkward act of affirmation
 Bobbing where the world can take no more than the impress of a nod
 But I (with the point of view of a man, so I am a man) don't laugh
 All night a mocking bird or bricklayer or bibliomancer and I have been
 switching identities
 That way we can maintain inconsistencies (BC79)

—while Napoleon appears “in his Donald Duck pajamas” (BC123), and Aristotle is transformed like a character in Ovid (this is, after all, a “poem of metamorphosis” [BC63]):

In a series
 Of slaps, of smacks, of bops, of whacks
 As Liuba as Phyllis
 Who gets Aristotle
 On all fours
 To gallop her through the garden
 Saddled and bridled (BC116)

In his book *On Humour* the philosopher Simon Critchley says that humor, especially in its eighteenth-century (and thus most rational) expression, is a superior form of comedy because it is wry and witty and elicits a smile rather than a laugh.¹⁸ Laughter is too often a form of cruelty—it is one of the pleasures of xenophobia, for example.¹⁹ Critchley prefers the Earl of Shaftesbury to laughter's prime movers, Aristophanes, Juvenal, and Rabelais.²⁰ Hejinian puts it this way:

The authors of new comedies differ from the authors of old

As Aristotle himself pointed out
 To the authors of the latter indecent language is funny
 To those of the former innuendo is more so (BC86)

By contrast, *A Border Comedy*—“without dirty (words) feet I cannot dance (speak)” (BC20)—is as non-Aristotelian in its comedy as it is in its form (“The actor wearing a phallus so engorged that his whole body laughs” [BC188]); it brings the low and the broad back to life in defiance of seminar-room decorum:

Diderot may have been right
 The mind may be nothing without the impulse-ridden body
 To laugh at (BC130)

And speak of the cheeks!
 Your mouth has become a muzzle, dear
 You are doomed to be chased by hunters
 Over the elements on all fours

Floundering

Flapping

Fucking with unwilling movements (BC100)

He didn't know she would say something funny

But she untied some babies and did

More women more words!

More geese more turds! (BC124)

Nietzsche's principle

“It's false if it doesn't make you laugh at least once” (BC148)

“But what is laughter?” the poem asks, and then lists a number of familiar answers from Hobbes to Freud (BC80-81). Possibly, being usually inappropriate (think of fits of giggling in church or classroom), laughter is a kind of seizure:

Laughter
 And what kind of laugh is being laughed
 The laughter of a laugher
 Whose only wish is to stop (BC161)

Or, more wickedly, as in “an old woman laughing”:

She uncovers
 Lifting the sentimental curtain bottom
 And inserting her nicety (also known as philosopher’s willow)
 Into a milky little actual grammar wrinkle
 Of veracity (BC176)

Or, for no reason, as when things get out of hand, which is all that chance means, it just happens:

Noting the numbers of people who’ve suffered wasp stings or been bitten
 by snakes or by cats, those who’ve been pecked by ravens or kicked by a
 horse, those who’ve been butted by goats or even gored by pigs
 Through no fault of their own
 It’s just luck that we’re caught in the web of comedy
 And poisoned by a spider
 Which raises a welt
 Which in turn occasions slapping
 A moral struggle ensues
 The strugglers succumb to laughter

Which is to say each other

Since the source of laughter lies not in the funny situation but in the one
who laughs (BC155)

If *A Border Comedy* has a heroine-hero, it is the body, or more exactly the endless series of anonymous *bodies* whose various parts, functions, and secretions fill just about every page of the poem:

The ineffable poise of the cadaver

Its organs in its naked hand

Making the familiarity it had with itself available

Displaying its physicality, a physicality it still has in common with us

But which is now all we share

Being otherwise completely severed from each other

The autonomy and independence (anonymity) and ultimately the authority
of its body parts

Having become complete (BC103-4)

Indeed, *flesh* would be the more exact term for what *A Border Comedy* is all about. The body (*soma*) is a Greek and famously heroic concept (although, interestingly, etymologically *soma* refers to a corpse). It is a masculine figure of strength and beauty; lean and hard, it is built for action, struggle, and victory, and as we know from Homer it never laughs (gods and fools—Penelope’s suitors—laugh; Achilles and Odysseus weep but do not laugh). The body achieves its apotheosis in marble. Flesh by contrast is a biblical concept (*basar* in Hebrew). It is a figure of passivity and weakness; it hungers and thirsts, it eats and is eaten, it is soft and corpulent, wet and smelly, and subject to complaints without number. Defeat is its horizon—mutilated Hector and Achilles with his heel are bodies reduced into flesh, as are the heroes of ancient tragedy (Agamemnon

in his bath, various kings of Thebes). In her book on abjection Julia Kristeva gives the flesh a splendid articulation:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver.²¹

Kristeva is a bit too serious, perhaps, but you get the point. Living flesh is almost an oxymoron, perhaps because living *in* flesh is a borderline condition. Indeed, unchecked growth of flesh—uncut hair and toenails, among other protuberances—gives the definition of “monstrous.” And flesh is what I must abject in order to achieve and maintain self-possession, which illness, pain, and aging work to subvert—and they work without fail: the trim sculpted body of youth eventually decays into the loose and baggy monster of an old man (“Excessive change in time will destroy the sensing body parts” [BC23]).²² For which there is no remedy (or other conclusion) than to put old bones to rest:

It should not be surprising then that the skull
is seen to have a face still
It’s expressive though not of self (S27)

But of course there is no rest—restlessness is the engine of Hejinian’s poetics, and at breakneck speed it drives *A Border Comedy*, with its ambulant “border ghost”

(BC12)—“so exhausted by reference it doesn’t know it’s dead” (BC68). Comedy permeates the border between here and the hereafter as well as every other boundary, as when “lucky heads...speak, sing, advise, prophesy, and entertain / Long after their owners are dead” (BC116). Or, again,

Like the ravening thought of an uttering corpse
 Showing emotion, stumbling over sounds
 Soft, breathless (BC167)

At any rate, flesh is what it comes down to (with apologies to Edgar Allan Poe):

Between woman and animal, man and candle
 There shakes the coward, flesh in liquid, skin in shreds
 Back from the dead
 And smelling awful
 Without warning
 People vomit
 Right there on the dance floor
 Death begins
 The promise of resurrection has got to be withdrawn (BC142)

“Death begins,” as if spreading like a plague, metonymically, indifferent to fences and defenses alike, the paradox being that it cannot itself be terminated. The dead return, not to life—“The promise of resurrection has got to be withdrawn”—but as comic ghouls, creatures of the between, “smelling awful.”²³ So one might figure death as an ellipsis...— another species of open form. Anyway, what can be more foreign than death?—which, if we follow the moral of the epigraph above, is one of the border zones that poetry “has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter” (BC126). Surely this accounts for the many ghosts and cadavers that roam and litter *A Border Comedy*:

Reason is an aid to stories
 It's the ghost out of the cell
 Reciting what it remembers, ruling nothing out
 Like the narrator known as Anonymous
 With his or her anonymous consciousness
 But if the flesh of the ghost is no longer under pressure
 Male and female
 Then, like a ghost, it's gone
 From its unusual or even downright alien position (BC54)

Ghosts are notoriously restless, which in Hejinian's world means discursive, literary, garrulous, in contrast to the mute or anyhow breathless and palpable cadaver:

The cadaver (the original) will not speak
 The cadaver cannot link impressions
 It is immediate
 It lacks habits, is proximate to nothing, will not argue
 Nor will it rinse its finger over a word
 And mean metamorphosis
 Spotting the ironies between aphorisms (BC104)

On this theory it would follow that a poet is more ghostly than any fleshly remains, not so much a dead author as a figure of catachresis: "Nameless in myself but full of synonyms and homonyms" (BC109).

More ghostly, but on the whole much less interesting because, free of its flesh, no longer comic, or anyhow less memorable than *A Border Comedy's* many surreal comic turns, of which this is one of my favorites:

In church, in the palace, on parade, facing the department head, the policeman, the administrator, no one laughs

The serf is deprived of the right to smile in front of the landowner
 So he lifts up his shirt
 He is another
 And another, wearing high heels, his sex distending his silk dress, was
 walking toward me while tenderly sucking pearls
 Yes, his hands were clammy with fear
 He knew damn well what was going on
 Which was the equivalent of saying, "Now we will change"
 With the tail parting and shrinking into what humans call nice legs
 They had yet to be shaved
 The thorns on them ripped my tongue (BC59)

When the serf lifts up his shirt, he reveals himself to be a stranger to the order of things. He opens in any case a border zone where anything goes, nothing is forbidden, certainly not laughter or horror or confusion—or whatever a cross-dressing young demon with an extended phallus and metamorphic tail might inspire in you. If one asks, irrepressibly, what he inspired in the poet, or speaker, or whoever it is that licked his thorny legs, one answer would surely be that the spirit of *A Border Comedy* is, in the tradition of Aristophanes and Rabelais, anarchic, libidinous, and superbly grotesque.

And I haven't even mentioned the clowns and geese—but time is up and space is at an end.

Works Cited

- BC *A Border Comedy*. New York: Granary Books, 2001
- CP *The Cold of Poetry*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994
- F *The Fatalist*. Richmond, CA: Omnidawn Press, 2003.
- LI *The Language of Inquiry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001
- ML *My Life*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987
- MLN *My Life in the Nineties*. New York: Shark Books, 2003
- S *Slowly*. Tuumba Press, 2002
- WAD *Writing is an Aid to Memory*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996
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Notes

¹ See “The Rejection of Closure”: “Language is one of the principal forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless” (LI49); “Language itself is never in a state of rest” (LI50); “Even words in storage, in the dictionary, seem frenetic with activity, as each individual entry attracts to itself other words as definition, example, and amplification” (LI51).

² “A Poetics of the Frontier,” a talk Kenner delivered in 1975 but, to my knowledge, never published. The idea is that a poetics of the frontier would be modernist in its amnesiac relation to the past—starting literary history over again (almost) from scratch.

³ “Parataxis,” Hejinian writes, “is significant both of the way information is gathered by explorers and the way things seem to accumulate in nature. Composition by juxtaposition presents observed phenomena without merging them, preserving their discrete particularity while attempting to also to represent the matrix of their proximity” (LI155). Likewise: “The popularity of the explorers’ writings was due, at least in part, to the

narrative tension that was established between perceptually immediate details (events) and the suspenseful deferral of complete comprehension” (LI157).

⁴ *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁵ In fact the magician later performs a hat-trick (and turns into a pun on imagination):

Then with a stage wink the magician’s assistant hands her the hat
 The magician looks into it, removes her glove, reaches in, and gently
 removes a spider
 With the allegorical practice that magic demands
 And sets it on a surface that’s either glass or a lens
 As the imagination’s assistant waves the wrinkled scarf and signs
 CAUTION STEPS
 ANIMAL XING (BC105)

⁶ Compare the following:

Or again, a human tells a story to another human being, beginning “A
 certain gentleman...”
 Which two dogs under the table overhear
 The human story prompts one of the dogs to tell a story of its own (BC71)

⁷ “A Textbook of Poetry,” *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), p. 176.

⁸ How the first-person singular works in *A Border Comedy* is an open question: the “I” sounds sometimes like it must be the poet herself—“I too have been too self-expressive, self-exposed (BC31); “But I should explain how I’ve written this” (BC108)—but more often it is as mutable or protean as the language:

Silently the word dives
 Fantastically spent
 “I” am time after all
 With the usual confusion of identities
 Leading to absurd consequences
 And the carrying out of death (BC88)

Or, again:

Friend, familiar, self rumored
 Running
 In rubber shouts
 Applying estrangements
 Willing to smash it, “I”...
 I...
 “I”...
 I
 But that’s just wordplay (BC153)

A sentence from *My Life in the Nineties* springs to mind: “I ‘talk to myself’ and as myself, too, not yet knowing what I myself (or better, selves) will say, what the rules are and will become, first thought flowing in imitation of a previous thought of a previous self one could say with equal accuracy scrawling or sprawling without limit, and yet that’s not right” (MLN46). The moral perhaps is that no one can be contained within any pronoun.

⁹ *Stories & Texts for Nothing* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 111.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 11: “The paradox of the

last phrase (or of the last silence), which is also the paradox of the series, should give *x* not the vertigo of what cannot be phrased (which is also called the fear of death), but rather the irrefutable conviction that phrasing is endless. For a phrase to be the last one, another one is needed to declare it, and it is then not the last one” (§17).

¹¹ *Boston Review*, 28, nos. 3-4 (2003), 59.

¹² “Found Objects,” *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 168.

¹³ It is important to notice that *A Border Comedy* concludes with an extensive bibliography of source-texts (and conversations). So (as if it were possible) we need to read or re-read the poem as a vast collage of quotations

¹⁴ See Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 57-110; and Derrida, “Proverb: ‘He that would pun...,’” J. P. Leavey, Jr. *Glassery* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

¹⁵ Here is the poet as a creature of memory:

I like to work every day
 After a number of days have gone by, I am able to establish a set of
 demands—beckonings, prompts
 Which I regularly update, maximize, and then allow to intensify in the
 course of several hours into absolute imperatives
 Which I long to follow
 And what is a prompt if not something in itself
 Which gives way
 The self itself
 Now looking back

To remember

What it will say (BC125-26)

Compare this from “Comments for Manuel Brito” concerning *Writing is an Aid to Memory*: “I do remember that the that the momentum of the cadence, with its departures within arrivals and arrivals within departures, was intended to push time in both directions, ‘backward’ toward memory and also forward toward ‘writing,’ which is always (for me) indicative of future unforeseen meanings and events” To which Hejinian adds, anticipating the last four lines just cited: “Writing gives one something to remember” (LI192).

¹⁶ See *My Life in the Nineties*: “Shall we do some ungendering, shall we gently cross-dress” (MLN41). See also “The Strangeness”: “In dreams, the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one. In fact, the dream’s independence from binarisms like form-content, male-female, now-then, here-there, large-small, social-solitary, etc., is characteristic and makes polarity irrelevant or obsolete” (LI140-41). Recall that the border landscape is like the dream landscape—unstable, incomplete (LI327).

¹⁷ In *The Fatalist* “One’s fate is what has happened to one, not what is going to happen” (F59). It can only be experienced in retrospect—except by those in a position to know better:

Like other comic poets

I should point out here

That tragic writers have merely to let their characters announce who they are for the audience instantly to know everything

Whereas comic writers use original plots

And start from scratch

Shifting points of view with uninterrupted sincerity as in dreams (BC78-79)

¹⁸ (London: Routledge, 2002), esp. p. 107.

¹⁹ One of the riffs in *A Border Comedy* is a series of citations on xenophobia, starting with Stendhal (“Sometimes you just start feeling it” [BC128]) and concluding with Virginia Woolf: “The presence of strangers may silence it, but when alone together the group of friends, with their clear complexions, sound teeth, ‘tunable voices,’ and plain way of speaking, grows merry in the fun of judging, admiring, condemning, approving, commending, ridiculing, and deriding” (BC129).

²⁰ See Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, “On Wit and Humour,” *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, and Times* (1711), ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). It was Shaftesbury’s idea that the great man is one who is undisturbed by being laughed at. Socrates at the hands of Aristophanes is the classic example.

²¹ *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

²² Cf. “The Person”: “But is it aggressive to be old / Is it pitiless, incited” (CP160).

²³ One of the source-texts Hejinian frequently cites is Jalal Toufic’s (*Vampires*): *An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (Station Hill, 1993; 2nd ed. Post-Apollo Press, 2003).