



The Shattered Language of Dreams in Lyn Hejinian's *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*

LUISA MARÍA GONZÁLEZ RODRÍGUEZ*
University of Salamanca (Spain)

Received: 16/01/2024. Accepted: 29/07/2024.

ABSTRACT

Lyn Hejinian, a prominent figure in Language poetry, is strongly committed to the task of dismantling poetic conventions by envisaging a new language that resists the constraints of linearity and referentiality. In *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* (2012), she explores the dream world in order to delve into the mechanics of the writing process, while playing with language and experience at various stages of consciousness and perception. This paper examines Hejinian's philosophical and epistemological quest for meaning and knowledge, focusing on her scrutiny of language as a medium for expressing and shaping the poet's experiences. A further aim is to analyze her poetics of indeterminacy and her use of the framing structure of dreams to distort reality, emphasize the role of art as a radical construct, and foster a dynamic space where the poetic language is shifty and elusive.

KEYWORDS: Language poetry; Avant-garde poetry; Postmodern American poetry; Lyn Hejinian; Indeterminacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lyn Hejinian, one of the founding poets of the Language poetry movement, advocates for a new poetic language that challenges conventional frameworks of perception and modes of signification through the use of experimental, digressive patterns and unconventional

**Address for correspondence:* Calle Placentinos, 18, Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Salamanca, 37008 Salamanca; e-mail: luisagr@usal.es

assemblages. She envisions the act of writing as a method of inquiry and views poetic language as a means to enhance our sensory faculties in the pursuit of knowledge. In *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* (2012), she employs the frame of dreams to bring the writing process into focus and delves into the role of language in depicting a vast and enigmatic reality. Hejinian explores the liminal space separating dream/fiction from reality and invites the reader to accompany her during a series of night journeys to get an insight into the creative process of meaning construction. Writing and dreaming are intertwined in a book in which the author plays with language and experience at various stages of consciousness and perception. Thus, the myriads of poems comprising this anthology become self-conscious acts of exploration, while the process of writing is conceived of as an exhaustive inquiry into the limits of meaning and the ways in which it is constructed through language. Despite its significance for comprehending Language poetry and Hejinian's mode of composition, this poetic compilation has been insufficiently researched. Thus, this study builds upon research on her previous work as well as the poet's personal theories of poetry, as articulated in *The Language of Inquiry* (2000), a collection of essays where writing is conceived of as a means of introspection and examination within the continuous flow of experience. In line with prior research examining the interplay between poetry and theory in the Language poets (Lavender, 1996), this article seeks to explore how, by blurring the distinctions between poetry and poetics, Hejinian ventures beyond poetry's isolated realm to investigate its influence on perception and meaning formation. More specifically, this paper analyses Hejinian's philosophical and epistemological quest for meaning and knowledge as well as her problematizing of the possibilities of language as a medium for conveying and constructing the poet's experience. It also investigates her poetics of indeterminacy and the way in which language is shattered like a broken mirror to distort ordinary life and present a kaleidoscopic and mysterious reality. A further aim is to analyze her use of the framing structure of dreams to foreground the position of art as artifice and create a personal dynamic space where poetic language is reinvented in an endless deferral of meaning.

2. INTROSPECTIVE WRITING THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF DREAMS

The Book of a Thousand Eyes is a long philosophical poem, made up of 300 fragments of experience structured around nights, drawing upon a constructivist aesthetic that emphasizes "the *making* process itself, in all its anti-closure, incompleteness, and indeterminacy" (Perloff, 2005, p. 126; emphasis in the original). Indeed, indeterminacy, or undecidability, understood by Perloff (1981) as the inaccessibility of the referent and the prioritization of composition over explicit meaning, is a crucial concept inherent within these poems. Obsessed as she is with epistemological uncertainty, Hejinian explores the liminal realm of the night, the

transitional zone between states of consciousness and unconsciousness, not only to explore the link between language and consciousness, but also to demystify the processes of knowledge processing and fiction construction. “This tome of interlocutory poems”, as Wood aptly observes, “shows how dreams get petrified in the world and then how writing may reverse the process, following the breadcrumbs of language back to where the dream originates, to a place where the poem reanimates a vision that has since disappeared” (2016, p. 411). In this compendium of poems, dedicated to Scheherazade, Hejinian explores her interest in the narrative conventions of the framing story and the possibilities of storytelling, using the dream realm as a kaleidoscopic landscape, where interpretive frames of reference are volatile and uncertain. She constructs the frame structure of her text in this first framing, from which all the other poems are generated in an endless unfolding process. She speculates in the silence of the night: “I’ll write / and I myself can read / to see if what I’ve written is right. / Sleep offers an excuse / for substitution. / But who else would dream / the world one thinks? It’s only there / the world repeats” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 15). This initial poem establishes recurrent themes and invites readers to delve into the act of writing and consider the role of dreams in shaping the poet’s perception of the world. The introspective tone of the first lines anticipates that the subsequent poems will scrutinize the act of writing in her pursue of personal understanding. For Hejinian, sleep provides “an excuse for substitution”, which suggests her interest in exploring the transformative nature of dreams and their impact on the poet’s understanding and representation of the world. She draws a parallel between the act of crafting fiction and the unique dreamscapes of the dream realm, while hinting that fictions and dreams may alter the reality one experiences.

Writing becomes a self-conscious act of inquiry that allows Hejinian to explore dreamlike cycles, patterns, and recurring motifs in order to challenge conscious referential modes of representation. In these poems, theory and practice, her metafictional commentaries on the poetics of composition and the creative act of writing, are intrinsically intertwined. The blurring of the boundaries separating poetry and poetics, “a central tenet of the Language movement” (Lavender, 1996, p. 185), allows Language poets to move beyond the distant, self-sufficient realm of poetry and explore its impact on shaping perception and meaning construction. These dreamlike poems are imaginative acts of composition during which she explores writing problems, thus presenting art as artifice, since, as Hejinian admits in “Barbarism”, an essay featured in *The Language of Inquiry*, “by emphasizing its writtenness, its literariness, the poem calls attention to the complexity of its constructedness” (2000, p. 329). Hence, in this first framing poem, which embeds the rest of the poems, Hejinian self-consciously portrays herself in bed at night during the process of poetical composition. This image suggests that these philosophical reflections are not only fragmentary representations of lived and imagined experiences to be connected by the reader, but also an assemblage of metafictional thoughts about how reality and experience

are constructed in poetry. The juxtaposition of poetry and poetics helps Hejinian draw attention to the outer frame of the book, thus creating an enriching dynamic between author and readership that exposes the provisionality and fictionality of any representation of reality. In addition, by admitting the similarities between the creative power of imagination and the mystery and uncertainty surrounding the dream world, Hejinian is expressing her interest in experimental writing as a way of restructuring normative knowledge systems and expanding representational practices.

Hejinian's commitment to avant-garde poetics and the Language poetry movement is clear in her fascination with the opaque materiality of language and her treatment of words as nonreferential objects. In her poetry, ordinary forms are shattered and reconfigured in dreamlike patterns in which words hold a value of their own, not for their ability to refer to reality. Additionally, by using the sentence, rather than the line, as the controlling unit of composition and using words associated with fluctuating referents, she disrupts both the flow of the lyric voice and the narrative thread. Indeed, she uses "the new sentence" as an arbitrary tool for "driving a wedge between any expressive identity of form and content" (Perelman, 1995, p. 65), as well as to carry "the duplicity, the torque, the ambiguity and polysemy of graphic/phonic disharmony to the level of syntax, grammar and meaning" (Lavender, 1996, p. 193). In Hejinian's view, sentences are "a medium of arrivals and departures, a medium of inquiry, discovery and acknowledgement" (2000, p. 196) that possess a catalytic effect, since they go beyond referentiality to play a fundamental role in shaping understanding. In line with the principles of Language poetry, sentences become the foundational blocks of thoughts and memories, due to their power to evoke mental images and generate experiences. As Hejinian claims in one of her poems, "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 / [...] The bed shows with utter clarity how sentences in saying something make / something / Sentences in bed are not describers, they are instigators" (2012, p. 17). At night the poet's mind drifts, and sentences help her to evoke memories and imagery, since they are the basic elements upon which meaning and understanding are built. For Hejinian, the diversity and varying nature of sentences not only endow "memories and sights" with freedom, but also allow her to create fragmented, dreamlike, eccentric assemblages and patterns that problematize chronology in astonishing sequences. She avoids, in Bernstein's words, "[s]entences that follow standard grammatical patterns", since they "allow the accumulating references to enthrall the reader by diminishing diversions from a constructed representation"; hence, by rejecting language-ordering systems, "the operant mechanisms of meaning are multiplied and patterns of projection in reading are less restricted" (1984, pp. 116–117). Therefore, Hejinian constructs her sentences, choosing her words carefully, highlighting their vitreous materiality, and

playing with grammar, to open them up to multiple meanings and explore the ambiguity of language.

In her essay “Strangeness”, Hejinian asserts that the realm of dreams represents a “*terra incognita*” inviting exploration and fostering “apprehension” or “expectant knowledge” (2000, p. 139; emphasis in the original). She also contends that poetry, by delving into experiences at the threshold of consciousness, heightens our awareness of the intricacies involved in constructing meaning. For Hejinian, dreams, like reality and experience, are essentially linguistic constructs, prompting her inquiry into the extent to which poetic language can transcend mere referentiality by navigating the ethereal trails of imagination. The poem titled “I am having difficulty staying asleep” captures the essence of freedom as advocated by dreams, illustrating a profound exploration of the liberated imagination and the boundless possibilities that night unfolds for the poet:

I am having difficulty staying asleep. I repeatedly catch myself saying, as if in a clichéd rhetoric of self-definition, “I am under foreign skies” and “I want to break this pattern.” It’s infuriating to speak in clichés, but slippage occurs just at the point where the thought of saying something “better” intersects with the cliché and instead I find that I’m attempting to say in Russian, “Sleep arms us with a terrible freedom.” I’m in a public tent or under an enormous awning “open to the wind,” I say, but then correct myself and say “open to the neck,” when what I really want to say is “billowing.” It’s a “richly aromatic” market, I say, since I smell dusky smoke from apricot seeds roasting over charcoals. Around me are nomadic traders. (2012, p. 77)

In this poem, written at the brink of consciousness before drifting into sleep, Hejinian delves into the boundless realms of an uncharted imagination where she can steer clear of clichés and craft complex assemblages by weaving together seemingly unrelated fragments of experience. She delineates an Arabian market through the juxtaposition of sensory elements, interweaving visual and olfactory images. Employing a deliberate lexical substitution strategy, the poet navigates away from poetic clichés, which are emphasized in the poem by placing them within quotation marks. This technique involves engaging in a nuanced manipulation of language to underscore the artifice of the creative act of composition and its impact on both linguistic form and evocative meaning. In a dreamlike sequence, the poet describes how she acquires a fruit at the market, witnessing its form and colour undergo continual transformations that encapsulate the surreal atmosphere commonly associated with dreams: “I point to a fruit that at first seems to be a pear, but it is shinier than a / pear, it’s more like an apple, red and orange and yellow” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 77). She further narrates an anecdote involving a young girl who assists her in paying for the fruit, adding another layer to this surrealistic encounter. To show gratitude for the girl’s help, the poet gives her “the doll (that’s what the fruit turns out to be) / and her mother nods ‘with

silent approval.’ ‘I’m glad it’s not a *talking* / doll,’ I say, thinking the batteries would die in the desert, but they don’t / seem to understand” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 77; emphasis in the original). While persistently working to bring unity to her collage, readers find that in a dreamlike manner, coherence escapes their grasp in the concluding moments. In this poem, as in many others, “Hejinian treads along the fault line of paradox: as sanctioned explanations fall away, we become increasingly responsible to the associations our minds make even as we are forced to embrace uncertainty about the validity of those connections” (Wood, 2016, p. 418). Hence, the liminal space separating light and dark is perceived by the poet as an invitation to explore inner contradictions and reflect on the contemporary writer’s challenge in conveying experience.

3. SPINNING TALES, WEAVING THE UNREAL: DREAM LOGIC IN POSTMODERN POETICS

In *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*, Hejinian resorts to traditional storytelling to dig into the mechanics of fiction construction by refracting the plots through the lens of a postmodern consciousness. Hence, she transforms into a postmodern Scheherazade who dismantles the conventional structure of traditional tales to metamorphose them into absurd, dreamlike narratives. Her story poems unravel the mysteries of human existence by combining antithetical ideas in order to challenge traditional modes of thought and narrative linearity. In his analysis of the digressive narratologies in Hejinian’s previous works, which are also characterized by their disruptive syntax and bewildering logics of composition, Reddy contends that her work “illuminates the enduring complexities of sequence and consequence in contemporary American poetics” by proposing “a new, digressive logic of discursive sequence within the medium” (2009, p. 55). However, he continues by stating that “[r]ather than dismissing all notions of sequential progression entirely, Hejinian imagines alternative, experimental, and provisional protocols of discursive continuity” (Reddy, 2009, p. 56). On rejecting traditional modes of representation and univocal meanings, as she contends in “Barbarism”, her writing becomes “emblematic of resistance, elaborating a rejection and ever a defiance of the production of totalizing and normalizing meanings; in resisting dogmatism, it may create spaces for ambiguity, provisionality, and difference” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 330). She acknowledges the inadequacy of language to apprehend and depict the immensity and uncertainty of our experience of reality and, consequently, rejects the possibility of attaining complete, univocal knowing. By playing with the referentiality of language and indulging in unceasing polysemic open-endedness, Hejinian frees readers from the constraint of established modes of reading and emancipates them from the poet’s authority over the text.

Hejinian emulates the themes and motives of traditional fairy tales to explore the possibilities of a genre whose shape and content can be easily recognized by the audience, and she re-examines the theme and plot from a postmodern perspective. “The fairy-tale combination of fabulation, extravagance, irrationalism, and barroquism”, as González remarks, “proves to be a fertile field for postmodern aesthetics inasmuch as it allows writers to demystify mimetic representations of reality and self-consciously explore the mechanics of fiction construction” (2020, p. 326). Hence, Hejinian abruptly shatters the traditional plot and function of the genre only to convey the idea that reality is not only unpredictable but also inapprehensible. By subverting all deep-rooted conventions of genre, Hejinian creates hybrid poems that draw attention to the way meaning is constructed. Furthermore, as hinted at in the poem “This tale like many others happened once” (Hejinian, 2012, pp. 322–333), *The Book of the Thousand Eyes* underlines the importance of stories to expand perception and experience. The profound influence of storytelling and the multifaceted nature of narratives is epitomized in the following lines: “[t]his is why the history of the world depends on tales, / which are like potatoes and the sky at night and have many eyes” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 322). In this poem, Hejinian skillfully reconstructs the enchanting fairy-tale world, weaving in motifs like the prince in the form of a sparrow, four beautiful sisters, and the mystique of the forest. However, as anticipated by the variation of the once-upon-a-time trope at the beginning of the story, the narrative unfolds in a seemingly purposeless manner, lacking coherence and connection, rendering the entire story meaningless. The girls are told “to beware of cats which in this part of the world are the size of cars”, and they “are forced to wear bells on their collars”, because otherwise they would devour “every living thing for if they had you would not be here / to hear this tale and I wouldn’t be here to tell it” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 322). This exemplifies how this fairy-tale poem indulges in digression and redundancy, weaving kaleidoscopic patterns that draw meaning along diverse pathways. Later, the sparrow prince vanishes as the four girls tirelessly search for food and water to feed him and cardboard to construct a shelter for him. However, despite their earnest efforts, their quest to locate the prince proves futile. Eventually, they find solace in playing with the gathered seeds, raspberries, and cardboard, gradually forgetting about the lost prince, and proceed to live happily ever after. Hejinian’s postmodern fairy tales “become textual labyrinthine forests of fragmentariness and digression where the reader is compelled to fulfill the hero’s function by going through the ordeal of constructing meaning out of meaninglessness” (González, 2020, p. 327). Thus, the poems emerge as invitations for readers to weave threads of understanding through the fragmented narratives.

Night after night, the poet enters the *terra incognita* separating dream from reality and composes a new poem, fairy tale, lullaby, fable, or philosophical riddle, thus starting a new epistemological quest in search of what, in her essay titled “A Thought is the Bride of What Thinking”, she defines as “a mode of writing that could be multiply referential, densely contextual, with a capacity to be periodically surprised by its own inherent logics, and in the

process of constantly either describing or suggesting possible narratives (histories)” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 8). These nightmarish poems become decontextualized fragments that frustrate any expectations of linearity, coherence or continuity. Another example of Hejinian’s concern with radical experimentation and non-normative representational practices is the poem “There was once a boy” (2012, pp. 202–203). This poem is a compendium of six very brief tales –whose main characters are a boy, a poor man, a sailor, a princess, an astronomer and a doctor, respectively– which unveil mystified logics of progression by setting our thoughts into motion and making our mind veer off in unexpected directions. In Scheherazade’s fashion, Hejinian constructs embedded narratives, tales leading to other tales, in an endless exploration of the possibilities of imagination. Events and concepts are decontextualized and reassembled into dreamlike patterns that whizz the reader around the axis of reality. Indeed, reality becomes as incomprehensible as the doctor’s words: “‘Everyone likes you plump and warm,’ the doctor would say to each of his / patients, which was just what he heard the baker saying to his / muffins as he took them from their tins” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 203). Syntactic estrangement and shifting referentiality turn her tales into avant-garde versions of traditional fairy tales, with plots that fade away in a tangled forest of fragments and digressions. For Hejinian, as Simpson pertinently remarks, “the significance –and value– of this continually unfulfilled desire for ‘perfect knowing’ lies precisely in its unfulfilledness” (2000, p. 13). She provides three morals for the tale; however, rather than clarifying the meaning of the stories, they evoke additional associations, leading to an overflow of interpretations. But, as the final line of the poem suggests, “That’s what we can learn from these tales and from other tales too” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 203). It could be stated that in an attempt to unsettle certainty and avoid emotional identification, “Hejinian deconstructs the moralizing impulse of the fairy tale through multiplications, discursiveness, and non sequitur, shattering the acquisitive Faustian impulse toward knowledge where counsel curdles into pedantry” (Wood, 2016, p. 425).

In line with avant-garde poetics, Hejinian’s poems immerse the reader in the dream realm, where she experiments with language and indulges in repetition, alliteration, incongruity, fragmentation, surrealism, and abstraction. These poems distinctively adhere to one of the fundamental axioms of Language Poetry, “where a given sentence never ‘follows’ logically or sequentially from its predecessor and yet is related to all other sentences by careful orchestration of leitmotifs, phrases, and numerical constraints” (Perloff, 2005, p. 128). Conceptual, semantic and syntactic fragmentation mirrors the disjunctions of the mind and the dreamy paths of poetic imagination. Events derail into bizarre sequences and language is distorted to challenge normative reading practices. The three-page long poem titled “The lamb butts its head against the udder” (2012, pp. 70–72) perfectly illustrates Hejinian’s self-reflective experimentalism by deliberately juxtaposing borrowed fragments and personal reflections. Her hybridized poetics subtly blends poetic critical theory with

practice, challenging not only generic conventions and normative referentiality, but also narratological determinism and logics. For Hejinian, poetry and poetics, as revealed in this poem, are inextricably bound, each shaping and deriving from the other: “Five robins and / some starlings land on the grass just outside the window under stormy / skies. I do not say they are ‘just robins and starlings.’ The contemporary / writer continues to struggle against sentimentalism and didacticism” (2012, p. 70). Moreover, by resorting to Gertrude Stein’s free-associational method, she gathers decontextualized fragments of experience and combines them in a matrix of gaps and accretions. The poem becomes a heterogeneous mosaic of fragments made up of unconnected ideas, recycled clichés, poetic motifs, self-conscious metafictional commentaries, and intertextual allusions to writers and poets such as Tolstoy, Gertrude Stein, Bruce Andrews, and Barrett Watten. Indeed, as observed in this excerpt from the poem, Hejinian reflects on and mimics Andrews’s, Stein’s, and Watten’s modular approaches to composition in order to challenge the tenuous coherence of poetic discourse and liberate words and phrases from their syntactical and structural constraints:

[...] Where Bruce Andrews’s work
*bare*s the device (of social oppression) at the lexical and phrasal levels,
 Barren Watten’s *bare*s the device (of something more recalcitrant and
 thus even more devastating) at the structural/semantic level. Andrews
 shows how fucked up the language with which groups speak is; Watten
 shows how tragic and fucked up our very structures of thought are. The
 sea, for example, is a very dark gray, its far edge clear and hard against
 the horizon, where light’s reflected off the clouds. Rain falls, releasing
 pleasure incommensurable with our fucked up structures of thought. I
 persevere on rain, I persevere on pleasure. Why did Gertrude Stein
 determine to eliminate memory from the processes of cognition? Perhaps
 because she had been unhappy. Birds and animal similes are said to aid
 remembrance [...] (2012, p. 71; emphasis in the original)

As she weaves together tenuously interconnected fragments, Hejinian invites continuous recontextualizing and frustrates univocal meaning, thus compelling readers to navigate through the intricacies of her text to discover hidden connections, for, as she contends, “[o]ne should picture each moment as a bundle / quivering in the breeze, then disappearing into what Tolstoy termed / ‘labyrinths of linkage’” (2012, p. 72). Her accretion technique entails a surrender to the unconscious that allows her to explore the mystery of fiction and its relation to reality, for, as she claims, “[w]hat the sea promises, it / will provide, which is more than one can say of a *painting* of the sea [...] That’s what is so miraculous about the painting. / It’s a rainbow, but with durability” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 72;

emphasis in the original). While acknowledging the limitations of art in capturing the full, tangible experience of nature, she concedes that the power of art lies in its capacity for evoking unique and lasting beauty. This very same idea of the impossibility of attaining whole meaning or univocal perception is a notion repeated throughout the text. By activating a process of fortuitous association and accretion, she constructs a reversible text that unveils hidden or mystified logics and replicates meaning *ad infinitum*. As Simpson suggests, “language [...] is one of the more significantly material components of the epistemological situation, and Hejinian’s writing highlights the constitutive role language plays in how we know and what we know by maintaining a continuous state of uncertainty” (2000, p. 16). The plurality of perception or the multiple paths of access to reality, an idea evoked by the metaphor of the title of the book, is obvious in the poem “Today is ‘a day just like any other’”, where the poet reveals that “everyone learns from stories, though not everyone learns the / same things” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 258).

Likewise, the poem titled “A Fable” and dedicated to her friend Carla Harryman, whose main protagonists are an owl and a peach, is an open-ended text that obliges readers to revise their conceptions of the capacity of poetic language to convey experience in a mimetic way. As the narrator of the fable suggests, “But the term ‘suddenly,’ as applied to the experience of an owl, should / always suggest patient speculation, extended contemplation, / prolonged acknowledgement, and then peace” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 49). The poet, through the introduction of the term “suddenly” in an unconventional context, strategically detaches the word from its referent and highlights the materiality of signifiers. This intentional detachment serves to defamiliarize the term, prompting readers to reconsider and reinterpret the poem in a manner that challenges normative expectations. In their attempt “to offer a glimpse of the intersection between the symbolic and the material planes of language”, as Dworkin contends, these poems “illuminate the dynamic transfers between medium and symbol that take place along the surface of the text, in moments in which noise and message, or signifier and signified, invert themselves in short-circuiting exchange” (2020, p. 5). The ambiguity and multivalency of the word “suddenly” liberate the text from the poet’s control and activate a subtly disorienting effect. Indeed, the concept of indeterminacy and openness serves as the guiding force in the poem, which is why the fable resists definitive closure by presenting four morals that deliver not truths but uncertainties. In fact, the fourth moral reads: “Various women writers will take up the philosophical / quest for uncertainty” (2012, p. 49), underscoring Hejinian’s and Carla Harryman’s commitment to the principles of Language Poetry.

4. THE POETICS OF INDETERMINACY: NAVIGATING AMBIGUITY AND FRAGMENTATION

The concept of indeterminacy is crucial for *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*, which identifies the night with the proliferation of meanings and utilizes the image of the thousand eyes to resist the constraints of linearity and determinacy imposed by the day. The eyes and the visual dominate “our access to knowledge”, since, as the author explicitly remarks, “we are overwhelmingly inclined to look or, where that’s not possible, to visualize, in order to understand or even to conceive” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 227). This image helps Hejinian enlarge the reader’s perception and understanding of the world by challenging the unity and stability of experience and consciousness. “In Hejinian’s poetry”, as Altieri points out, “indeterminacy functions most richly as a means rather than an end, largely because the full conditions of participation require our being able to treat multiple or uncertain meanings as aspects of the fundamental authorial action within the poem” (1996, p. 217). A good example is the poem “gris” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 251), which is a one-word poem that evokes feelings of neutrality, melancholy, and ambiguity associated with the colour gray in English, or gris in Spanish and French. Additionally, it could signify a blending of different elements or perspectives, or, more specifically, the interplay of light and shadow in the liminal space between dream and reality, where there is a regression to a state of undifferentiated awareness. Another poem that epitomises her acceptance of the inherent uncertainty of our understanding of reality is articulated as follows: “frst Vhtidyinr – nr erll / I mean ... / mpe jrjsy smf dp, ryjomh nsf / But there is no way to correct a dream” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 87). Through the inclusion of gibberish words, the poem compels readers to grapple with uncertainty in their conscious experience, just as they would in the dream world. Meaning, for Hejinian as for other Language poets, “is bound up with what Kristeva has termed the ‘semiotic,’ which signifies through nongrammatical lexicons (pulse, body rhythms, nonsensical sounds), and which can never be separated from one’s total linguistic experience”, since “the value of a poem lies in its nonrecuperable ‘elements of language’” that lets us intuit its “indeterminacy” (Hinton, 2000, p. 187). Hence, for the poet, the night unravels an ambiguous realm with hazy boundaries, enticing uncertainty and creating a space for reflecting on the nature of reality and challenging the referentiality of language.

Like Scheherazade, Hejinian invites the reader to enter the world of her dreams and scrutinize the unpredictable possibilities it opens up. This book, as she argues in “La Faustienne”, reflects her interest in the processes of “assimilation and assessment” that occur at night, “where opposites [...] always coexist” and “when the mind must accept the world it witnesses by day and out of all data assemble meaning” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 250). Nights allow her not only to portray experiences as hesitant, silent, and illogical, but also to blur the boundaries between fiction/dream and reality in order to explore the possibilities of language as a mediating medium of conveying and constructing the poet’s experience. As she herself

admits in “Barbarism”, “[l]ike a 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” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 327).

Moreover, she considers that dreams not only unleash what is repressed by the unconscious, but also serve to select, analyze and process daily experience in order to make sense of all the data gathered during the waking state. “Our thoughts wander” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 317) is a poem that delves into the intricate workings of the mind across different states of consciousness, highlighting the wandering nature of thoughts in both dreams and wakefulness:

Our thoughts wander, and, except when making an effort to remember, we hardly notice any friction.

Remembering takes no effort in sleep. We slide into it just as we slide into forgetting.

The affinities with which one disperses in dreams and which enable one to be everyone in them shouldn’t be confused with waking kindness.

In dreams, one’s large identity is all memory, peopled but with something other than rapport. It’s waking life that rapports populate [...].

The poem addresses the fluidity of memory and identity in dreams, suggesting that the dream state is distinct from waking life in terms of the nature of the connections we establish. For Hejinian, memory processes function differently during sleep, where recollections are more fluid compared to wakefulness. The meandering course of the mind also differs between various states of consciousness; therefore, the bonds forged in dreams are distinct from the connections built in our waking experience. The poet advocates for fiction where, as in dreams, facts or events are not connected, since it is only in the waking life that the necessity for connection arises. The night also allows Hejinian to explore the unconscious processes of the mind, since, as she claims in the second part of the poem, “In sleeping we go backward toward the true blank, / where it’s been permanently though prematurely installed. / It’s precisely in sleep that we come to things installed, things in / endless summation” (2012, p. 317). Sleep entails a regression to a state of undifferentiated consciousness that precedes the imposition of distinctions. Thus, the night unveils a realm of ambiguity for the poet, inviting uncertainty and providing a space for contemplating the essence of reality with new eyes. But Hejinian is also interested in the process of accretion triggered in dreams around trivial events or motifs, and, for that reason, in the darkness of the night, she struggles to generate a new poetic language that by suggesting multiple associations and digressive pathways may better convey the complexity of human experience. The middle zone between wakefulness and dream state is a fertile space that beckons ambiguity and uncertainty, for, as she claims at the end of the poem, “[d]reams themselves, though full of gaps, slip things into the gaps / that

harbor the indivisibility of the middle zone of life, where indeterminacy / and intermediacy are so easily confused” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 317). These lines suggest not only that in the dream realm things are uncertain, incomplete, and intermediate, but also that in this in-between state even words can become muddled or confused.

According to Freud in “The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words” (1957), contraries and contradictions are usually disregarded in dreams, where opposites are freely combined to represent and evoke ideas through their contraries, thus complicating the understanding of their real meaning. He also draws an analogy between the original, antithetical meaning of words in archaic languages and the regressive, primitive nature of the thoughts emerging in dreams. Thus, in dreams opposites coexist, enabling assumptions and conventions to be ignored and making the familiar appear strange, and vice versa. By juxtaposing antithetical elements and words, Hejinian ignites sparks of meaning that provocatively suggest new forms, perspectives, and directions. She understands “one of the poet’s tasks to be not only creating a new poetic object within the world, but actually creating new possibilities for perceptions of that world –apprehending new relationships between things, seeing new things, even creating new things in the world through these rejuvenated perceptions” (Kuckelman, 2018, p. 30). In these poems, the coupling of irreconcilable realities contributes to stretching imagination by creating dreamscapes in the interstices between antithetical levels of reality.

Hejinian’s compositional technique closely aligns with that ascribed to Gertrude Stein, as articulated by William Gass, who claims that “[w]ords can be moved about like furniture in their sentences; they can be diced like carrots [...] they can be used in several different ways simultaneously [...] they can be ingeniously joined, like groom and bred, anxiety and bride” (1979, p. 79). Indeed, the poem titled “What is this argument worth?” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 267), which blends everyday observations, existential reflections and a touch of surrealism, is a homage to Gertrude Stein, from whom she even borrows the line, “I call carelessly that the door is open”, extracted from Stanza 83 of *Stanzas in Meditation* (1994). This line, as the second line of the poem “Cold roast chicken on black bread, dear father” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 267), evokes the idea of domesticity and is focused on ordinary life and objects. Ideas about domesticity or family life are interspersed with philosophical or poetic reflections: “With my children in a rubber raft dodging larger trucklike craft / Pressed on by time, flight, and the rhythms / I call carelessly that the door is open / And the fields of buttercups flow and glitter” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 267). The imagery of being in a rubber raft with her children conveys a sense of navigating through life’s everyday moments and uncertainties, while the reference to “time, flight, and rhythms”, adds a deeper temporal and rhythmic dimension to the natural passage of time. In the two following lines, an apparently prosaic observation, “I call carelessly that the door is open”, is blended with the poetic image of glittering “fields of buttercups”. This can be interpreted as an invitation to the reader to appreciate the natural beauty and vitality of ordinary life. These weird juxtapositions prove that, as Beach contends,

“her writing attempts not only to transcribe or capture experience, but to interact on a textual or metatextual level with that experience and the process of remembering and re-creating that experience” (1997, p. 59).

In this compendium of poems Hejinian demonstrates a passionate commitment to her notion of the open text, one which invites unlimited access to reality and multiple interpretations of it. Hejinian acknowledges the impossibility of bridging the gap between the desire to communicate experience and the description of that experience. Thus, as she contends in “The Rejection of Closure”, “[w]e delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world –to close the gap between ourselves and things– and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 56). Playing with opposite meanings and indulging in syntactic estrangements enable Hejinian to slip into indeterminacy and openendedness. She explores the surreal realm of dreams and the wandering associations within the unconscious mind while asleep, to create fluctuating patterns that elude a comprehensible conclusion. Her poems, like dreams, are full of gaps which try to preserve the mystery of poetry in their rejection of definition and closure. In fact, many of the lyrical tales of the book end with one or several vague morals in an endless deferral of meaning. A clear example of this is the moral of the poem “An elephant goes by”, which epitomizes Hejinian’s deliberate intention to playfully challenge the reader by consistently deferring the revelation of meaning and refusing to seal the gaps of her poems: “[o]ne shouldn’t look too closely into the gaps in a story. / They are hiding places, and what’s in them is none of your business” (2012, p. 305). Like Howe (1999), Hejinian is interested in a poetry of “bewilderment”, which is not only “close to dream-construction” (para. 16) but also “follows a complete collapse of reference and reconciability” and “cracks open the dialectic and sees myriads all at once” (para. 9). Hence, refusing traditional expectations about univocal meaning, these poetical reflections provide an abstract picture with different levels of reality and open up infinite routes of access, a thousand eyes, to reality and experience.

The Book of a Thousand Eyes embodies Hejinian’s desire to challenge the rules of signification and divert the linearity of narrative; thus, she opens her text to polarized interpretation in order to offer new modes of knowing, orchestrating infinite possibilities and plural significations. She has constructed a framed text, presenting poetry as artifice, where any reading “is an improvisation”, and, as the poet herself observes in “The Rejection of Closure”, “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” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 44). This is achieved not only by using a framing device that generates endless replicas of similar thoughts and reflections, and through the repetition of certain words in different contexts and grammatical assemblages, but also by juxtaposing dissimilar words or ideas to create dreamlike patterns that reshape the very foundations for discourse: “The scavenging

beetle is as big as a thumb / It's dangerous to ride on a brittle beetle bone / Bone, thumb, coat / *That's the coat*" (Hejinian, 2012, p. 83; emphasis in the original). The structure of this nightmarish poem has been splintered, as if mirrored through a shattered glass, with each fragmented piece providing only obscure and undefined details of the depicted scene. The first line suggests that at night even small things like a beetle can become potentially significant and dangerous. However, immediately, the second line banishes all feelings of danger by shifting the context: "It's dangerous to ride on a brittle beetle bone" (Hejinian, 2012, p. 83). This line introduces the idea of risk or fragility, thus emphasizing the vulnerability of the beetle, which has now stopped being a menace. Riding on a "brittle beetle bone" becomes a surreal, almost absurdist, image, while alliteration adds a rhythmic, poetic quality to the line that helps alleviate the feeling of danger evoked previously. This rhythmic quality is also enhanced through the repetitions of the words "bone", "thumb", and "coat" in the third line to create an eccentric fusion that defers meaning *ad infinitum*. By disrupting the syntactic flow and discursive sequence, Hejinian not only adheres to a bewildering, digressive logic of composition, but also challenges the temporal and spatial consistency of events. Reddy's words, referring to a sentence from Hejinian's *My Life in the Nineties* (1980), also apply to this poem: "[T]his grammarless series of words proceeds associatively at first [...] but then [...] one word follows another according to the delayed coherence of a shifting logic" (2009, p. 56). Moreover, the words are treated as objects that can be recombined in the manner of a verbal collage to reveal new meanings full of nuances that add freshness and complexity to the text. The poem seems to weave together disparate surreal, abstract images and concepts as an invitation for readers to find their own meanings and connections. Indeed, "it is the logics of these new connections", as she proclaims in "Barbarism", "that provide poetry with its enormous mobility and its transformative strategies" (Hejinian, 2000, p. 328).

In these poems the repetition of certain thoughts and images has not a harmonizing effect but a disruptive one. Repetition obliges us to re-examine and modify previous interpretations in the light of the new contexts offered, and this makes us experience the fluidity of meaning and experience. By repeating words, phrases, and ideas, Hejinian stimulates the meaning-making process, and, as she herself points out in "The Rejection of Closure", "the initial reading is adjusted; meaning is set in motion, emended and extended, and the rewriting that repetition becomes postpones completion of the thought indefinitely" (2000, p. 44). Therefore, repetition must be understood as intensification but also as endless deferral of meaning. A clear example is the poem "Constant change figures" (Hejinian, 2012, p. 177) –a slightly modified, longer variation of part of a poem included in her prior work, *The Fatalist*– which is rewritten to evoke new meanings. Although the previous version of the poem suggests the centrality of our subjective perception of waking time in constructing memories and experience, it also acknowledges the freedom that dreams provide to shape experience: "I know that the only 'inviolable' privacy lies in dreams / where things are

experienced without thought to their having been / ‘permitted’” (Hejinian, 2003, p. 20). Thus, in the new version, crafted in the liminal realm of the night, the previous nine lines are repeated three times, each time swapped and reorganized freely to suggest multiple interpretations. The dream world enables Hejinian to represent the fluidity of experience by repeating the same or similar phrases but constantly varying the grammatical function of its parts:

constant change figures
 the time we sense
 passing on its effect
 surpassing things we’ve known before
 since memory
 of many things is called
 experience
 but what of what
 we call nature’s picture
 of many things we call
 since memory
 we call nature’s picture
 surpassing things we’ve known before
 constant change figures
 experience
 passing on its effect
 but what of what
 constant change figures
 since memory
 of many things is called
 the time we sense
 called nature’s picture
 but what of what
 in the time we sense
 surpassing things we’ve known before
 passing on its effect
 is experience (2012, p. 177)

In this way, she manages to create a modular style where the different elements acquire a permutable and provisional character that mirrors the elusiveness of experience. “Facilitating this”, as Gardner explains, “is the lack of punctuation, letting the first line be an adjective, noun, and verb, or else adjective, modifying noun, and noun, so that the poem can be organised in many ways” (2013, para. 6). This gives the poem a tint of indeterminacy and provisionality, even of artificiality, since words might have been arranged in a different order and suggested other meanings. Hejinian’s mode of composition here matches the one attributed to Gertrude Stein by Gass when he remarks that “[e]very sentence is a syntactical space (a room) in which words (things, people) act (cook, clean, eat, or excrete) in order to produce quite special and very valuable qualities of feeling” (1979, p. 79). Hejinian enjoys playing with the prominence of words in her sentences, and thus she creates multiple centers or focal points where all the meanings converge and diverge. There is a tendency to turn

sentences against themselves in order to generate indeterminacy as meanings clash and blend. Derived from a critique of linguistic linearity in preference for intricate configurations, this perspective permits individual words to bring about shifts and variations within their own context or surroundings. She repeats words but places them in different positions, forcing them to adopt changing grammatical structures, thus enabling the comprehension of categories as dynamic and shifting. Instead of imposing strict boundaries and definitively defining terms, this technique encourages a more open and evolving understanding that can be seen as a starting point or an initiation into exploration, rather than a final and conclusive establishment of limits to meaning construction. In essence, defamiliarization promotes a perspective that acknowledges the dynamic nature of categories and resists the idea of setting rigid terminological boundaries. As Scharper claims, “[d]isdaining traditional conceptions of meaning, these pieces teeter sometimes pleasingly on the edge of incoherence” (2012, p. 84). Thus, the responsibility for establishing coherence in her poetry lies with the reader, who is tasked with interconnecting sentences and synthesizing meaning through the amalgamation of disparate fragments of experience woven throughout the text.

The first line of the last poem of the book, stating “I have lived aboard a ship stranded by a terrific immobilizing wind” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 333), describes the poetic experience as an adventure of the mind, an exploration of the unconscious where there is endless contradiction here underlined by oxymoron. She has decided to write these poems in the dark of the night where opposites are not distinctly perceived and meaning and experience are constructed through assimilation and coexistence. For Hejinian, the epistemological inquiry is brought to an end while she gradually regains consciousness at dawn; the remnants of her dreams fade away, being replaced by the looming reality of classes, “I’m to lecture on Noh plays” (2012, p. 333), and other daily routines. Daylight offers little possibilities for narratives, stories and conjectures; as the quotation from Bourdillon inserted at the beginning of the book states, “[t]he night has a thousand eyes, / And the day but one”. The light of the new day represses the poet’s imagination, and that is the reason why all these poems have been constructed at night, where meanings proliferate and speculation intensifies. Therefore, the poem ends by underlining that “[d]awn brings all speculation to an end” (Hejinian, 2012, p. 333), thus suggesting that the poet, like Scheherazade, reinvents herself every night as she embarks on new quests for inquiry and new literary adventures of the mind.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The interplay of writing and dreaming takes center stage in an anthology where the author artfully manipulates language and experience across various stages of consciousness and perception. As a result, the poems in this collection become self-conscious acts of exploration while the writing process itself is envisioned as a thorough investigation into the limits of

meaning and the intricate ways in which it is constructed through language. The liminal space between dream and reality allows Hejinian to craft lyric stories, volatile fragments of experience, which acquire the quality and texture of dreams. In *The Book of a Thousand Eyes* she conveys a fascination with the raw materiality of words and their ability to construct fictional realms, much like the way the mind, in dreams, weaves its own illogical and fragmented narratives into existence. Moreover, Hejinian delves into her fascination with narrative conventions and framing stories. Her exploration extends to the possibilities of storytelling within the dream realm, portraying it as a dynamic and uncertain kaleidoscopic landscape where interpretive frames of reference are in constant flux. In these eccentric assemblages of weird poetic material, which fluctuate between dream and reality, every utterance resounds with ambiguity, intentionally undermining coherence and univocal interpretation. By rejecting traditional expectations of unequivocal meaning, these poetic reflections present an abstract portrayal with multiple layers of reality, providing myriad perspectives and infinite pathways to access reality and experience. Always elusive, indeterminate and open-ended, the poems constructed night after night embody different modes of enquiry and poetic exploration and invite the reader to assume a dynamic role in the construction of meaning. Like Scheherazade, Hejinian deftly spins together impenetrable riddles and mystifying tales meant not to be understood but to be experienced. However, it is not until the very end of the book that we realize that all those poems, by underscoring the mystery inherent in poetry and reality, have completely changed our perception and enlarged our understanding of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research has been supported by the Consejería de Educación, Junta de Castilla y León (Spain), through the project SA 012A10-1 *El lenguaje de las vanguardias: Una nueva identidad poético visual*.

REFERENCES

- Altieri, C. (1996). Some problems about agency in the theories of radical poetics. *Contemporary Literature*, 37(2), 207–236.
- Beach, C. (1997). Poetic positionings: Stephen Dobyns and Lyn Hejinian in cultural context. *Contemporary Literature*, 38(1), 44–77.
- Bernstein, C. (1984). Semblance. In B. Andrews & C. Bernstein (Eds.), *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (pp. 115–118). Southern Illinois University Press.

- Dworkin, C. (2020). *Radium of the Word: A Poetics of Materiality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226743738.001.0001>
- Freud, S. (1957). *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*. The Hogarth Press.
- Gardner, C. (2013, June 18). Perception is almost an end in itself: Lyn Hejinian's *The Book of A Thousand Eyes*. *Glasgow Review of Books*. Retrieved June 6, 2023 from <https://glasgowreviewofbooks.com/2013/06/18/perception-is-almost-an-end-in-itself/>
- Gass, William H. (1979). *The World within the Word*. Boston: Nonpareil Book.
- González Rodríguez, L. M. (2020). Experimentalism and Self-reflexivity in Donald Barthelme's Postmodern Fairy Tales. In L. Brugué Botia & A. Llompарт Pons (Eds.), *Contemporary Fairy-Tale Magic. Subverting Gender and Genre* (pp. 329–339). Brill Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004418998_032
- Hejinian, L. (2000). *The Language of Inquiry*. University of California Press.
- Hejinian, L. (2003). *The Fatalist*. Omnidawn.
- Hejinian, L. (2012). *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*. Omnidawn Publishing.
- Hinton, L. (2000). Centering margins: The Language poets reconsidered (as women). *Contemporary Literature*, XLI(1), 180–188.
- Howe, F. (1999). Bewilderment. *HOW2*, 1(1). https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_1_1999/index.htm
- Kuckelman, M. (2018). From Romanticism to Language Poetry: Discovering the unapprehended in Percy Bysshe Shelley, Gertrude Stein, and Lyn Hejinian. *THE MEIO UNIVERSITY BULLETIN*, 23, 23–32.
- Lavender, W. (1996). Disappearance of theory, appearance of praxis: Ron Silliman, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and the essay. *Poetics Today*, 17(2), 181–202. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773355>
- Perelman, B. (1995). *The Marginalization of Poetry: The Language Writing and Literary Theory*. Princeton University Press.
- Perloff, M. (1981). *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Northwestern University Press.
- Perloff, M. (2005). Avant-Garde tradition and individual talent: The case of Language poetry. *Revue Française d'études américaines*, 103, 117–141.
- Reddy, S. (2009). Changing the sjuzet: Lyn Hejinian digressive narratologies. *Contemporary Literature*, 50(1), 54–93.
- Scharper, D. (2012). The book of a thousand eyes. *Library Journal*, 137(8), 84.
- Simpson, M. (2000). *Poetic Epistemologies*. State University of New York Press.
- Stein, G. (1994). *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems*. Sun & Moon Press.
- Wood, T. (2016). Between bibetgekess and 'but...': Lyn Hejinian's *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*. In R. Smith & J. Hofer (Eds.), *Arial 10: Lyn Hejinian* (pp. 410–434). Edge Books.