

All About Me: Rethinking Subjectivity in the Poet's Autobiography

by
Rachel Kamphaus

Thesis Advisor: Tamar Katz
Second Reader: Timothy Bewes

Thesis

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Introduction

“And if it’s about her—so what? Who fucking cares? This is her voice. This is who she is.”--HBO
Girls

“These are my wartime experiences, that no one has considered
Occurring while one reads my poetry, as I am dead.
The pacific war pacified no one, and that’s not my face,
On the figure in the mind, grimed with tropical combat.
It’s the cover of an edition of *The Naked and the Dead*.

...

“The poet watches a grenade explode; I’m communicating with the
dead again it makes the gears go crazy I have just undergone
a bonafide 1970s panic attack; the poet was already dead by then
and I never met him anyway. Panic also temporarily
discombobulates the gears. I might die but maybe
I’ll just give the perceptual framework a good whack.
The poet tells me there’s a real problem with the human person
it can’t cope with its genius the poetic for example an
extraordinary art delineating our being as it’s lived, no one listens he
says not
even my best friends, I have to fight *them*. The world is at war with
poetry
he says, never smiling, beneath the ludicrous green netted helmet.” --Alice Notley, “To
Frank,” (1-5, 20-32).

How does one write after the death of the poet? Such is the major idea of Alice Notley’s
poem “To Frank.” The poem begins with a first person possessive pronoun in its first line,
indicating perhaps the presence of a standard lyric subject, yet the speaker’s first declaration of
“I” does not function so much as an assertion of presence but one of non-presence: “I am dead.”
The impossibility of a subject who is both dead and speaking cleaves the lyric subject from any
“real” person who might reside behind the page, effectively destroying any notion of a stable

speaker who writes from experience (2). “I is another,” goes Rimbaud’s famous maxim. “I am dead,” so goes Notley’s.

Yet the death of the poet here is not the end of the poem, but rather a catalyst for its action. Starting with the death of the poet, Notley continues to deconstruct—or rather, cope with the deconstruction—of the poem’s poetic subject. Immediately following the speaker’s declaration of his/her—this distinction will become important—death, he/she states “that’s not my face/ On the figure in the mind, grimed with tropical combat./ It’s the cover of an edition of *The Naked and the Dead*” (3, 4). Here, the speaker gestures towards the impossibility of creating a “true” representation of the self within the reader’s mind; perhaps drawing upon a poststructuralist idea that a subject is an “accumulation of representations” (77). Notley anticipates that the reader’s own interpretation of the subject is necessarily flattening, an approximation based upon encounters with similar representations in the past. Put another way, to picture “soldier” in the mind obviously does not reproduce the soldier in flesh and blood, it simply creates a *representation* of the referent “soldier,” one that comes from the reader’s previous encounters with that term. Notley’s reference to the cover of Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, with its well-known close up of a startled soldier, is a knowing observation that the reader cannot help but mis-interpret the poem’s subject—it serves as a recognition that there is always a gap between the poet and subject on paper. In this stanza, Notley seems to say, *It is not me you picture, nor any other unique speaker. When you think of war, you will inevitably return to the image of a shell-shocked soldier, eyes cartoonishly wide under his lopsided helmet.* In short, what we see is a caricature, not a “real” person, so-to-speak.

Yet recognizing this gap between poet(real)/speaker(representation) is not the only way that Notley deconstructs the subject in her poem. While the first stanza introduces us to a subject

who is a) a poet, b) involved in a war of some kind and c) dead (perhaps because of said war), the third stanza throws the positioning of this subject into question: “The poet watches a grenade explode; I’m communicating with the dead again/it makes the gears go crazy I have just undergone/ a bonafide 1970s panic attack; the poet was already dead by then” (20-23). In this line, the combatant poet-subject becomes a combatant poet-object, and the speaker of the poem acts as a medium through which the “poet,” now dead, can once again speak. Thus, among this interplay between subject and object, among these false representations, among this “I” that ricochets like stray bullets upon the helmet of Mailer’s soldier, we must question whether a subject even exists within the space of this poem—and, if it does, whether that subject exists in any comprehensible form.

I begin with “To Frank” because it introduces the main problem that this thesis seeks to address: the role of both the subject and the poet in late 20th century poetry, particularly in the aftermath of a number of critical schools that would emerge to critique both the author and subject. The New Critics of the 1940s, for example, attempted to disengage authorial intention from the study of literary works, treating the text itself as a source of authority. Concerning themselves primarily with lyric poems, the New Critics sought to draw out the formal nuances of texts independent of their historical context or authorship. By the 1950s, New Criticism was the dominant method of teaching texts, particularly in teachers’ colleges (*New Criticism*).

In the late 60s, post-structuralist thinkers deconstructed the role of the subject to the extent that “the ‘death’ of the subject itself” became “one of the more fashionable themes in contemporary theory” (Jameson 63). The literary implications of such an idea are perhaps most famously articulated in Roland Barthes’ 1967 essay, “The Death of the Author.” In Barthes’ view, writing is a space where the subject itself collapses: “Writing is that neutral, composite,

oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142). Yet rather than treating his views as a radical rupture in the reception of writing, and hence framing himself as the agent of the author’s death, Barthes claims this feature as inherent to texts: “No doubt it has always been that way” (142). Thus, under a post-structuralist paradigm, “The creative poet is (always already) dead, murdered by the restrictive codes of his own language, ” and becomes little more than “an author-function...a mechanism of language.” (Blazer 8-9).

While the New Critics operated from a distinctly apolitical standpoint, the poststructuralists of later decades wrote in a highly-politicized, leftist space, and they often imagined their theories as having some sort of revolutionary import. For Barthes, the death of the author function as a critique of the bourgeois, capitalist subject, because the very belief in the author is a capitalist invention: “It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist' ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author” (144). Here, the author is not merely an effect of capital, he is the “culmination” of the entire capitalist ideology, under which he becomes the “owner and persona of language in one” (Stopford 184). Thus, for the reader or critic to ignore or erase the presence of the author is necessarily an act that weakens the power of capitalist ideology.

Because of this, it is fitting that a number of writers would emerge to address the questions posed by these poststructuralists. Seeing “contemporary forms of language” as “products of hegemonic capitalist rationality,” a group of writers known as the Language Poets began experimenting with forms of writing characterized by either “extreme ling[ui]stic fragmentation” or more grammatically intact forms that “allow for high degrees of disjunction from sentence to sentence or element to element” as a polemic against said rationalism (Shetley

144, Izenberg). Generally, these poets embraced post-structuralist thought, seeing language as an inherently unstable play of meanings which the reader was responsible for constructing.

Importantly, these poets imagined their project as a rebellion against traditional lyric modes and forms of subjectivity, and they actively worked against the “‘lyric I’ as a figure of sovereign self-possession and autonomous reflection...an ideological fiction by means of which the inchoate self might be rendered coherent and the determined self naturalized” (Izenberg). As a number of Language poets (which included Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten) claimed in a joint manifesto: “The self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing” (263).

Yet, the aesthetic practices that characterized the Language group extended far beyond its own participants. In his famous essay “Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson argues that formulations such as “textuality, *écriture*, or schizophrenic writing” become the “privileged terms” of postmodern culture (71). Stephanie Burt likewise identifies a strain of criticism that sees “lyric poetry...[writ large] as a way of resisting individuality, or resisting meaning,” while Srikanth Reddy identifies a “scholarly bias toward a poetics of fragmentation.” (Burt 427, Reddy 17). Yet, the overwhelming adoption of these ideas by the academy, and the extent to which they appear in the corpus of late 20th century poetry, make Language poetry look dogmatic. As Reddy explains, these “radical changes” in writing get absorbed into the fabric of the university, and to some extent, culture in general: “Broken literary speech runs the risk of simply reproducing a fatalistic dialectic whereby poetic annunciation, for the fractured authorial sensibility, ‘*requires* abandoning normative syntax, and even illegibility” (Quartermain qtd. in Reddy 19). Hence, illegibility is no

longer a paradigm-bursting literary technique, rupturing hierarchies of language—it simply becomes integrated into a new hierarchy as a privileged term, particularly upon a lyric terrain.

If I have made it seem like Notley is too much on the side of the poststructuralists, it is because I have not yet stressed enough that Notley imagines the death of the poet, not as final, but as a *war*—that is, contested terrain. Despite the various stanzas in which the subject seems to disappear or become muddled, there are others in which it comes back with startling coherency. Consider the second stanza of “To Frank”:

I don't want to talk. Their piquant questions are too scholarly
for one who's chatting with her gynecologist over the stirrups.
Nude as a nut I told her I had two new books of poetry out
“How are they being received?” she asks and then I grip her finger
with my vaginal muscles, “in case of leaks” (6-10).

Here, a clearly female, first-person, poet-speaker emerges, a subject that can believably be interpreted as Notley herself. While the previous examples I have cited from “To Frank” instantiate a wide gap between poet and subject, the gap seems to close here, and a unity between the two is restored. Thus, “To Frank” will function as a push and pull between these modes—a more confessional one and a more “disjointed,” Language inflected one. While at first it seems that Notley does not privilege one over the other, in the final stanza, she declares: “I’m adrift from my goals at last, winning the war”—the “I” standing triumphant.

The Poet's Autobiography

In 1998, Notley released her book *Mysteries of Small Houses*, her effort to “re-center the *I* in poetry,” (Notley, qtd. in Robbins 78). She published the book at a stage in her career in

which she had abandoned standard lyrics and began to experiment with other forms of poetry. As in Notley's previous work, *The Descent of Alette*, an "epic poem" notable for its odd tendency to set each metrical foot off with parentheses, *Mysteries of Small Houses*, Notley does not so much invent a new literary form as recycle an old one. But rather than turning to ancient themes of battle, war, and dreams, Notley writes *Mysteries* as an *autobiographical* coming-of age story, following herself from her childhood in Needles, California, to her marriage with poet Ted Berrigan, to her eventual move to Paris.

Autobiography, in some ways, may seem more protected against the processes that I have so far outlined. The genre's mobilization of conventional narrative structures (seen especially in the proliferation of "cradle-to-present" autobiographies), presents information in such an easy and logical manner that readers cannot help but take its relation to an essential "truth" for granted. In the words of Juliana Spahr, autobiography functions as a place "where the conventions of representation are narrative, where text uncovers" "a visible and essentially legible self" (139). Of course, the phrasing of uncovering assumes identity as naturalized, an obvious challenge to the idea of the self as linguistically constituted and brought into focus via "difficult" writing that forces close interaction between the reader and the text.

The autobiographical text allows its writers to pull off a convenient trick. While the genre is still implicated in poststructuralist critiques (de Man is famous for his deconstructive essay "Autobiography as De-Facement"), it *looks* like it portrays a coherent subject that closely aligns with the author's identity. It is generally true—far more so than in lyric—that readers assume the speaking narrator of an autobiography shares the identity of the author. So, the autobiography gives writers a vantage point from which they can openly write about their own selves while also giving them the framework to critique and reimagine the very selfhood they explore.

Thus, in my thesis, I aim to look at two poet autobiographies: Alice Notley's *Mysteries of Small Houses* and Eileen Myles' *Inferno*, arguing that these poets conceptualize the autobiography as a stage upon which debates about the role of the subject in late 20th century and early 21st century play out. I am particularly interested in looking at these autobiographical practices as part of a textual network that includes these authors' poetry. In Notley, for example, the two terms become entwined under the "poetic autobiography," whereas Myles will create a textual network that encourages readers to read across their poetry and autobiography. In engaging with autobiography and autobiographical theory, these authors will generate and encourage reading practices that map on to their poetic output—my point is that, across the works I'm looking at, the two are mutually informative.

In this thesis, I use the term autobiography somewhat loosely. It is not true that the texts that I look at are conventional autobiographies; rather, they exhibit autobiographical *characteristics*. I am particularly drawing upon Philip Lejeune's schema in which he defines autobiography like so:

1. *Form of language*

- a. narrative
- b. in prose

2. *Subject treated*: individual life, story of a personality

3. *Situation of the author*: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical

4. *Position of the narrator*

- a. the narrator and the principal character are identical
- b. retrospective point of view of the narrative. (4)

Lejeune then identifies a number of closely-related genres that include nearly all these criteria except one or two: “memoirs: (2) -biography: (4a) -personal novel: (3) -autobiographical poem: (1b) -journal / diary: (4b) -self-portrait or essay: (1a and 4b)” (4). We might more accurately group *Mysteries of Small Houses*, for example, as an autobiographical poem, rather than a true autobiography. Thus, it may be more accurate to claim I am studying texts that rely heavily on autobiographical characteristics rather than those that are autobiographies proper—although, as I will explore throughout the course of this thesis, the “autobiography proper” is not itself a stable category. I think this especially true in the case of Myles who prefers to describe their work as fiction, even as their books satisfy *all* of Lejeune’s categories—a paradox which I will give more nuance to in the second chapter of this work.

I specifically look at texts by non-male writers (Notley is a woman and Myles a non-binary lesbian) because gender is one place where the Barthian paradigm begins to encounter major problems. It seems that at the time women and queer writers gain the ability to be represented at an institutional level (and by institutional, I mean accepted by presses or taught at universities), the subject/poet/etc. loses its power within the academy, an act which, to some extent, erases their contributions. And while the death of the author has a major role in critiquing the valorization of singular, artistic genius, Marjorie Perloff has shown that this idea does less to kill the notion of authorial uniqueness than displace it. With the author out of the way, the *theorist* instead adopts his position: “If genius theory is passé, if there is no such thing as unique style or authorial presence, why are these names [Adorno, Althusser, Freud, Lacan, Hegel, Nietzsche, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Ernesto Laclau, and Karl Marx] so sacred?” (Perloff 410). And as we can see from the list that Perloff cites, these theorists are overwhelmingly—if not exclusively—male.

It is also the case that reading from a Barthesian perspective—under which the author is totally erased—leads to interpretive blindspots in terms of gender (and racial) readings of texts. Susan Lanser discusses an 18th century text, *The Travels and Adventures of Mademoiselle de Richelieu*, whose anonymity—specifically scholars’ inability to identify the author’s gender—creates fundamental problems of interpretation. She cites one well-known scholar who assumes that the text is an “anti-feminist satire” and that the author is accordingly a man, while the other interprets it as a “subversive lesbian and feminist novel” written by a woman (217). In this case, knowing the author’s identity fundamentally changes the way that readers interact with the text. It is also true that, if the second were true, the text would provide insight into women’s and lesbian issues of the time. To unconsciously accept Barthes’ theory would be to ignore the foundations of feminist, queer, and black studies, which often read on the foundations of the author’s gender, even if the author’s characters themselves are not markedly queer, female, or black.

A 2020 book by Lisa Robertson, entitled *The Baudelaire Fractal*, engages this problem. The book follows a character named Hazel Brown who resembles Robertson herself—the book’s epigraph is “these things happened, but not as described”—who wakes up one day having inherited the work of Charles Baudelaire. While it seems that the content of Baudelaire’s oeuvre does not change at the textual level, Robertson portrays the shift in authorship—that is, the shift in authorship to that of a *girl*—as fundamentally altering the texts. Drawing on the shared etymological connection of author and augment (from the Latin *auctore*, “to increase”), Hazel claims: “To augment would be my work—to add the life of a girl without subtracting anything else from the composition, and then to watch the centre dissolve” (141). Here, Robertson identifies the outside-the-text information of authorial gender as fundamentally changing the

meaning of the work itself, and so “the Baudelairean universe is thus transformed by its encounter with Hazel as reader/writer” (Evans 73). I bring up Robertson because I like her idea of *augmentation*; it is possible to think of the autobiographical project, and the way it subsequently informs the reader’s relationship to the author’s poetry, as working in a similar way.

Notley, Myles, and the New York School

Both Notley and Myles are linked by their affiliation with the second generation New York School of poets. I choose to focus on writers from this school, not because the New York School has a particularly vexed or significant relationship with the question of “the death of the author,”¹ but because its second generation is roughly contemporaneous with the Language poets. At the same time that Notley and Myles were emerging in the poetry scene in the 1970s--the two knew each other well, particularly through their work at St. Mark's Poetry Project--Charles Bernstein was editing *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, a magazine he imagined “would distinguish a poetics separate to the New York school” (Vickery, qtd. in Kane 190). That said, the poets of each school knew each other and sometimes collaborated. Lyn Hejinian and Alice Notley had a decades-long correspondance with each other and admired each other's work,

¹ The New York School’s relationship to problems of self-expression and self-referentiality is a bit difficult to track. In “To Frank,” Notley seems to position Frank O’Hara as the representative of poetry and the poet that she imagines can no longer exist beginning in the 70s. While it is true that O’Hara was a magnetic personality and that his personal life often manifested in his poetry, it is not necessarily the case that O’Hara or other New York School poets were particularly interested in the stakes of self-representation à la the Confessional school. Eileen Myles, for example, called the male poets of the New York School “just as New Critical as everyone else in the fifties. They would all assert that the poetry was not about them. It’s about skimming the surface of the self” (qtd. in Nelson xxvi). On the other hand, Barbara Guest, one of the major poets of the first generation, described “all poetries as confessional” while the critic William Watkin argues that Kenneth Koch and “the New York School as a whole self-consciously exploit” “the eradication of distinctions between writing and living: “it is in the long poems of the New York School that we find this particular desire to remove the gap that articulates the difference between the real and the utterance” (Daly, Watkin 37). I tend to agree with Catherine Daly when she identifies confessional characteristics in New York School writing but notes that these characteristics are employed in a much different way: “the confession and narration of the New York School poetry is not confrontational, as in the poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, or Anne Sexton.”

Bernstein was taught by members of the first generation New York School, and indeed, there was some “fluidity and affinity” between the *women* of both movements, (Daly, Nelson xvii).²

Thus, an accurate history of 1970s poetry reveals that, as much as the Language group comes to look polemical, other groups of poets did indeed pull from their ideas and practices, concerning themselves with the instability of subjectivity in postmodernity. That said, it does seem that Eileen Myles is concerned with a critical obscuring of their own work in the zeitgeist of the Language movement. They say in a letter to Alice Notley:

Out of sheer grouchiness I’m going to the poetry in the 70s conference in Maine. I just couldn’t let them make it out that only language poetry happened. I never gave a shit about the language poetry thing since many were friends and I just didn’t think of myself as “opposed” but now the sheer clubiness of it is rewriting history by young people and I am opposed to that. (2008)

When Myles says “I just couldn’t let them make it out that only Language Poetry happened,” they refer to a critical or academic environment that *privileges* the Language poet and accordingly undervalues the work that Myles and their coterie (presumably the group of poets working around St. Mark’s Poetry Project) did at the same time. It is easy to see how the emergence of this group, and its propensity for formal experimentation, could make other forms of poetry look insignificant. So, I want to do the work that Myles talks about, that is, show the

² It was sometimes the case that writers of the Second Generation New York School were identified with Language poetry. This is especially true in the case of Bernadette Mayer—Daniel Kane identifies her as a major influence on the development of the Language school, as she introduced poststructuralist content to her workshop students, some of whom, like Bernstein, became involved in Language poetry (191). More puzzling is a rare identification of Alice Notley with Language poetics, the *New York Times*, for example, cites “Language Poet” as one of Notley’s identities (Brouwer). While it is true that Notley’s poetry is often characterized by the same kind of difficulty that emerges out of the Language group, I largely disagree with this claim. In an interview with Notley, Nina Zivancevic says: “I’ve never thought of you as a ‘Language poet.’ I’ve considered you a ‘Language being.’” And while it is true that some of her works are more impersonal and formally inventive, I want to stress that Notley’s aim to place the I back into poetic discourse in *Mysteries of Small Houses* is a clear statement against the foundational claims of the Language movement.

ways that poets responded to the critical discourse of the late 20th century without succumbing to the Language movement's most extreme quality—the utter suspicion upon the self's representation. Despite the fact that Myles doesn't see their practice as entirely oppositional to that of the Language poet, arguing that the lines between the groups have been drawn retrospectively, I do believe that Myles' desire to assert the uniqueness of their own practice in response to this critical discourse perhaps overrides their desire to show the schools were not “opposed.” In many places, I will be placing Notley and Myles in opposition to members of the Language school, but I do so mainly to show that the privileging of Language poetry has resulted in an obscuring of the kinds of formal experimentation that Notley, Myles, and their contemporaries were involved in—not out of an attempt to erase the fluidity that could exist between the schools.

The first chapter of this thesis centers around Alice Notley's 1998 collection *Mysteries of Small Houses*. Here, I examine Notley as caught between competing motivations: on the one hand, a distrust of simple narrativization that comes from post-structural theorists like Barthes and Paul de Man, but on the other, a desire to “recenter the I in poetry.” Using Notley's observations about her brother, a Vietnam War veteran, as an entrypoint, I argue that Notley is distrustful of conceptions of the self as singular and pigeonholed by narrative. At the same time, I show that Notley's lesson from these problems does not result in a decision to obscure or destabilize the self. Contrasting her model with her friend and contemporary Lyn Hejinian (a prominent Language poet) I will show that she develops a poetic autobiography that juggles between the two modes. Ultimately, I argue that her poetic autobiography enables Notley to imagine a malleable and constructed self that can be abandoned in times of crisis but is nonetheless special.

In the second chapter, I turn to Eileen Myles' decades-long autobiographical project, inaugurated by their 1994 work *Chelsea Girls* and extending to 2018's *Afterglow: a Dog Memoir*, although I focus on their 2010 book *Inferno*. Here, I track the relationship between autobiographic practice and poetic. My central argument is that Myles' autobiographical mythmaking results in a state of hypervisibility that fundamentally alters the way that readers in turn encounter their poetry. Specifically, I revise Maggie Nelson's claim that Myles' work is inherently political, showing that the political effectiveness of Myles' work depends on mediation through their mythologized persona.

In their works, neither Notley or Myles looks to be particularly anti-theoretical or anti-postmodern. As we will see, they portray selves as relational, constructed, and fictionalized. Indeed, the theoretical and poetic assumptions that render the self unproblematic appear, well, *problematic* in Notley and Myles. By moving to the terrain of autobiography, Notley and Myles do not circumvent the problems that came to define lyric; instead, they encounter a new series of obstacles relating to the self's representation.

Indeed some of the observations that come out of Barthes seem largely true; thinking that there is a one-to-one relationship between a "self" and a self expressed on paper looks naive; of course it is impossible, no matter how mimetic, to have these two things completely line up. It may even be the case that selves are in fact textual constructions, that we build them through relational processes that include the act of writing. What I instead want to argue is that these developments need not result in an air of suspicion towards the representation of the self—whatever that may be.

It is therefore not my prerogative to state that the subject returns in any stable way through this poet's autobiography, just that it becomes recentered in a way that the last 50 years

of poetic production and poststructuralist theory prevented. We are far past the point where the rational, complete, and stable subject of the Enlightenment can survive. I think that this idea is especially pronounced in the ways in which we have rethought gender in the last several decades. Thus, the question of womanhood, and its potential instability, will become a major theme throughout all these works. Neither Alice Notley nor Eileen Myles sees “female” as being an unproblematic category, and each will blur gender in various ways.

Instead, I propose that the autobiography, which places its writer-subject’s development (however disjointed or lacking closure) at the story’s center, is a way to cope with the crisis of subjectivity instantiated in the late 20th century. I am interested in seeing how each of these authors conceptualizes the role of the poet in the 21st century and what new forms of subjectivity arise from the wreckage wrought by the 20th.

“I might die,” Notley says in “To Frank,” “but maybe/ I’ll just give the perceptual framework a good whack” (24-25).

Chapter 1. (S)he not Busy Being Born: The Voice of the “I” in Alice Notley’s *Mysteries of Small Houses*

“I myself have begun to write. Surprisingly, I seem to be writing rather separate poems for the first time in a long time, and also writing about “myself”. The age I’m at seems a good one for writing about myself since it isn’t automatically attractive, it’s actually problematic—I like that...Partly I see that one thinks of herself as “she” rather than “I,” and I’d like to get past that.”

—Alice Notley, letter to Lyn Hejinian

He not busy being born is busy dying- Bob Dylan

I am standing in the bath tub
crying. Mother, mother,
who am I? -Frank O’Hara, Mayakovsky

inside my mother
i make a little fist
& then i punch her

enter another plane

walk right into it

THE ROARING BEGINS

a few hours later

you stride ashore

“WELCOME TO AMERICA!”

*

“th-there’s a l-lot of b-bastards out there!”

—William Carlos Williams

ONE MOMENT PLEASE
TO ADJUST MACHINE

*

2 a.m. in bed

says “come on out”

some one in my head

“you’ve been forgiven” —To be Born Again, Anselm Hollo

When we last encountered Alice Notley's poetic subject, it was at war. In the face of discourses surrounding the stability of the "lyric I," Notley rendered a poetic subject in a double bind: cognizant of its own problematic relationship to textuality while wanting to avoid the gunfire of a discourse that sought to annihilate it all together. In using the catastrophic language of war to describe poetic debates, Notley attempted to foreground the total loss implicit in death of the author theory. And indeed, this hyperbole lent the search for a different (or non-conformist) poetic voice a sense of gravity or even urgency.

To begin this chapter, I want to return once again to a scene of war. Not a metaphoric war, but one grounded in history: Vietnam, 1968, the year of the Tet offensive. Where over 70,000 people died, military and civilian, as a result of North Vietnamese bombardment on the South. Where journalists captured thousands of horrific photographs to send back to the United States, eroding support for the war. And where Alice Notley's brother, Albert Notley, served as a sniper, witnessed the death of 148 companions, and developed PTSD—whose long term effects drove him to suicide.

Around two-thirds through her 1998 collection *Mysteries of Small Houses*, Alice Notley includes a poem called "Sept 17 / Aug 29, '88," which is about Albert's experience in the war. In contrast to most of the poems in *Mysteries of Small Houses*, which are narrated by someone resembling Notley (more on this later), most of "Sept 17 / Aug 29, '88," is constructed through Albert's own quotes. Visiting her brother in a hospital, Notley collects his story, arranges it, and puts it down in writing, plugging in gaps as she sees fit.

Yet the telling of this story becomes problematic, as the act of recounting and narrativizing his wartime experience traps him inside his trauma, preventing him from healing. "I wonder how he can have a future," Notley says about Albert (107-108). "I wonder if he could be

the way he was—happier/ and lighter—before he started remembering, but/ I don't think so” (11-112). I will say more about this poem in the future, but it is important to note that Albert's remembrance—here, an oral practice directed towards Notley, who writes it down—and their joint attempt to turn it into narrative foregrounds issues of biographical representation that map onto Notley's own autobiographical project.

Recall that *Mysteries of Small Houses* was Alice Notley's attempt to put the “I” back into lyric poetry. And as mentioned in the introduction, the lyric terrain of the late 20th century was fraught in its relation to its authorial relationship. Autobiography thus seems to be a natural practice for Notley to turn because it generally assumes a more direct relationship between the authorial self and the self of the text. And indeed, what is perhaps the defining account of autobiography of the era, Philip Lejeune's *On Autobiography* maintains a quite simple definition of the genre: a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4).³ For Lejeune, the autobiography needs nothing more than the name of the author to align with the name of the principal character (usually a speaking “I”) for it to function as such. Lejeune also assumes that, even if the events within the autobiography are told out of order or changed for narrative purposes, that they can largely and unproblematically correspond to the events of an actual life.

That's not to say that deconstruction did not attack autobiography at all (my very citing of Paul de Man shows that there was, in fact, a deconstructionist intervention into autobiography). Still, it seems that deconstruction did not dominate autobiographical reading and practices to the extent that it did for the lyric. Few accounts of the lyric in the 1970s and the 80s, for example,

³ Although Lejeune identifies prose as being an essential part of autobiography, he does explicitly talk about the autobiographical poem—what we might define as functioning similarly.

can avoid references to the Language poets and the turn towards heavy engagement with deconstructive theory, but if we look at autobiographies within the same period, the number of important “autobiographies” that really challenge generic conventions seem minimal. The turn towards “critical autobiography” as a categorization--that is, autobiographies that challenge the relation between the self and the text--seems only to have emerged in the past decade or two.⁴ So, while de Man and other deconstructionists sought to attack the autobiography, and while writers attempted to write non-traditional autobiographical forms, these did not become the *dominant* form of autobiographical writing. This is quite unlike Srikanth Reddy’s account of poetry that describes an aesthetics of “fragmentation” as its defining feature in this period (17).

At the same time, I do not seek to dismiss these theorists altogether--Notley clearly does engage with them, as “Sept 17/ Aug 29 ’88” shows us. For Paul de Man, autobiography is not so much a genre but an overdetermined series of tropes that “may itself produce and determine the life,” in contrast to our assumption that a life produces an autobiography (69). These tropes, which attempt to foreground a sense of subjective closure that does not exist, might also point towards another object of autobiographical critiques: its relatively unchallenged embrace of narrative--that is, the attempt to yoke unrelated incidents and accordingly generate a coherent story. And while this technique is entirely common, it often puts subjects in an uncomfortable position. As Samantha Matthews argues in the Oxford Bibliography of Victorian Literature, “the overdetermined progressive narrative, by which the life story works toward the achieved “I” writing the autobiography, threatens to fix the subject in a deathly stasis”--which is the very problem that Notley foregrounds within “Sept 17/ Aug 29 ’88” (“Autobiography”).

⁴ See Di Summa-Knoop, L. (2017) ‘Critical autobiography: a new genre?’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 9(1). doi: 10.1080/20004214.2017.1358047.

Notley thus seems to be stuck between these two discourses. At the same time that she wants to preserve her own sense of self and identity, without it becoming utterly fictionalized, she is also weary of the destructive effects that narrative autobiography can have on subjectivity. Thus, I argue that these contrasting concerns form the foundation of *Mysteries of Small Houses*. I will begin this chapter with a deeper examination of “Sept 17/ Aug 29 ’88,” foregrounding certain tensions that emerge among memory, narrativization, and auto/biographical writing in the text. Then, I will introduce the Language poet Lyn Hejinian’s 1980 text *My Life* as an exemplary postmodern autobiography, arguing that, although it “resolves” certain problems of the genre, its impersonal and fragmented characteristics are unappealing to Notley, who aims to preserve, rather than obscure, the self. I will end with Notley’s own intervention into the autobiographical genre, claiming more specifically that Notley advocates for a malleable “I” that can be reappropriated and rebranded in times of crisis. It is not necessarily narrative that is problematic in Notley, it is the idea that we can be stuck inside one story. And when Notley comes to this realization, she emerges with a different kind of lyric voice.

War Story

“Sept 17 / Aug 29, ’88,” is an odd passage, unlike many other poems in *Mysteries of Small Houses*. While most of the collection is linguistically experimental, this one is simple and clear. Furthermore, the violent and catastrophic force of war is to some extent out of place in a collection that focuses heavily on the private self, especially within domestic environments. Yet at the same time, the poem’s inclusion is necessary because the setting of war—with such high stakes—presents us with subjectivity stretched to its extreme, providing Notley with an

opportunity to explore the self in ways more startling than only self-examination would afford her. The poem begins in a diaristic manner:

We get out of the car and I think
 I see him, he waves, coming from a woods.
 Looks like our dad, shape of head and current
 Slenderness; mustache, is wearing glasses.
 Hugs (1-5).

Not only does Notley title the poem diaristically (“Sept 17 / Aug 29, ’88”), but she uses a kind of shorthand that we might associate with personal, or private, writing in this passage. Many of the sentences on the first page of this poem are incomplete, with missing subjects and, occasionally, verbs. Yet these phrases do not at all resemble the fragmented form of writing that is possible in poetry, and indeed which sometimes appears in other Notley poems. The sentences are in no way opaque, and there are clearly rules to how this shorthand’s syntax operates. Notley arranges the sentences with the minimal amount of information necessary to convey their meaning. Although the phrase “Looks like our dad,” lacks the necessary subject to be a complete sentence, it still remains legible, clearly picking up the “he” of the previous sentence as its invisible subject. In sentences where the subject remains the same as in its predecessor, Notley prefers to remove it rather than insert a pronoun. Thus, where we might expect to see pronouns, we encounter lacunae instead. And where the verbs “is” or “has” might appear, Notley often omits them.

Including such characteristics—that is, the absence of connectives, the dropping of subjects, and the omission of certain linking verbs—conveys a sense of spontaneity in Notley’s writing. I say this kind of writing is diaristic because it conveys impressions quickly and with the minimum amount of information necessary for legibility, rather than conforming to grammatical

conventions expected from a reading public. It is possible to view this style, in its seeming spontaneity, as being a somehow more *authentic* expression because it conveys impressions as they arise, rather than as reconstructed from memory. And indeed, it is through the process of remembering and attempting to make such memories coherent that autobiography takes on its narrativized, and as Paul L. Jay (drawing on Roland Barthes) would argue, less authentic qualities: “narrative, which would transform this pattern into a chronological one, would betray the very texture of the “life” it would be seeking to evoke” (1053).

But Notley does not do what we might expect her to do with the diaristic form—she engages in a process of deconstruction herself when she shows that diary, rather than being a “purer” form of expression, proves to be merely a choice among other formal choices. Consider the title of the poem: “Sept 17 / Aug 29, ’88.” Although nothing in the poem indicates that the action unfolds on two different days, the title indicates that the writing process did, hence revealing a gap between the action *as it happened* and the writing of said action. Second, we should note the temporal arrangement of these dates. *Mysteries of Small Houses* has, up until this point presented its information more or less linearly. Alice Notley grows up in her childhood home, goes to school to become a poet, falls in love, has children, and copes with loss—in that order. Yet, by placing September 17 *before* August 29 in the title, Notley draws attention to the fact that she is involved, to some extent, in acts of narrative construction and the rearrangement of memory. Notley is thus not, in fact, conveying impressions as they arise, but engaging in a careful process of narrativization. And it is through this process that “Albert” comes to being as a character; he seems to emerge as merely a *formal* construction.

Of course, these details are not immediately self-evident. Notley’s engagement with narrativization is much stronger in the next stanza of the poem, where, based upon conversations

she has with her brother, she narrates his experience in Vietnam. While many of Notley's poems work against normative syntactical paradigms, this passage in the poem is unique for its prosaicness, containing transitions, mostly complete sentences, and regular syntax:

Albert hears their screams and knows
everyone is frying from white phosphorus;
he goes for the escape hatch on the bottom, but
it won't open, for long long seconds.
Finally he gets out, everyone else is dead of
Course (34-39).

It is easy for us to encounter a passage like this and take its simplicity for granted, assuming that the events are described as they occurred. Yet, placed next to the more spontaneous-sounding, diaristic passage, this story appears less organically. Additionally, Notley draws attention to the fact that Albert's experience is mediated through her language. In the beginning of the poem, she mentions that she has two conversations with her brother: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. But as she introduces his story she states "I'll fuse them" (18). Even the direct quotations provided by Albert prove not to arise organically, but are carefully arranged in order to help his story cohere.

To say that "Notley narrativizes" is hardly a groundbreaking statement--many writers do this. What is unique about this poem is that Notley draws attention to the very fact of her narrativization. The jump between what appears to be spontaneous and what is more carefully plotted, coupled with the admission that she "fuse[s]" Albert's oral stories, shows that her process is not at all spontaneous, nor are her brother's remarks.

Memory is especially implicated in this process of crystallizing Albert, becoming a problematic term within this poem:

I love my brother so much this visiting day, but wonder
if he doesn't know too much to live. He's been
remembering and remembering—the therapists want him
to remember even more, but he doesn't want to, he wants to
go home and see his kids. I wonder how he can have a future.

...

I wonder if he could be the way he was—happier and
Lighter—before he started remembering, but
I don't think so. He emanates too much knowledge, power;
His self is huge, bigger than any I've witnessed.
His boundaries are too painful and small:
they keep him where he remembers, they keep his
knowledge concentrated, personal (103-108, 110-116).

I am particularly struck by Notley's statement that Albert was "happier and lighter" "before he started remembering": it is not the war that made him unhappy and burdened, it is the constant remembering of it. If we consider the verbal reporting that Albert gives to Notley as a form of life writing—an autobiography within an autobiography—Mary Jane Kehily's statement is largely true here: "autobiographical writing involves not only recalling the past, but the very act of *recreating* the past in an attempt to discover and *invent* the self" (29). But while Kehily's word "invent" carries a positive connotation—a sense of possibility—I would propose a more negative word in this case. Through the process of recalling the same incidents over and over again,

Albert doesn't so much invent as *pigeonhole* himself to be a soldier and a victim. Memory is thus limiting, pushing Albert into a nearly inescapable loop: it makes his "boundaries" "painful and small" at the same time that these same boundaries "keep him where he remembers," bringing him back to the place where he started (Notley 114-115). Essentially, Albert as we know him solidifies as a result of repeatedly remembering and turning those memories into a narrative.

I should also note that Notley, in stitching together Albert's words, and hence, constructing her own narrative of Albert, reproduces an act of violence against him, solidifying and arranging these memories in a way that prevents him from existing outside of the violence of war. Narrativizing is thus far from an innocent act—Albert's only "escape" from this self proves to be through suicide.

Lyn Hejinian and the Language Autobiography

In this poem, Notley foregrounds two ideas for us: 1. That narrativization is a textual process by which our subjectivities crystallize and 2. This crystallization of the self is limiting, and in some cases, dangerous. Such observations might indeed align her project with one of the various postmodern critiques of autobiography, which begin to proliferate at the end of the 20th century. Perhaps the most lauded among these is Lyn Hejinian's text *My Life*, which has been described as "Language writing's masterpiece." But compare *Mysteries of Small Houses* to other works of postmodern autobiography, and Notley does not exactly seem to fit in.

In 1980, Lyn Hejinian published the first edition of her "autobiography" *My Life*. Writing against autobiographical generic assumptions, Hejinian crafts a rather unconventional autobiography characterized by non sequiturs, highly formal structure, and anti-chronological temporal arrangement. Hejinian initially wrote the book with 37 chapters each with 37 sentences,

to reflect her age at the time of its writing. Eight years later, she updated *My Life* to include 45 chapters with 45 sentences each, put in “arbitrarily.” For Kornelia Freitag, Hejinian’s ability to revise the text in such a way “proves that... writing is not a closed reasoning process but very much a matter of arrangement and rearrangement of textual structure” (317). Such a technique, of course, prizes this “textual structure,” over content; representation, for Hejinian, comes as a secondary concern, if at all.

And indeed, this expansion of *My Life* is only possible because the existing structure of the book depends so little on ideas like linearity or coherency. Each sentence in *My Life* stands more or less unrelated to the sentence that precedes or follows it (even if these sentences occasionally present vague contours of autobiography, such as references to childhood, grandparents, and poetry):

“Are we not all anorexic? In weather, only lozenges. They differ. Meanwhile I live within a few blocks of my childhood and yet they evoke nothing...A reference to Thanatos as that which lacks the urge to hear. (81).

The meaning of the work would not necessarily change if Hejinian rearranged the sentences or introduced new information in between them. Nor would the introduction of new sentences interrupt the unity, pacing, or coherency of the work, since none of these terms seem to carry much weight for Hejinian. It would be much more difficult to perform the same technique if, for example, I decided to insert eight more sentences on each page of this essay or to arrange the sentences in alignment with my age. My incentive to write so that each sentence ultimately builds towards the same argument would conflict with the demands of such formal restraints. Hejinian appears to write without an end—or beginning, for that matter—in sight. Lacking “a definite beginning and end...the text rejects closure,” says Freitag (*Cultural Criticism* 318).

Indeed, the book would be almost unrecognizable as an autobiography were it not for textual clues that Hejinian sutures between its chapters. One of the most recognizable characteristics of *My Life* is Hejinian's tendency to repeat phrases, such as "a pause, a rose, and something on paper" (a statement that is also nearly ubiquitous in criticism on *My Life*),⁵ "what was that meaning hung from that depend," and "as for we who love to be astonished." On one level, these repeated structures demonstrate the fundamental mutability of signs, the ways in which the meaning of each phrase changes depending on its surroundings (which is, I should note, also not a bad description for how *self* functions in the text). But it is also possible to imagine that these repetitions may also replace the function of "voice" in Hejinian. ("The dismissal of voice," as Marjorie Perloff argues, is "perhaps *the* cardinal principle of American Language poetics") (405). These sentences are some of the only markers that prevent the book from being completely random; they remind us that there is a sense of, however small, continuity between the different segments of the book—and thus, a sense that there is something that could be thought of as "Lyn Hejinian."

Perhaps we might describe Hejinian (the poet/author/self) as only a *signature* in the text. Wanting a term to account for the distinctiveness of individual writers from others, without overrepresenting the role or will of the author, Marjorie Perloff proposes the term "signature," which is essentially any kind of distinguishing stylistic mark, to describe the way in which one can differentiate a writer from another in the context of Language writing. For Perloff, the signature functions as a compromise; on the one hand it enables her to retain the "deauthorized" background of Language Poetry, at the same time that requires her to recuperate a term that is

⁵ Kornelia Freitag, for example, titles one essay on Hejinian "'A Pause, a Rose, Something on Paper': Autobiography as Language Writing in Lyn Hejinian's 'My Life.'" Juliana Sphar has an extended analysis where she claims the phrase echoes Gertrude Stein's "rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" and thus shows that "the effect of the repetition is to remind the reader of the multiple possibilities for meaning and the impossibility of claiming authority over any word" (150). Hillary Clark reads its repetition as a means of creating "semantic echoes" (318).

viewed as “suspect in poststructuralist theory” (413, 414). In her analysis of Language poets like Leslie Scalapino and Ron Silliman, Perloff proposes that certain syntactical and stylistic qualities can sufficiently mark a text as ‘by Ron Silliman’ or ‘by Leslie Scalapino’ without injecting an equivalent authority. So for Lyn Hejinian, repeated phrases that carry through the text act as a *signature* or *mark* of Lyn Hejinian, at the same time that they do not directly *refer* back to her.

Because of these details, many critics consider *My Life* to be emblematic of poststructuralist interventions into autobiography, “correcting” the theoretical problems raised by the standard autobiography: “The shardlike autobiographical subject that Hejinian proposes offers a solution to the troubling conundrums that haunt the critical discourse of autobiography,” claims Juliana Spahr (146). For Hilary Clark, *My Life* is a more “authentic” index of the genre. Finding mnemonic patterns among the book’s sentences, she argues that Hejinian portrays a more “realistic” way of remembering than narrativization: “My Life is arguably closer to the springs of memory, to the way we truly remember, than is autobiography based on careful narrative shaping and selection” (332). Even Kornelia Freitag, who cautions against the “overrat[ing]” of Hejinian’s style, as well as the idea that *My Life* is “more “true,” “normal” or even “canonical” than other autobiographies” valorizes the text (“Autobiography as Language Writing,” 217). Freitag supports Hejinian’s own claim that her style of writing “invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader, and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies,” (Hejinian qtd. in “Autobiography as Language Writing” 216). Such an analysis rests upon a kind of overly-heroic formulation in which the fragmented form or writing apparent in *My Life* acts as a major challenge to power structures. But the flaws in this reasoning become apparent by Spahr’s

begrudging admission, at the end of her essay on Hejinian, that “I cannot...provide empirical evidence of a concrete social change stemming from a reader-centered work” (155).

Still, it might be natural to compare Hejinian’s and Notley’s projects because both use poetic forms to posit alternatives to traditional autobiographical modes of representation.

Mysteries of Small Houses reformulates the autobiographical narrative through poetic techniques. The collection, though arranged linearly and following the contours of Notley’s life, is entirely comprised of individual poems which do not always have clear relation to each other. Furthermore, these poems are often experimental in form and employ difficult language: “in the Great American/ poem anything/ can’t you, can’t you/ not be an/ American be in and out of/ species” starts one of them (“Go in and out the Window” 1-6). Using non-linear structures and poetic language, Hejinian and Notley work against narrativization in autobiographies and challenge its production of a unified subject. And in playing between genres (lyric and autobiography), Notley, like Hejinian, draws attention to the idea that “every ‘fact of life’ in the autobiographical text has to be mediated not only by language, but, additionally, by generic choices” (“Autobiography as Language Writing” 214). Yet at the same time that Notley works within a postmodern autobiographical mode, she seems to be deeply critical of many of the practices that emerge among her contemporaries, making fun of the Language poets and their aesthetics. She often views them with a sense of comic amusement, arriving “onto their Gilligan’s island”--a reference that not only casts the school (known for its theoretical seriousness) as clownish but also as a literary dead end (the characters of the slapstick comedy never make it off the island) (“The Year of the Premonitory Dream That Ted and Steve Left Me,” 18).

The poem “Choosing Styles–1972” finds Notley stuck in between a classic poetic structure and the Language model, neither of which she finds appealing. She seems to parody the latter when she says,

Choose sometimes more for beauty or for clarity
 or for some arbitrary reason—no reason I know go
 against word order • firstling you
 by dint of me, clean, sings up in the clerestory
 of the donned doom show Worthless filthy daughterous
 contagion in the durable shell
 take the horse nearest the door (15-21).

This section of the poem is clearly imitative of the Language style, with its difficult vocabulary and “go[ing] against word order.” Although the poem is quite different from what we’ve seen from Hejinian, it does resemble an “open system” in which the parts of the poem are more or less interchangeable. Its meaning does not emerge from a linear progression of clauses: mix the words around, and the poem’s sense would not change much. The poem takes on its satirical qualities by extremes of Language poetry, using difficult/obscure words, such as “firstling,” “daughterous,” and “clerestory,” and heavy consonance and assonance (clean and *cl*erestory, donned doomed, me/clean/sing horse/door) that privilege sound over meaning. Language poetry’s supposed difficulty arises because it expects the reader to construct meaning out of the text, and it would be possible to do that with “Choosing Styles–1972” noting, for example, the gendered force of “daughterous” and its linkage to words indicating filth, contagion, and animality. Yet Notley’s statement that she chooses for “no reason I know” conveys a sense of

nonchalance or even aloofness about the text's purported difficulty that contrasts with the erudition and theoretical grounding of the Language poets.

As the poem progresses, Notley shakes off this style, rejecting a “way to write right” (31). The playful mocking of the Language poets and other kinds of poetic establishment transforms into a burst of anger: “mouthmouthed I mean foulmouthed motherfucking turds you are/shit in the wind, frail shit blown back...” (32, 33). I am struck, of course, by the impropriety of the language, as well as the speaker’s “tripping” over her words, both of which convey a lack of linguistic control. The lines abandon the carefulness seen elsewhere in Notley’s poetry, as the emotion overwhelms her capacity for clear or proper expression (we even watch as the speaker corrects her mistake from “mouthmouthed” to “foulmouthed”). And of course, this exaggerated and heightened sense of emotion contrasts with the cold formalism of Language poetry.

The tension explored here (affective spontaneity vs. opaque formalism) is quite similar to a conflict that Jameson stages in his essay “Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capital.” For Jameson, postmodern aesthetics (which, we should remember, are most strongly articulated by the Language poets à la Bernstein), are characterized by a “waning of affect.” (61).⁶ In a “flat” or “surface” aesthetic object, which is how he describes the aesthetic object in the wake of deconstructive theory that erases the inside/outside binary, there is no interiority from which to project “affects.” Strong affective expressions are thus usually contrary to postmodern aesthetic objects:

The very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and the outside, of the wordless

⁶ Jameson, I should note, does not necessarily refer to affect as the field of affect studies does. As Thomas A. Laughlin notes: “in 1984, when Jameson first theorized the ‘waning of affect,’ there was not yet a whole theoretical discourse associated with the word, which for many of its proponents turns on a terminological distinction between the emotions (Jameson’s ‘named emotions’) and affects proper, now understood as unnamable, pre-cognitive bodily ‘intensities.’” I use Jameson’s definition of affect because I refer to merely the expression of emotions. Furthermore, the relationship between affect studies and poststructuralism is still debated and beyond the scope of this thesis.

pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that ‘emotion’ is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling (61).

Notley’s “tripping over herself” does exactly this. It necessarily conveys depth, to use Jameson’s terminology, because, with its uncharacteristically strong language and tongue-twisters, it acts as that kind of “desperate communication” that signifies “the outward dramatization of inward feeling.” Of course, this is only a small portion of a small poem in Notley, but my point is that Notley is capable of strong affective pronouncements. This quality makes *Mysteries of Small Houses* quite different from *My Life* with its “open” system of textuality, in which the death of a parent does not emerge as any more powerful than a day at school because all of these events have been equalized under Hejinian’s formal constraints.

And it is through the articulation of this emotion that the poem’s “I” emerges strongly. Here is how the rest of the passage reads: “mouthmouthed I mean foulmouthed motherfucking turds you are/shit in the wind, frail shit blown back *and I/ am onstage*” (32-34, emphasis my own). The enjambment in this final line is remarkable. With the string of pejoratives, with this sudden outburst of anger and loss of control, Notley grabs our attention and then pauses, before letting her “I” come out like a star from the wings. So while Hejinian obscures the self behind her book’s structure, Notley places the “I” front and center, demanding us to look at it.

The Language autobiography, as practiced by Lyn Hejinan thus proves to be an inadequate response to the problems generated by autobiography. While it attempts to resolve critiques of memory, narrative, and stable subjecthood, it results in a subject so fragmented that it is almost illegible. We thus find Notley in a double bind, pulled between what is, on the one hand, an autobiographical mode that easily assumes a too natural relationship between a static

and *a priori* self and its representation on paper, and one in which the subject disappears completely. Yet there must be an approach that can reconcile these two poles. Is there a way to reject the self as coherent and uniform without the author becoming completely fragmented?

Bildung Houses

In order to answer this question, I want to take a brief detour into the house. The house is a common (and obvious) motif in the collection, as its title indicates, and its relation to selfhood and subjectivity appears early in the collection. In the first poem, the house acts as an anchor to Notley, transforming her from incoherent and unmoored in time to a more grounded subject: “perfect’s here from ever all along and if it doesn’t say it’s right it’s right and I/ am from then now Alley House I am/ and get scared till I *am* I” (“Would Want to be in my Wildlife” 11-13). While the sentence first presents us with an unclear succession of pronouns and a disoriented subject (situated in a temporally formless state “from ever all along,” both “then,” and “now”) the introduction of the Alley House seems to allow a more solid I to emerge, culminating in the declaration “I am I.” In the next poem, “House of Self,” this relationship between the house and subjectivity becomes even more clear. The poem begins with a subject who seems confused about their positionality in time and space (“where or what was I once?”) (5). Yet as they explore and become acquainted with the space (establishing what we might think of as a sense of home), their–her–boundaries become more clearly defined and she learns to recognize herself: “I am/what I asked for/I’m speaking/like this” (71-75). But at the same time that Notley construes her subjectivity to her sense of place, it is also possible to imagine that the house functions on a deeper metaphorical level, as the title “House of Self” implies. In an interview on *Mysteries of*

Small Houses, Alice Notley tells the writer CA Conrad about her unusual writing process, which required her to enter her childhood home that she viewed as her “essential self”:

“To enter the writing of a particular poem in *Mysteries*, I first had to enter one particular house while in trance. This was the alley house, the house I lived in in Needles when I was four. I would go into a trance, walk--in my mind--up the few front stairs of that house and enter it. When I was in that house, I could go from there to any other time or house in my past that I wanted. But the key to entering into other times was that time, that house, because it represented my essential self. The part about using past styles wasn't as exact as you suggest. I wanted to resurrect past styles, but the style of a poem isn't exactly the style I was using in the year or years the poem's about” (“a conversation with ALICE NOTLEY on trance, tarot, and poetry”).

Perhaps Notley's declaration of an “essential self” might be surprising here, as I have attempted to show her as skeptical towards claims of an inherent subjectivity. (In “Sept 17/ Aug 29”, for example, it emerges as a product of narrativization.) But let us consider one of the contradictions that emerges in this passage. Yes, Notley claims the house as a representation of an “essential” (and hence, singular) self. But she also locates—consciously or not—this representation *in the past*: “it *represented* my essential self.” In using the past tense, Notley denies that this self is ever present; perhaps at one point, the house at Needles represented her essential self, but it does not anymore. And in fact, even if the Needles house seemed important to Notley's writing process, I want to reject Notley's claim that it is somehow more “essential” to the collection as a whole. In fact, the text introduces us to a number of environments (as Notley indicates), which similarly seem core to the poet at different points in the text: 101 St. Mark's Place in New York, Diversey St. in Chicago, and an apartment in Paris.

Notley's continual movement implies something about her model of subjectivity, which seems to solve both problems she is stuck between: she imagines the self as iterable. What I mean by that is that Notley can vacate and rebuild her subjectivity in times of crisis, changing its fundamental characteristics, even as we can come to recognize these different "selves" under the sign of "Alice Notley"--or more simply, under the sign of "I."

This idea, of course, is not immediately obvious to Notley--in fact, it takes her most of the collection to arrive at this realization. It is important to engage with the *form* of *Mysteries of Small Houses*, tracking it more specifically as Bildung- or Künstlerroman in that it follows Notley's development over a lifetime. Although I have already implied this through my engagement with *Mysteries of Small Houses* as autobiography, I want to stress that we must read Notley's book, not as a collection of self-sufficient poems (even though the poems could be read on their own), but as a linear story that tracks the poet's progress. The central arc in *Mysteries of Small Houses* revolves around the question of the "I" and how to imagine subjectivity in the wake of multiple challenges: on the one hand, a discourse that seeks to unravel the self and render it incoherent (Hejninian problem) but on the other, a recognition that stable identity is entrapping (Albert problem). I thus seek to track the development of Notley's conception of selfhood in *Mysteries of Small Houses*, which begins with an "essential" foundation, but is elaborated upon and shaped by tensions and relations between others--including her relationship to individuals, spaces, and to language and writing. Specifically, I want to track three main stages of selfhood in *Mysteries of Small Houses*: 1. "I" as singular. 2. "I" as expansive and 3. "I" as malleable.

Early poems in the collection seem to insist upon a core or essential self that can be expressed through language, albeit with some difficulty. The phrase "I *am* I," for example,

implies that there is an essential quality to selfhood. As a reflexive statement sutured by a form of “be,” the phrase is not characterized by the language of becoming or construction, but of ontology (“Wildlife,” 13). In her early poems, Notley consistently envisions a possibility for the self that exists outside of language—even if it is difficult to find the language with which to express that self. In her poem “Experience,” she states:

So glad I don’t have to write
in the styles of the poetries I was taught
they were beautiful and unlike me
positing a formal, stylized woman (45-48).

This stanza acts as a response to an idea that selves are essentially products of forms. If we subscribe to the belief that selves are produced through writing (as the Language poets do), Notley’s comments make little sense. She clearly envisions a gap between the “formal, stylized woman” who appears on page and her own self. The product that appears on the page is *not* Notley, and hence, she seems to reject a notion that *scribo, ergo sum*. Instead, the relationship between writing and the self is more classically mimetic. In saying that “[I’m] So glad I don’t have to write” in styles “unlike *me*,” Notley implies that poetry should aim to represent a self that exists *prior* to writing. All of this is to say that it is clear Notley imagines a “me” that exists outside the text, and that it is possible to convey this “me” in writing—or at least something “like” me. In fact, I think “like” is an apt word to describe how Notley envisions the relationship between the self on and off paper. It may be impossible to put “Alice Notley” on the page, yet she still sees mimetic resemblance as possible, and it is her goal in the early poems to find a language with which she can do this.

One of the biggest blows to Notley's view of the self as stable, coherent, and reproducible in writing comes from her pregnancy, which forces her to reckon with the idea that her subjectivity may need to be shared. Following a series of poems in which Notley repeatedly describes pregnancy as disorienting and alienating, Notley comes to what I see as the second major development in her self-construction: recognition of the "I" as expansive.

In "Not Child," pregnancy places Notley in a state of temporal and spatial disorientation. In the beginning of the poem, Notley's "I" disappears, resulting in an awkward, subjectless construction: "Can't today, am not" (1). She continues to present herself as ungrounded and in crisis: "life's unhinged and blowing round me/clouds and tatters," she announces at the beginning of the poem, and at the end "Chicago or Paris, am I? New York,/San Francisco,/Where's the most distorted being/I've ever been?" (3, 4, 59-62). Notley loses her footing both temporally and spatially—the various places that emerge in *Mysteries of Small Houses* blend together. Her use of the interrogative pronoun "where" also conveys this disorientation; while we might expect the adjective "disoriented" to go with the more ontological "what," (hence describing the speaker) Notley connects "disoriented" to "where" (thus modifying place).

I am particularly interested in the spatial dimensions that emerge in this poem. When Notley announces her pregnancy, she declares "I can't even drive, pregnant I," a chiasmic structure that she repeats with "I've allowed burning inside me, I" (7, 52). It is significant that the information that appears between the I in each instance refers to Notley's interiority—first, with pregnancy, next with the "burning inside me." In each instance, we see the pronoun "I" function not unlike a skin, vessel, or frame. In fact, pregnancy is a particularly powerful idiom because it is essentially a physical manifestation of the phenomenological ideas Notley will later

explore, as pregnancy renders physical the idea that a person's subjectivity can be multiple. But at this stage in her development, Notley cannot quite incorporate these other subjectivities into her person. In fact, the "I" that we encounter in the poem places Notley in the position of being the skin or the house of another's birth, not the core self on the inside.

This sense of *hollowness* that emerges in "Not Child," seems to engulf the speaker of "A Baby is Born Out of a White Owl's Forehead," obliterating her very sense of identity. If the "I" of "Not Child," still existed as a skin, it becomes entirely alien in the following poem. From its very title, the poem casts motherhood as intensely depersonalizing; its mythic language obscures Notley as an individual and replaces her with a more universal feminine signifier (with its allusion to a mythological goddess). At the same time, Notley's interpellation of Minerva's parthenogenetic birth story (in which the goddess springs out of Jupiter's forehead) erases the maternal altogether. (Yet I would like to note that, although she obscures the mother, she also erases the paternal male Jupiter from the story, in perhaps a more feminist gesture.) The passive voice here is also noteworthy; Notley does not give birth, her baby is born. Notley further emphasizes this sense of depersonalization in the poem through her description of her son's birth as a process of "obliter[ation]" "undo[ing]," and "unbirth" for herself (34, 41, 43). As a result, Notley becomes completely alien to herself, rendered not as "I" but as an object, becoming, at one point, merely a "woman in the photo" (35). The poem ends with Notley feeling a profound sense of emptiness: "for two years, there's no me here" (57).

Pregnancy and childbirth clearly throw Notley's subjectivity into crisis. The anticipation and demands of motherhood force Notley to change her relationship to her selfhood. While she had once been autonomous (or *felt* autonomous), the birth of her son places her in a symbiotic relationship with another being, and she is not immediately able to cope with this change. In the

process of becoming a mother, Notley's relationship to herself and language dissolves. As in the very first pages of *Mysteries of Small Houses*, Notley once again finds herself unmoored in time and place, and she loses grip on the "I" that she had begun to wield with more comfort. Notley feels that "the transition to motherhood can therefore feel like a transition to chaos," and experiences everything as "a morass of half-meaning in which the mother can discern no coherent meaning or pattern,"--ideas which she convincingly renders linguistically (Stone). Pregnancy and motherhood seem to cause such a sense of disorientation because they force a person to reconcile with another individual who is bound to them for food, nurturing, and support. Notley's poems express the idea that "to mother and relate to her child from a maternal position, the mother must re-inhabit the realm of bodily intimacy and autonomy" in contrast to being "an autonomous agent" (Stone).

The kind of disorientation that pregnancy lends Notley carries on to other parts of her life. Pregnancy forces Notley to reckon with the idea that her subjectivity is not entirely independent and may indeed be a product of relations with other beings, people, and even things. In her poem "They Cut Out Her Eye and Now She Doesn't Know If It's Real," which directly follows the sequence of poems on motherhood, Notley comes to realize how her self relates to ideas and objects around her--and how these objects in turn shape and change her subjectivity. The poem's very title conveys Notley's budding skepticism in the self as "real," as she plays on the homophonic resonances between "eye," and "I;" read aloud, it is possible to hear "they cut out her "I" and now she doesn't know if it's real," a statement that implies self-doubt in subjectivity itself. While earlier poems in the collection showed Notley forming her identity around books (with a particular interest in stories of muses), this same idea becomes problematic in this poem because it requires Notley to confront the mutability of the self. She describes

herself as “Afraid of movies and books/Open to all their quackery,” sensations which emerge from the fact that this media passively becomes incorporated into her subjectivity: I’d/seen a ghoulish movie/and changed/charged with fear” (18-22). And later: “in those days art could be dangerous//no this was real fear” (29-30).

“They Cut Out Her Eye and Now She Doesn’t Know If It’s Real,” has an exaggerated position towards questions of subjectivity, portraying the idea of relational selfhood with mock-horror. The second stage of Notley’s self-odessey reaches its telos when Notley comes to acknowledge this shared sense of subjectivity to be important. In part, Notley’s acceptance comes from the fact that she can (perhaps paradoxically) recognize both herself and her children as existing *apart* from each other at the same time that their relationships among each other are co-constitutive. In “The Howling Saint T-Shirt,” The beginning of the poem is filled with Notley’s reflections on her children growing apart from her: “they bear no relation to yourself,” she says and notes that “they’re true in their separate houses” (7 14). At the same time, she claims that they are “like me,” and “I need their words for my poem/to speak for a house we make together” (24, 26-27). We thus encounter a reversal here of the previous dynamic between individuality and collective identity inherent in motherhood. While Notley had previously feared the loss of her own subjectivity, she now yearns for instances where she can enter a more intersubjective experience with her children.

Here, Notley recognizes a sense of, if not intersubjectivity, then a kind of self-multiplicity activated through language. She wants to use their words for her poems, but also claims that this act is “contrary to poetry” (28). Is it possible to read this as “contrary to [existing forms of] poetry,”? And hence imagine that Notley’s acceptance of her expanded subjectivity is tied to her desire for new poetic avenues? If we read the poem this way, we find that in sacrificing part of

her individuality, Notley effectively expands the capacities of a poetic lyric voice. I largely read this phenomenon in relation to a line of scholarship that writes about Notley's lyric "I" as being expansive. Amy Robbins states that Notley's self is "[comprised] of various moments of relational exchange, rather than of intrinsic psychic content" and that "poems of *Mysteries of Small Houses* work...through their continual investigation and analysis of Notley's self as constituted by her found communities" (83). Elline Lipkin goes a step beyond Robbins to argue that Notley adopts a "shifting or permeable 'I' that can encompass the other subjectivities in the room" (113). This statement generally offers us a claim about a different kind of lyric voice that extends beyond what the genre's traditional boundaries. But I am also interested in it for how it spatializes the lyric voice—in Lipkin's words, the I functions like an architectural structure which can "house" multiple subjectivities.

But this realization that the self is relational (or "inclusive" as Lipkin would claim) does not necessarily solve all the problems of subjectivity that Notley seeks to address, nor is the section on pregnancy the only place in which Notley finds her subjectivity in crisis—which brings me to the third stage in Notley's development: self as malleable. When her husband Ted is dying, Notley once again finds her conception of the self shattered. As I have shown, the second stage of Notley's self-development resulted in her incorporation of other individuals into her own subjectivity. This was as true for her husband, Ted, as much as it was for her children. Confronted with Ted's death, Notley experiences another crisis of the self, noting that Ted was "embedded in certain ways self to self with me" and asks "how will we extricate each other, to exist as separate essences?" ("How We Spent the Last Year of His Life" 5-6). After Ted's death, the speaker claims that "pieces of myself are hacked away" and she feels herself "emptied," ("I—Towards a Definition" 10, "II—The Person That You Were Will Be Replaced" 43). And it is

not only Ted's death that places Notley in this state—in the last third of the collection, Alice's father, brother, and second husband also die, bringing about similar effects.

Faced with the idea of becoming totally empty, Notley must be willing to abandon the identity that is dependent on Ted and actively build a new one. I think, then, that this malleability helps Notley respond to trauma, or potential trauma. Not only does it prevent her from feeling empty, it also prevents her from becoming defined by her grief. As always, let us return to the problem of Albert, who becomes entrapped by his constant inhabitation of the same story. For Albert, it is the repeated reinforcement of his identity as soldier and victim that prevents him from escaping his trauma, as it becomes worked into his psyche as a fundamental part of his subjectivity. Notley's ability to construct herself in relation to other people, places, and things, and most importantly her ability to *change* her subjectivity and *reorient* herself in times of change and crisis enables her to maintain a sense of subjectivity, rather than becoming trapped in a role of grieving widow.

This reworking of the self is particularly activated through writing. Notley has consistently negotiated the tensions between a priori identities and identities as textual constructions. In early poems, Notley rejects the notion that the self is merely a formal problem of language, positing instead that she imagines an a priori self that can be mimetically represented on paper. Yet, after Ted's death, she finds the ability to create and reinvent herself through language to be liberating. In the poem "Point of Fidelity," Notley uses writing as a means of coping with Ted's recent death. Three pages into the poem, she introduces a poem within a poem:

Poem

This death is Egyptian

I wear an Egyptian dress
 with black horizontal stripes
 you even say “this dress is Egyptian”
 when I perform your last rites
 sprinkling you with drops of gin & tonic
 and saying “May the 14 pieces of Osiris be joined together”
 We laugh though you’ll die the next day
 Eleven years later I wonder
 at using such a fiction, a fetish of Egyptian
 exactly to be there, that moment (56-69).

The poem begins with a standard lyric configuration: an “I” speaking to a “you.” In fact, the such a standard convention is relatively uncharacteristic for Notley, as she wields this “I” in a much less problematic manner than we see in other poems in *Mysteries of Small Houses*. While we have previously seen her avoid or delay its usage, she easily and unambiguously employs the pronoun here. At the same time, in locating herself in ancient Egypt, Notley places in a time so foreign that she (the speaker) cannot be construed as having a one-to-one relationship to an *a priori* Notley. The Egyptian Notley is a textual effect, a subject that Notley herself dreams up and commits to paper. Notley, furthermore, draws our attention to the fact of her writing at the end of the section, where she says “eleven years later,” thus instantiating a gap between action (as it may have occurred) and the writing of it. The poem ends with a metatextual reflection that gestures towards Notley’s fictionalization: “I wonder/at using such a fiction.”

But I am also interested in why it seems that this “fiction” is what enables her to access the past, “exactly to be there, that moment.” Again, I think this device has something to do with

the Albert poem. The self-conscious fictionalization creates a distance between Notley and the memory, it keeps Notley's boundaries wide where Albert's are small. So, by transporting her speaker to a different time period, she allows herself to remember and honor her husband while essentially *removing* her from the story. An "I" exists within this poem, but it is clearly a stylized Notley, not necessarily the "pure" one. So is this where we arrive? After all of her insistence upon a core and real self, we come to learn that the self in Notley, is indeed merely textual and relational?

Yes and no.

When Notley set out to write *Mysteries of Small Houses*, she insisted on representing a core self in her work. ("I'm not really trying to talk about any everyday or anecdotal myself, I'm looking for a ground myself not socialized or reflecting," she says in a letter to Lyn Hejinian). I want to pause to examine where Notley's belief in a "ground myself" comes from. Later in that same letter, she claims that "Partly I see that one thinks of herself as 'she' rather than 'I,' and I'd like to get past that" (7 June). I think Notley begins her project with a false assumption that the understanding of the self as relational (and not inherent) is part of the same alienating processes that make her think of herself as a "she" rather than an "I." But by the end of Notley's deep self-examination, it doesn't seem like this core or "ground" self can continue to exist. Notley needs relations—especially a relation to writing—to mold her subjectivity and keep it fluid. I think, once again, of Samantha Matthews' statement that the narrative autobiography "threatens to fix the subject in a deathly stasis." Where I think Notley makes her intervention is that she shows it is possible to come to this conclusion and still want to make the self seem special. Even as Notley comes to understand that selfhood is not inherent, she emerges to confidently speak with

the voice she has developed. Near the very end of the collection, Notley places exhibits her speaking “I” through a 34 line poem, each of which begins with the pronoun:

I was at four a shape of love and reason

I was at fifteen capable of heinous pity

I’m not so foolish as to

I think at 34 that I know who the best poets are

...

I put self back in the genie bottle for the fad

I, and did I ever love

I, loving truth more than myself, am abased by

I was poor but never poor enough

I have as much authority to speak as

I was against all war and loved mostly soldiers

I have no identity to recognize except in myself

...

I, guilty as always through speaking, inhale

I, this year, hating the species, thought of myself as inhuman

I think the imagination is more real than

I, I said, presume we’re all fully responsible for

...

I will never be complete without the

I caressed him too clumsily

I borrow someone else’s form what else is a body

(“Remember What I Came Here to Do to This World Very Little Actually” 5-8, 13-19, 22-25, 32-34).

I think it is fair to say that, by entering the autobiography, Notley articulates an alternative way of being a postmodern subject. She understands that the self is to some degree produced—yet it is not her prerogative to throw up her hands and claim that the attempt to tell her own story is entirely wrong; she does not want the self to become formless, as it is in Hejinian. Instead, she imagines a form of subjectivity that is still special (and, as I should note, a subjectivity that feels essential) at the same time that it can be vacated and reworked in times of crisis.

Here I once again return to the metaphor of the house. In attempting to read deeply, perhaps I have passed over what sits at the surface of the text. The house is a built structure. It did not exist before someone bought a property, hired contractors to create a blueprint, oversaw its construction. Yet at the same time, it is special. It becomes filled with picture frames and bookshelves, markers of memories that spill across each and every surface. And it is notably changeable. When the inhabitant finally gets tired of the house, she can paint her kitchen green, tear down the wall between the living room and the office, or move to Europe to live *la dolce vita*. The House metaphor is a way to cope with the death of the subject that does not require Notley to abandon the lyric I. So, having worked these problems out through autobiography, Notley emerges, once again, with a new poetic language, a new set of tools with which, lovingly, she can restart work on the building of her life.

Chapter II: It's M-m-m-m-myyyth: Eileen Myles, Autobiographical Mythmaking, and the Authority of the Audience

It's like, well, the highest form of anything is sainthood. A marvellous thief like Villon or Genet...they were saints 'cause they raised thievery to its highest form of grace. Ole George Carter, black and beat to shit on some dock singing "Rising River Blues"...he was one. He sang like an ole broke-down music box. Some say Jesse James was one...and me...I dream of being one. But I can't. I mean I can't be the saint people dream of now. People want a street angel. They want a saint with a cowboy mouth.
 –*Cowboy Mouth*, Sam Shepard and Patti Smith

"i" thinks there should be a new "new sexualized and radicalized poetry of the self" -Olena Kalytiak Davis

I am Eileen Myles. The Poet. – Eileen Myles, *Inferno* 249

Eileen Myles is a poet. The "punk poet" to *The Guardian* (Brookes). The "poet idolized by a new generation of feminists" to the *New York Times* (Witt). And the "closest thing we have to a celebrity poet" to Shoshana Olidort in the *Paris Review*. In their career, Myles has won an impressive number of awards, written dramas, novels, and essays, edited collections, taught at several universities, and ran a presidential campaign (which "wasn't even stupid," according to Rich Smith). And still, "poet" is overwhelmingly the first—and most important—word in descriptions of Eileen Myles.

Upon the 2015 release of Myles' *I Must Be Living Twice*, Seattle-based magazine *The Stranger* ran an article titled "Don't Let Eileen Myles's Radical Badass Lesbian Reputation Overwhelm the Joy of Actually Reading Her Poems." Despite claiming that being a poet is an essential part of Eileen Myles' "reputation," ("Nobody actually escapes their working-class background by running off to New York City to live the life of a poet and totally succeeds. Myles did, which makes it easy to engage with [them] as this super-cool bohemian figure"), Rich

Smith, the journalist behind the article, assumes a readership that is wholly uninterested in encountering their poetry. “Poet” is a term of interest at the same time that *poetry* is not, which expresses a paradigm faced by the contemporary poet: for many readers, the idea of “being a poet” is cool, reading poetry is a bore.

This is not to assume that readerships—particularly Myles’ readership—are lazy when it comes to poetry, because it is important to note the extent to which Eileen Myles *enables* this kind of reception. Over the past two decades, Myles has been involved in a relentless project of self mythologization underscored and maintained by a turn to autobiographical forms of writing over the last 25 years, a project that has eclipsed their poetic output. As Catherine Daly explains in her survey of the New York School: “Eileen Myles became better known for their fiction and autobiographical writing than for her poetry.” (“New York School of Poets.”)

In 1994, Eileen Myles published *Chelsea Girls*, their first “novel.” I put the term novel in quotation marks because the book is highly autobiographical, even as Myles refuses the terms autobiography, memoir, and autofiction. It is possible to think that this novel belongs to a trope of “hiding autobiographies under claims of fictitiousness,” as criticism on *Chelsea Girls* often notes how it enables an autobiographical encounter in which the reader interprets events as “true” (Lanser 206). Rachel Hurn speaks to this experience when she describes *Chelsea Girls* as “a book of prose that reads like memoir and is called fiction,” and her reaction to it: “I didn’t know this at the time. I thought it was all true, all about Myles, and in a big way I still think so.”

Over the next two and a half decades, Myles published *Cool for You*, *Inferno*, and *Afterglow: a Dog Memoir*; many of which repeat, elaborate, or expand upon stories told in Myles’ previous publications. Often, the books follow the same basic sequence of events—a young Myles from working-class Arlington, Massachusetts leaves for New York to become a

poet. Along the way, they attend readings at St. Mark's Poetry Project, work for legendary New York School poet James Schuyler, and sleep their way around New York's creative lesbian scene. In constructing these works, the poet creates a "canon of Eileen Myles." And in doing so, "Myles does well to recognize that the public is more interested in poets than in poetry. They have probably helped to reinvent that fact" (Sigo).

So, Smith's article comes to reveal a curious quality about Eileen Myles' reception and their own literary project: Myles, far more than their contemporaries, embodies the idea of Poet not only as creator, but also as cultural icon. In this chapter, I examine what this might mean, focusing in particular on this auto-biographical/ fictional output, its role in the construction of Myles' personal mythology, and its relation to the rest of their lyric output.

The Value of Poetry

Throughout their work, Myles engages in a continual undermining of the poet and the poet's social role, reflecting what I see as the diminished role of the poet at the end of the 20th century. *Chelsea Girls* in fact opens with a story that explores this idea. Called "Bath, Maine," the opening chapter (short story) of *Chelsea Girls* follows "Eileen" as she stays in a quaint New England town with "her ex-girlfriend and her girlfriend, and *her* ex-girlfriend" (1). In an argument over who is going to drive home from the bar one night, Eileen's ex-girlfriend (Chris, extremely drunk) and Chris' current girlfriend (Judy, apparently sober), become involved in a physical altercation with the police, which Eileen herself⁷ eventually joins and gets arrested for. Here's how she attempts to escape:

⁷ I want to provide a brief note on pronoun usage in this chapter. While Eileen Myles (the poet) uses they/them pronouns, most of their "autobiographical" work was written before they came out as nonbinary. Since Myles sees the Eileen of their books as a textual (perhaps even fictional) construction (more on this later), I have decided to stick with she/her pronouns when describing the character. In a way, this discrepancy in gender will always alert us to the gap that exists between Myles and "Eileen."

My real moment in the police station in Bath, Maine was when I lifted my sword and revealed to them that I was a poet.

“I’m a poet, you fools, you asshole *cops*! Poet has always meant to me saint or hero, the dancing character on the stained glass window of my soul, the hand lifting slowly through time, the whirr that records my material against strong light, gosh, why I live...

Okay, okay, so you’re a poet, let’s hear a poem. I don’t *know* my poems I proffered, snobbishly, being baldly attached to the page. I hold the poem, the sacred document. Oh, alright. This was like martyrdom, baptism by fire, by blood.

It’s called: *Roast Chicken*. 11

This passage clearly explores Myles’ dialectic of “a Stein-like conviction of her own genius and significance” and “a startling—indeed shameless—exploration of her powerlessness and shame” to humorous effect (Nelson 185) . It begins with Myles’ own assumption of the poet as transcendent, both hero and martyr, a framework under which their situation takes on mythic importance. Of course, the ultimate reveal of the poetic title is shocking—and quite funny: “Roast Chicken,” whose ordinariness is completely out of line with the previous descriptions of the text as “the sacred document” and Eileen’s own reading of it as “martyrdom, baptism by fire, by blood.”

The effectiveness of this passage also comes from the way that Myles mobilizes this tropic poet as hero/saint in the entirely *wrong* context. Eileen imagines herself as a Byronic hero, but rather than, well, doing Byronic hero things, she drunkenly confronts bored New England cops who “mock” her (11). I am a poet! Eileen declares. Who the hell cares? seems to be the response. The tension at the core of this poem comes from the mismatch between Myles’ own

conception of the poet, and the value afforded to the poet by the average person. And I use the word *value* deliberately—Eileen seems to believe that the activation of ‘poet’ might initiate some kind of transaction by which she can walk free.

I am also interested in the way that Myles parodies the idea of the “public reading” that occurs elsewhere in their oeuvre. In their later “novel” *Inferno*, Myles often draws attention to performances of their own work. One particularly notable scene comes from Eileen’s reading of her poem “An American Poem”⁸ on a press-funded trip to Germany. Such a reading enlarges her subjectivity, making her feel like an “exalted kind of multiple”: “I am everyone” (152). Here is the model of poetry/reading as transcendence, as Eileen experiences what seems to be a form of self-dissolution. In other places, Myles imagines the space of the poetry reading as a political one; as they toured they were “thinking about where I was performing and who I was performing for. Just regarding the public space as a political one, thinking what would be political for this group of people” (Durgin in Nelson). Yet in “Bath, Maine,” neither aspect (transcendent or political) is present. While it could be possible to imagine the police station as a locus for political action, the reading that occurs renders Eileen not powerless, but a more pathetic *silly*. When Eileen reads her poem, she stumbles and forgets some of the words. What she reads is perhaps not as comically ordinary as the title “roast chicken” might imply, but it is a banal love poem riddled with clichés. “Oh no,” says Eileen’s ex when “she asked what poem” Eileen recited. “Oh no, she cringed, ‘Not that one’” (12).

Not only does this passage engage poetry as performance, meaning the public recitation of poetry, but it also alerts us to the power (or lack thereof) of performative *speech*. In her analysis of “An American Poem,” Maggie Nelson speaks of the poem’s performance as bringing

⁸ This poem, which I will explore later in this chapter, follows a narrator who resembles Myles but is secretly a member of the Kennedy family. It is probably Eileen Myles’ most famous poem.

almost revolutionary effects. Referring to the poet's continual assertion that "I am a Kennedy", Nelson claims:

...one of the most compelling aspects of Myles's posturing is how it eventually becomes indistinguishable from exaltation itself. The performative utterance 'I am your President' is technically 'infelicitous' to use [J.L.] Austin's term, in that Myles lacks the authorization or social power to make [themselves] the president. But as [Judith] Butler makes clear in *Excitable Speech*, not only is it 'clearly possible to speak with authority *without* being authorized to speak,' but it is precisely this kind of 'insurrectionary speech' that often brings about social transformation (157).

Myles's performance in 'An American Poem' sets out to blur the boundaries between 'imposter' and 'real authority,' for while she is indeed a Kennedy imposter, the authority claimed by the poem ends up no sham...(Nelson 184, 185)

In "Bath, Maine," we watch as Eileen's attempt to claim poetic authority through the statement "I'm a poet, you fools, you asshole cops!" lands flat—and hence, the statement is robbed of any real political or performative authority. To imagine that "social transformation" might come about through Eileen's police station performance is absurd, and thus, Myles undermines the very political potency of poetry that critics identify elsewhere in their work.⁹

In Myles, there is a clear sense of a crisis of poetic value at work in the late 20th century. It no longer goes without saying that the performance of the poet has value or is, by its own existence, politically potent. That said, the opposite is not exactly true either: that the poem is

⁹ As well as Nelson, see "Class, Crisis, and the Commons in Eileen Myles' Late Work" by Matthew Holman (2022), and "Unruly Vernacular Riverfront": Eileen Myles's Queer Persistence in the Changing Climate of New York" by Davy Knittle (2024). (driving and catastrophe maybe as well). Many critics identify Myles as a highly political poet (which is not entirely wrong, considering Myles' own 1992 write-in campaign for President), yet I think that these readings sometimes fall into the trap of overemphasizing Myles' own belief in poetry's potential for political change. My point in this chapter is that the status of poetry is ambiguous for Myles, and it oscillates between being transformative and, for lack of a better term, lame.

never politically powerful or valuable. (As we have seen in the case of Eileen’s performance of “An American Poem,” this cannot be the case). What “Bath, Maine” shows us is that Myles recognizes that poetry’s power is dependent on *audience*—although it is clear, in a late 20th century America, that the appropriate audience of poetry seems to be dependent on increasingly small circles, most of which (in Myles’ work) seems to be contained to several small blocks in New York.

Making Myth

Such an incident of course raises the question: what are the conditions under which one of Myles’ poems can be politically powerful? But before answering that question, I would like to take a detour into a different type of performance that emerges in Myles’ autobiography: self-performance, which Myles’ displays an obsessive penchant for. Across their auto-“biographical” texts, there are a number of scenes that Myles (re)turns to over and over. Among these are their childhood in a working-class, Bostonian family, their Catholic schooling, their father’s death, their move to New York, their experience in the poetry scene around St. Mark’s Poetry Project, and their relationships with various women (Chris, Robin, and Mary appear across volumes). Maria Dimitrova describes these repeated sequences as part of Myles’ continuous self-fashioning:

[Myles’] early days are recounted in a number of [their] books, most notably *Chelsea Girls* and *Inferno (A Poet’s Novel)*, each subsequent rendering continuing Myles’ practice of self-making, often to the effect of film reels overlaid on each other. It is a work of perpetual arrival, one that ‘violates the hermetic nature of my own museum’, as the eponymous poem in [their] breakthrough volume *Not Me* goes (Dimitrova).

Dimitrova's characterization of Myles' repetition as an ongoing "practice of self-making" and a "work of perpetual arrival" places them in a state of continuous becoming, which could be imagined as Eileen Myles' performance of their own identity. In brief, performance theory (which I have briefly touched upon in my engagement with Nelson) contends that the repetition of certain speech acts as well as "other social practices" make up the "process of subject formation" (Cavanaugh).

It is worth talking about just what kinds of characteristics are included in this self-making. Yes, Myles repeatedly returns to their early days in their work, but for what purpose? What do these early days reveal about Eileen Myles as a person/persona? For one, these scenes enable Myles to focus on the process of artistic development, functioning as a kind of origin story (although as Dimitrova indicates, the very idea of origin is fraught because Myles' work places them in a continuous—perhaps we should use Hejinian's term *open*—system in which the story itself, because of its repetition, has no clear beginning or end). One thread that runs between then, however is Myles' identity as a lesbian,¹⁰ which is often tied to their coming of age as an artist. (In *Inferno*, for example, coming out as a lesbian becomes informative of Eileen's poetic practice. She says "It seemed like being gay changed the thing of you. I started reading Sappho and I saw what everyone was talking about when they told you to take words out of your poem") (218).

¹⁰ Although I think a detailed discussion of Myles' lesbianism generally takes us away from a focus on questions of audience, mythmaking, and performance, I want to briefly talk about it because this performance of lesbianism (or more specifically, lesbian poetry) does something politically interesting. In their manifesto "The Lesbian Poet," Myles positions poetry on the side of anti-reproductivity, associating it with the bodily waste of menstruation. To be a lesbian poet, for Myles, is "owning your insides," which means choosing to create literature rather than children. Their articulation of a lesbian poetics specifically grounded in a female body and implicated with menstrual waste functions as an explicit refusal to perpetuate the male subject, whose literature they imagine as fundamentally (re)productive: "male creativity is a conversation with a masculine God, a self-fulfilling act of male conception, something roomy" (128, 129). In "The Lesbian Poet," Myles is conversant with Barbara Johnson's famous essay "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" in which she claims that "men have in a sense always had no choice but to substitute something for the literal process of birth." These associations have rendered male writing "procreative" while women's writing has been imagined as "infanticidal" (38). Myles also seems to share Sara Ahmed's language of "reorientation": "The woman turning, that's the revolution. The room is gigantic" (Myles 131).

Myles encapsulates these ideas in a scene where Eileen puts on a play about Sappho. Wanting to stage a last-minute performance at a “famous poet’s night” at St. Mark’s, Eileen grabs a guitar, dons a shirt with the name “Sappho” scrawled on it in black lettering, and repeatedly sings “Oh my name is Sappho” (110). In this performance, specifically in the repeated act of *naming* herself, she interpellates herself into the role of Sappho and accordingly the voice of lesbian poetry. But the performance turns out to be less than elegant:

I sat down on a chair in the shiny shirt with the guitar across my knee. I plunked it slow.

Oh my name is Sappho. Plunk. Plunk. Plunk. Plunk. Oh my name is Sappho. Plunk.

Plunk. Plunk. Plunk. Oh my name is Sappho, my name is Sappho. My name is Sap-PHO.

Then I got up and smashed the guitar on the chair. 110

In playing Sappho, Eileen does attempt to become a representative of lyric *as such* (not to mention, someone who links lyric poetry itself with *queerness*), but she also points us towards a parodical and self-aware posturing. The performance is tinged with irony, as Eileen’s attempt to simultaneously embody the voice of lyric poetry and that of rock n’ roll turns out to be...well...a bit lame. The repetition of the single sound “plunk,” doesn’t sound at all musical; it is a noise I can only describe as dinky. (A few sentences previous, Eileen even says she never learned to use the guitar, and the one that she is in possession of only contains two strings). So, it happens that the attempt to be a serious artist becomes a playful nod to the artist’s *lack of seriousness* (as is often the case in Myles’ work).

Of course, there is also something very metatextual about this incident. As Eileen (in the book) is performing the role of the lesbian poet, Myles (the author) is enacting the *same kind* of performance in the act of writing *Inferno*, and all of their autobiographical fiction, continually using speech to interpellate themselves into the role of lesbian poet. And the winky self-awareness

that undergirds this performance is a nod to the idea that all these roles are fundamentally that-roles.

It is possible to see this repetition—both in terms of events and themes—as a process under which Eileen Myles becomes encoded, legible, and mythic. For Barthes, “myth is a type of speech” that is essentially “constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it” (107, 113). It is important to note that when he says “speech,” he does not mean only *vocalized* utterances, but “a system of communication” or simply any kind of “message”—conveyed through “modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity” (107, 108). Anything, for Barthes, can become speech, but only forms of speech that are themselves referential to other forms of speech can be myths. An example he gives is of the Latin sentence “*quia ego nominor leo*,” which a school child might encounter in an instructional book (114). The primary meaning of the sentence is “because I am called lion,” but its function is not so much to convey information about a lion, but to demonstrate a principle of Latin grammar. *Quia ego nominor leo* therefore becomes *mythic*, because “its true and fundamental signification” does not come from the linguistic system alone (114). In creating a number of associations such as “lesbian” “poet” “badass” etc., Myles orders their life according to a particular set of semiotic codes. The myth of Myles is therefore tied to—or metonymic—with “the lesbian poet.”

I want to pause by noting how this revises the fundamental problem we’ve encountered so far. Celebrity, as it turns out, makes us hyper-aware of the self’s constructedness. If we believe that Myles is in fact engaging in a process of mythmaking, we see that they become textual—any sense of inherent “Eileen Mylesness” cannot exist. Yet, it is not my point to say that there can be one—such a statement seems nearly impossible to prove within the realm of literary studies. What

Myles shows us, and what the practice of celebrity mythmaking in general does, is that the exploitation of the self's constructedness need not be accompanied by a simultaneous *obscuring* of the self. Such is a view of postmodern subjectivity whereby the self can continue to exist on relatively unproblematic terms; in Myles work, we see nothing of the fragmentation or crises that seem to follow the Language Poets.

This idea is articulated well in Myles' repeated telling of the several weeks they worked for New York School poet James Schuyler, an anecdote that appears in three or four places across Myles' books. In fact, the title story of *Chelsea Girls* centers the period of Myles' life when "I was making...[my] living in a way I would never forget, making French toast for Jimmy Schuyler" (254). Well, not just making French toast. As it turns out, Eileen's job included a number of regular activities, most of which could be categorized under the banner of *hanging out*. In the story, she goes over to Schuyler's apartment one morning, bitches about her girlfriend Chris, and reads a poem. She performs minor tasks, like the aforementioned toast-making or bringing Schuyler the paper and his pills. Reflecting on her job, she notes that she often sees Schuyler's penis.

In *Inferno*, Myles again recounts their time as a caretaker: "My job, meanwhile, was being assistant to the great poet James Schuyler." They continue:

The job with Jimmy is described in the title story of *Chelsea Girls* (1994). In fact, anybody interested in his work who would like to know exactly what his room looked like from 1979 to 1982 should totally take a gander at my book. There is no other account and mine is so much like a little movie. I was getting paid \$235 a week to sit in the Chelsea with Jimmy and bitch about Chris and my gay life; bring him the paper and make the French toast (making him totally fat.) Bad things happened during my tenure: Jimmy

went mad, and walked out of the elevator one day completely naked. Jimmy come in.

Chris and I bought six-packs from the cash from the cash from his pants pockets and sat with him until his older friends decided what to do. (114).

And *again*, they recount this story in an interview with Ben Lerner:

Really, they needed someone to give Jimmy his pills and spend time with him. He had burned through all the friends who had been willing to let him stay in their homes and live with their families. That was over. He'd had a lot of breakdowns, and there was nobody left who was going to let him into their intimate space. His friends were already in late middle age. Jimmy was in his fifties. They got a lawyer and created a trust fund for him. They got him a room at the Chelsea. They got him me. And I had to move his papers and his clothes out of the Allerton, which was this dive hotel around the corner where he'd moved after burning down his room someplace else, and I moved his crap from there over to the Chelsea. This is all exactly in *Chelsea Girls*. My writing has made me a redundant human being.

Many of the details from *Chelsea Girls* reappear in at least one, if not both, of these other passages: feeding Jimmy "French toast," bringing him the paper, complaining about Chris, giving Jimmy pills, finding him nude, and helping him through his madness. This kind of repetition singles the Scuyler out as a *significant* piece in Myles' work/life (more on this distinction later), becoming part of a code by which Myles organizes themselves. Schuyler, it seems, is a legitimizing force to Myles' own claim to poetic merit. Indeed, Myles does often mention their connection to other poets (Alice and Ted Notley, Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman), displaying a penchant for name-dropping important literary figures that they orbit. Schuyler's presence might therefore reflect a contact notion of genius, or an idea that proximity to a

“canonical” writer may in turn render Myles themselves canonical. At the same time, it is important to note that the nature of Myles’/Eileen’s relationship to Schuyler is that of a caretaker, whose “service” to the male poet renders Eileen more marginal—not to mention that this is service to a male poet apparently past his prime. Such a representation recalls the ambivalence with which Myles invokes Schuyler in “The Lesbian Poet”: acknowledging him as an influence while simultaneously noting their own outsider status in relation to the particular canon he belongs to. The repetition of the Schuyler incident thus implicitly reinforces Myles’ own poetic status.

But what is also of note (at least in the second two examples) is Myles’ repeated deferral to *Chelsea Girls*. Myles directs their readers towards their earlier work, even though they can quite easily summarize it in both *Inferno* and their interview. The Schuyler anecdote ends up being an act of both repetition, and, in a way, of self promotion. Myles encourages their audience to read across their work—and this is the most important part—in the pursuit of gaining a more “complete” view of the poet’s life. When Myles assumes that Schuyler’s readers would want to know “exactly what his room looked like from 1979-1982,” they implicitly comment on their own literary project, which takes this idea (that readers want to know about poets’ lives) and blows it up to its extreme.

We can also view this odd characteristic of these passages as commenting on the fiction/nonfiction divide. “This is all in *Chelsea Girls*” Myles says in *Inferno*. But consider how this statement is revised in the Ben Lerner Interview: “This is all exactly in *Chelsea Girls*. My writing has made me a redundant human being.” Remember that the first quotation is from a supposedly *fictional* novel while the second comes from a *non-fictional* interview. Yet when Myles invokes the first person pronoun, it seems to apply to both: “writing”—that is, writing books like *Chelsea Girls* and *Inferno*—“has made me a redundant human being.” There is a sense

here that Chelsea Girls (the fictional account) becomes a substitute for Myles' real life, viewed either as more authentic, or at least synonymous, with Myles' real life.

These quotations (and the entire Schuyler anecdote) throw the status of fiction and truth into crisis. And at the introduction of this chapter, I noted how Myles insists on the fictionality of most of their prose output: "I don't like autofiction and all these made-up things. I read a lot of novels. I love fiction. I love novels. I feel like I am made-up and my vision of reality is made-up" (Myles, LA Review of Books). But as we can see from this interview, either the "fictionality" of the texts *or* the "reality" of a living speaking Eileen Myles is thrown into crisis. (In the LA review of Books interview, they tend towards the latter, talking about how they feel "made up"). Such an interpretation is reminiscent of Arielle Greenberg's formulation that Myles' work functions as a "hall of mirrors." She agrees that we "invent and perform multiple selves" but notes that "writers—especially writers who choose an autobiographical first person, as Myles does—have a particularly bizarre relationship to that invented self because the construction is also the basis for the art." The paradigm gets more complicated because the art takes on a life of its own at the same time that the author does—especially if they become famous. "And now which is which?" Greenberg asks. "Is the constructed self the writer? Is the writer the work? Is the work the image, the fame? Is the image or fame the same as the life? There it is: the hall of mirrors" ("Advanced Sentiment"). The interview invites us to ask similar questions. Obviously, there is some public interest in Myles as a person, as the number of interviews with Myles (including within large newspapers like *The New York Times*) attest to. But the repetition of stories across "real" interviews and "fictional" books invites us to ask questions about where the work begins and life ends; and as with the pair of mirrors endlessly reflecting each other, we are never quite sure where to look: look at the fiction, and we see the real, look at the real, and we

see the fiction, and again and again, until the two become one and the boundaries between each disappear.

This image may remind us of Paul de Man's formula. For de Man, since autobiography is an orientation of reading, rather than a genre in and of itself, *any text* can, and should, be thought of as simultaneously autobiographical and not autobiographical. Autobiographical because, as any text with a title page might indicate, it demands to be read as emanating from an author. Not autobiographical because it throws the relationship between the referent and what de Man calls the "figure" into crisis: "Does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction?" (69). It might seem that Eileen Myles plays with the same sort of indeterminacy in their work.

Of course, this framework may present us with a problem. So what if Myles' project is dissimilar to the Language Poets, if the attempt to write a coherent and consistent account of the self only ends up revealing to us that selves are constructed? For one, it has never been my prerogative to argue against the idea that selves come into being through storytelling. But I think that examining texts in this way is overly simplistic and also *flattening*. Of course there is a difference when Eileen Myles writes an autobiography vs when Roland Barthes writes one vs when Cher does. There must be something that makes Eileen Myles special. What, for example, does their mythmaking actually accomplish, and how does it preserve the notion of a coherent speaking I? And what happens if we shift the dialectic from fiction/real to autobiography/lyric? How does one affect how we read the other? Are we almost back to politics?

The post-structuralist critiques of autobiography that I have introduced are essentially paranoid, and they treat the observation that the self is fictitious under a hermeneutics of

suspicion. This is especially true for Barthes, whose autobiographical intervention was made to be “disjointed,” so that it “never illuminates anything” (Barthes, qtd. in Jay 1056). And like a partner in a tag team, the Language Poet swoops in to write forms of autobiography in which it cannot be possible to take this fact for granted, because to believe otherwise is actively dangerous. Under this paradigm, it becomes nearly unethical to write about the self coherently; to do so would be to support the entire logic of logocentrism that undergirds hierarchical relations. As Vernon Shetley explains: “For the Language writers and their academic supporters, assaults on the ‘descriptive and narrative’ functions of language as such...strike a blow against the ideological apparatus underpinning the capitalist state” (140).

Yet for Myles, the understanding that the self is fictional does not result in a need to obscure the self; rather, it frees them to write about the self in a far more sustained way. As Myles explains in *Narrativity*: “Let’s face it, [the male New York School Poets] were just as New Critical as everyone else in the fifties. They would all assert that the poetry was not about them. It’s about skimming the surface of the self. Using that facility to shape the poem. My dirty secret has always been that it’s of course *all about me*” (Nelson XXVI). And so we arrive at the title of this thesis. Myles recognizes that to admit their poetry (and writing in general) is to some degree confessional is taboo. Yet at the same time, we can tell that Myles finds a degree of liberty in this fact. Their understanding of the self as mutable and constructed opens the door for the self’s *rewriting*. Put another way: to assume that there is a stable self and that this self can coherently be reproduced in writing precludes the need for the kind of sustained revision that Myles undertakes.

But maybe thinking about the self in terms of its stability (or lack thereof) is the wrong question to explore. I want to return to Lejeune who claims that it does not really matter whether

or not the facts of the autobiography have a direct, one-to-one relationship with the events of the life narrated. I have previously discussed Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" or the idea that the reader tacitly agrees to honor the fact that the writer, narrator, and speaker are one, granted that the main character shares the name of the author. But in the same text, Lejeune also suggests that readers also enter into a "referential pact," which enables the reader to trust the author even if the narrated events are not entirely true:

[The autobiographer's] aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not "the effect of the real," but the image of the real. All referential texts thus entail what I will call a "referential pact," implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim. (22)

So an autobiographical text need not be an exact representation of the author's life (such a text would be impossible to imagine, even in diaristic forms of writing, as I have shown in the previous chapter) because the reader understands that this characteristic as a function of autobiography.

I like Lejeune's formulation, especially because it imagines a reader-centric view of textuality without succumbing to the need to erase the author. I am not certain that Lejeune's criteria are true in all cases (he flounders when discussing the possibility of an autobiography written under a pseudonym or false name) but I do generally agree that the "autobiography" might simply be defined by whether or not an *audience* has sufficient grounds to believe that a given work reflects the author's life. Let us return again to the interview with Lerner, where Myles seems to indicate a certain referentiality between their life (real) and their life as presented in their prose works. A few pages ago, it looked like the interview might indicate an essential

indeterminacy between truth and fiction, with the two becoming *deconstructed* in Myles' work. But, looking at the ideas of Lejeune and others, I am not confident that Myles' readers would primarily interpret the texts this way.¹¹

Myles' audience instead would seem more poised to agree with Lejeune or Susan Lanser, who explains that it is only "the announcement of "fiction"" that "opens a chasm between the life and opinions of the author" (207). If we are to interpret the interview as an inherently more "truthful" format than fiction--and if the same story can be told in either autobiography or fiction--then it is also true that Myles' claim to fictionality does not entirely work, as it seems to confirm that things that happened in the novel also happened in real life. Of course, there are many novels which, to some extent, lift from their author's lives, but I want to be careful to emphasize that this one incident with Schuyler is one of *many* stories that Myles tells that spans both interviews and novels, which perhaps differentiates Myles from their predecessors (that, and of course the context of *celebrity* discourse and the tradition of interviewing writers). Other incidents include their father's death, their experience in Catholic school as a child under strict nuns, and visiting their grandmother in a mental hospital. So if Myles "creates a chasm" between themselves and their fictional counterpart in announcing their

¹¹ I do not say this just because I tend to agree with Lejeune over de Man—I think there's a compelling reason to think that Eileen Myles' audience would as well. One of the primary reasons why the "fragmented" lyric becomes so dominant in the late 20th century is because the audience for lyric poetry shrinks, becoming more and more homologous with the academy. Vernon Shetley maps this change as occurring during the advent of modernism—giving rise to the success of "difficult poetry"—but reaching an extreme during the moment of the Language Poets. At this time, he finds the audience for poetry split between the academy and the more recent MFA crowd. Although I wouldn't necessarily argue that Eileen Myles' is primarily embraced among this workshop public that Shetley proposes, I do think that they are far from embraced within the academy. The number of academic articles and chapters published on Eileen Myles remains relatively small in comparison to the amount of articles that have been published on Myles in more popular publications. In fact, a 2022 issue of *Women's Studies: an Interdisciplinary Journal* called "Eileen Myles Now," which includes four research articles, two poems, and one re-printed essay on Eileen Myles, notes that "in one fell swoop this special issue nearly doubles the number of published articles and book chapters on Myles" (861). In terms of more popular publications; however, Myles seems to be well-represented, and indeed may be *over*-represented for a contemporary poet. The LA Review of Books has five articles on Myles, the New York Times 20 from the last 10 years, and Literary Hub flashes seven pages—yes, pages—under their name. So to assume that Myles' audience is primarily academic, and on the lookout for Myles' artificiality seems wrong.

works as fiction, they accordingly *close* this chasm though moments like this one in the Lerner interview—and thus, the autobiographical pact can function, despite Myles’ rejection of autobiography.

Autobiography, Lyric, and Authorial Attachment

I want to end by considering what the proliferation of this intensely autobiographical project has on Myles’ poetry—and finally loop back to the question of audience, poetic success, and politics. Briefly, I mentioned that Lejeune is perhaps mistaken or overly simplistic when he imagines that autobiographical poetry must be excluded from the categorization of autobiography proper—and hence the autobiographical pact. For Lejeune, prose seems to be an essential part of the genre; the autobiography is first and foremost a “retrospective prose narrative” (4). Lejeune’s theory is of course helpful for imagining how and why an audience might read a text as autobiographical. But if the autobiographical pact is not necessarily a given for lyric poetry, that still leaves the question: under what conditions is an audience more likely to ascribe the author function to a lyric “I”? And is it possible to imagine that Myles’ autobiographical project strengthens this connection in their *lyric*?

Susan Lanser, whom I have been engaging with to a limited extent, formulates a different way of thinking about the autobiographical pact in terms of a generic sliding scale. Lanser proposes that we think about texts in terms of *how likely* an audience is to assume that a speaker is related to an author—even if the audience knows that a given text is fictional. (The kind of example Lanser is most interested in might be how a reader of *Anna Karenina* would associate one of Levin’s discourses with Leo Tolstoy). For Lanser, the “I” of a given literary work falls on

a spectrum of “attached” to “contingent,” with attached works exhibiting the greatest link between a textual speaking “I” and the author’s.

Lanser proposes several criteria that make a voice more “attached” in a text: “singularity, anonymity, identity, reliability, and nonnarrativity” (212). Although these criteria can function independently of genre, she notes that certain genres come to look more attached than others in general. Lyric, she proposes, carries the highest degree of attachment, while drama the least. Generally, it seems that the reason why lyric does this is because lyric poems, which are often anonymous and narrated by a singular voice, do not contain the kind of informational feedback that could enable a reader to think that a poem’s speaker *does not* share the identity of its author. So, if a reader encounters a poem narrated by a singular speaking “I” who may carry similar characteristics to the author (such as gender or nationality), they are likely to assume that the speaking voice is the name as that of the name on the volume.

Lanser contends that readers make attachments all the time, even when they are not supposed to and with limited information about the author—although it is true that possessing some knowledge about an author may help facilitate this process. (Lanser’s third evaluative criteria, “reliability” is “a reader’s [complex] determination that the narrator’s values and perceptions are consistent with those of the author—that is, with the values and perceptions *the reader believes the author holds*”) (213, emphasis my own).

Here, I return to “An American Poem,”—more specifically, a story Myles tells about a public reading they once gave of this poem in *Inferno*, where our concerns about audience, celebrity mythmaking, and the problem of lyric authorship converge. To recap: “An American Poem” follows a narrator, who, like Myles, “was born in Boston/ in 1949,” (1-2) comes out as a lesbian, and moves to New York to become a poet—with a twist. Playing on their Boston heritage,

the narrator increasingly connects themselves to the Kennedy family, eventually declaring “Yes I am/ I am a Kennedy.” (72-73) This amusing turn, however, becomes a launching point for Myles to assume the role of a politician, railing against the government’s inability to address the AIDS epidemic, unaffordable rent, or inaccessible health care. At the end of the poem, Myles’ claim to Kennedy-ness extends to the whole audience: “we are all Kennedys/ and I am your President” (157-158). In calling upon a source of American authority, the speaker of the poem fashions a political platform from which they can advocate for ideas like universal healthcare, housing reform, and queer rights.

In *Inferno*, Myles provides a story about “An American Poem” that hinges upon audience misrecognition. According to Myles, a friend of Eileen’s recorded her reading the poem and wanted to submit it to a short film festival. Thinking that the poem was written by “some condescending Kennedy,” the festival rejected the film, until Eileen’s friend explained that she was not, in fact, a Kennedy, and that the piece was a performance. Still, the audience at the showing could not help but make the same mistake: “They stared like I was a freak. There’s the Kennedy. People started pointing wildly” (145).

The audience’s (mis)reading of “An American Poem” in this anecdote is predicated on their inability to recognize Eileen Myles. The incident is clearly a problem of attachment as the audience assumes homogeneity between author and speaker that should not exist. The film festival and audience (wrongly) deduce that, because the speaker of the poem claims to be a Kennedy, that the narrator must also be one. This is certainly the “unauthorized crossing” that Lanser talks about in her article. And it is with this unauthorized crossing that the poem becomes politically *ineffective*. If the author is indeed a Kennedy, then the closing gesture (“we are all Kennedys”) does not work, because the rest of the poem assumes that to be a “Kennedy” means

to be born into the family, receive elite education, and bump arms with the rich and famous. Even if the speaker/author attempts to subvert the Kennedy image by becoming a lesbian poet, this subversion does not change the fact that the audience interprets the poem as “condescending” (145).

In order for a reading of an “American Poem” to accomplish the poem’s *political* aims, the poem requires that the reader be able to make a complex determination between fiction and autobiography. It is not that Myles’ Kennedy persona is entirely fictional and that we can ignore the presence of the author. I largely agree with Maggie Nelson’s assertion that the poem actually hinges upon a two directional movement: “the speaker continues to posit herself as near-royalty slumming it as a poor poet and a dyke, while she also *is* that poet and that dyke”--and it is this simultaneous gesture that propels the political engine of the work (184).

In order to recognize the speaker as “that poet and that dyke” however, we must make some fundamental assumptions about who Eileen Myles is. The very foundation of “An American Poem” relies on our recognition, not of the speaker’s, but of the *poet*’s marginal social positioning. As Nelson claims, it is the poet’s “infelicitous” or unauthorized claim to presidential authority that destabilizes “the established grounds of legitimacy” of an utterance, bringing “about social transformation”--but the utterance can only be infelicitous if it comes from someone who does not have a right to claim the authority in the first place (Nelson 184, 185, Butler in Nelson). This is the movement that enables Myles to claim “I am your President” and have it *mean* something—it is also what enables them to extend this authority to the audience: “we are all Kennedys.” So, we must believe, at least at points in the poem, that Eileen Myles, whose background as a working class lesbian poet places them far outside the traditional purview of political power, narrates the poem. I say “at points” because Lanser argues that audiences can in

fact racket between “attached” and “detached” readings, juggling the fictional with the autobiographical.

My point is, we need to know (or at least assume) certain details about Myles’ background in order for “An American Poem” to work. Still, the audience’s ability to do this, as I have shown, is far from guaranteed. (This observation also forms the foundation of my earlier reading that Nelson takes for granted that “An American Poem” and much of Myles’ work, is on its own political). The more knowledge the audience has of Eileen Myles, the easier it is to make complex determinations as to what elements of a given poem are true or false. The opening lines “I was born in Boston in 1949” should immediately jump out to a reader familiar with Myles as being biographical, whereas claims of private tutoring and lavish vacations should ring false (1).

What I think the autobiographical project does is that it fundamentally *changes* the nature of authorial attachment in Myles’ lyric work. I do not believe that all attachment is created equal—nor does it seem Lanser does. Autobiography helps readers sift through the places in which attachment *should or should not occur*. Under the death of the author, it should not matter whether the reader is able to make these distinctions, right? But as Lanser explains, “not even the most postmodern reader,” “treats a work of history or philosophy or scholarship, a letter to the editor, or an autobiography as if the author in the text were not also the author of the text” (209). Most readers, according to Lanser, *will* make attachments, even unintentionally. And as Myles’ work shows, there are genuine interpretive problems that arise when audiences make errors in this process.

Myles’ process of mythmaking thus results in a sense of hypervisibility that affects how their audience encounters their poetry. The strong image of “Eileen Myles” that emerges within books like *Chelsea Girls*, *Inferno*, and *Cool for You* generates a better understanding of the “I” of

Myles' lyric poems. It is easier to index qualities like "reliability" and "identity" in Myles' work (and thus generate more accurate attachments) especially because Dimitrova notes there is a "striking, almost recalcitrant consistency of [their] author-character persona" (Dimitrova). The fundamental mythology of Eileen Myles does not change across their books, and, as I have noted extensively, they are drawn towards encompassing identities like lesbian and poet.

Of course, claiming that the presence of Myles' autobiographical output informs readings of Myles' poetry only works if we assume that a large contingent of Myles' readers have encountered both. It does seem, as the Smith article I began this chapter with suggests, there is a portion of Myles' readership that encounters their poetry *through their prose*. This assumption is also present in their own autobiographical texts. Much of Myles' writing, as well as their interviews, is self-referential, directing readers towards other texts in their oeuvre. Myles, for example, advertises *Chelsea Girls* in several of their works, (as we have seen) but they also advertise their poetry this way, referencing their collection *Sappho's Boat* and poems like "Joan," "Shhh," and "An American Poem" in *Inferno*.

"We are all Kennedys, and I am your President," the speaker declares at the end of "An American Poem." The statement is powerful precisely because we have come to know Eileen Myles; we understand that they claim this identity from a marginalized position, and we *identify* with them. If Myles claims that their poetry is "all about me," this act of self-writing proves to be anything but selfish. As Maggie Nelson argues, Eileen Myles invites us to share in their authority. If Eileen Myles, whom we have come to know as a lesbian, who grew up in a working class Bostonian family, who struggled to pay rent can come to be the voice of poetry, so can we. If this person could come to achieve fame, then fame is also within our reach. If this person can

ascend to the presidency, that position too, is open to us. In making their poetics “all about me,” Myles paradoxically opens the door for all our involvement.

Conclusion: On the Death of Robert Lowell (and other Deaths)

whoever saw a girl like robert lowell?--Olena Kalytiak Davis

In this thesis, I have returned repeatedly to the image of the dead poet. His presence haunts this work, always spectrally present as the animus of the poetic autobiographical project I study. We have seen him notably (and literally) as the fallen soldier in Notley's poetry, but he is also everywhere in this work. He was the starting point of this thesis, and so, in the spirit of harmony, I will also make him the end. Although this time, I do not want to engage with the dead poet as a literary device but rather go to the site of a real poet's death.

On September 12, 1977, the confessional poet Robert Lowell died from a heart attack at the age of 60, following a career that spanned over 30 years. His passing prompted an outpouring of tributes, including a number of hyperbolic assessments in the popular press. To the *New York Times*, Lowell was "the best English-language poet of his generation." (McQuiston). To the *Washington Post*, Lowell's "bleak and brilliant verse has ranked for more than 30 years among the major works of American letters." (Gorney). Perhaps my use of "hyperbolic" is wrong, as these assessments are more likely sincere reflections of a widely held belief that was shared by much of the literate public: "At the time of his death in 1977, Robert Lowell was the most esteemed American poet of his era." (Wojahn, 750). Lowell's death thus served a major blow to the poetry establishment and represented a turning point in American letters. He seems, in a way, to be the last American poet who was a genuine cultural icon, occupying the vatic role inaugurated by Whitman. As Wojahn explains, Lowell "had come to be seen as not only a strikingly original and influential poet but also a *public figure whose import far surpassed that of other poets of his generation*" (750) (emphasis my own). I highlight this last section because it names a phenomenon that has not meaningfully survived past Lowell. Even Eileen Myles, who

attempts to harness the apparatus of celebrity culture and mythmaking as a means of *reasserting* the poet's presence, is not the kind of household name that Lowell was, nor are they in any way a "dominant" poetic force. In fact, I would argue that there is no such thing as a dominant or central poet of our age—nor does this role seem to be possible anymore, considering the increasing retreat of poetry into the academy and away from the public imagination. In a more recent essay on Lowell, Robert Fay says "I get sad when I think of Robert Lowell because America is in turmoil once again and there are no *cultural figures of his stature* to push back" (Fay, emphasis my own).

It is also important to note that Robert Lowell gained this status in *writing about himself*. Robert Lowell was not only the voice of a nation but also became one in a personal way. His poetry (specifically 1959's "Life Studies") pioneered the confessional movement, demonstrating that the poet could roughly correspond to the speaker of the poem, even as the New Critics attacked this position. His poetry followed the ups and downs of his life, recounting his family background, his marriages, and his bouts of mania. It is not that Robert Lowell or his work was immune from observations about the poet's own self-fashioning and embellishing, but that his poetry does seem to profess a simpler and more unproblematic relationship between the poet and the speaking "I." It is possible to deconstruct the Lowell persona, but it is not true that this persona draws particular attention to its own construction.

Since the 1970s, critics agree that Lowell's reputation has suffered several blows. While still considered to be technically gifted and a significant presence in the canon of American poetry, he no longer seems to be "the" central poet of the midcentury. Part of this backlash is due to the changing critical position of Confessional poetry in general. Although the term has always had a charged history, carrying connotations of scandal (even Lowell himself did not like the

label), the movement's interest to scholars seemed to change over the years. If the value of confessional poetry in the 1950s and 60s was its expression of an "authentic" and personal literary voice, in subsequent years it came to be seen more as another surface upon which critics could examine the construction and artifice of the literary persona. Thus, the innovative aspects of Lowell's work—that is, the popularization of poetry that comes from experience—becomes absorbed and homogenized with forms of poetry that more explicitly draw attention to their own artifice and whose experiments are simply more interesting than Lowell's.

At the same time, as Fay argues, there was another component to the general waning of Lowell's status: his identity. In his memorial on Lowell, Faye notes that Lowell's optics in the present day are "not good": "Lowell was the patrician poet with a trust fund; the privileged, white-male literary figure who wore a corduroy sport jacket and sloppily-knotted tie—the casual wear of the "bummy rich," as they were once known on Boston's North Shore" (Fay). It is not that the notion of a white male poet is now charged, problematic, or passé (that claim feels ridiculous, and indeed, many poets who *do* seem to occupy central roles in the midcentury poetic scene, such as O'Hara or Ashbery, came from relatively well-off white backgrounds) but that the experience Lowell so thoroughly explored in his confessional work no longer seems particularly revolutionary, especially because the ability to write candidly about topics like marital strife and alcoholism, and have it be widely read, to some degree seems to be enabled by his privileged background.

Eileen Myles reflects this general shift in Lowell's reception in their poem "On the Death of Robert Lowell." Although its title implies tribute, the poem abandons elegiac deference in favor of a crass indifference. Here's how it reads:

O, I don't give a shit.

He was an old, white-haired man.
 Insensate beyond belief and
 Filled with much anxiety about his imagined
 Pain. Not that I'd know.
 I hate fucking wasps.
 The guy was a loon.
 Signed up for the Spring semester at MacLeans
 A really lush retreat among the pines and
 Hippy attendants. Ray Charles also
 Once rested there...
 So did James Taylor
 The famous, as we know, are nuts.
 Take Robert Lowell.
 The old white-haired coot.
 Fucking dead. (In *Inferno*, 166-167).

The poem establishes itself as a lyric parody. Its opening word, the archaic "O," is an address used notably in Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, often to signal apostrophe, but in Myles, it proves to be a false lead. Myles looks like they are about to invoke Lowell, but instead uses the "'O' of the pure vocative" (Johnson, 31) in place of the subjective interjection "Oh!" This move draws attention to Myles' rejection of apostrophe, specifically in its role as an *animative* force—that is, its capacity to give inanimate objects life or interpellate the dead from beyond the grave. As Barbara Johnson explains, "The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropo- morphic. Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism

through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness” (30). Myles, of course, refuses to address Lowell and accordingly resurrect him, leaving him in the past tense. The final line, in its punchy abruptness, renders him especially inert: “Fucking dead.” There is no *nostalgic* impulse to channel Lowell in this poem, as famous apostrophic poems (like “O Captain, my Captain”) tend to have.

The anti-nostalgic position that Myles adopts is underscored by their openly insulting language. The crude indifference of “I don’t give a shit,” turns nearly hostile when they say “I hate fucking wasps,” and “that guy was a loon.” Myles is particularly disrespectful towards Lowell’s mental illness: they ridicule him as a “loon” a “coot;” underemphasize the severity of his mental illness by calling MacLean’s, a famous institution, a lush retreat; and refuse to take his pain seriously, calling it “imagined.” Part of the speaker’s aversion and hostility to Lowell comes from his identity; Myles identifies him as an “old, white-haired man,” who belongs to the wealthy, white, Protestant background they “fucking hate.”

There is still a sense that Myles does feel some sympathy towards Lowell, especially if we read *autobiographically*. In much of their work, they discuss their grandmother, who spent years institutionalized for schizophrenia. It is not at all the case that Eileen Myles is ignorant towards mental illness, so the position in “On the Death of Robert Lowell” is to some extent, posturing. Still, Robert Lowell does not emerge as a powerful figure in Myles’ work. We can sense sympathy, but there is a deliberate desire to de-elevate Robert Lowell and undermine his poetic position, casting him as whack-job rather than genius. Above all, Myles’ poem asks the question: is the figure of Robert Lowell—and the stable, white man persona he adopts—worth holding on to? Honoring? Elevating? To assume that Lowell and his representation are

“coincident” in turn naturalizes Lowell’s identity, avoiding the way that categories such as “white” and “male,” are too constructed.

In this thesis, I have gone back and forth on the effect of the poet’s death—in some places, it has seemed highly distressing, in others, no big deal. It is difficult to identify the extent to which this event is problematic, particularly Myles and Notley write in a critically murky period where the death of the author can seem both upsetting and liberating. Regardless, it is clear that the terrain they operate upon is far different from the one Lowell worked in. Lowell could make it look like there was a unified relationship between his self and the speaking “I,” even if this voice required techniques of embellishment and fabrication in its representation. Myles and Notley instead find themselves in a position where the very idea of self-representation is fraught. How does one write about, hold on to, a sense of identity when identity can only unravel?

The autobiographical project that I have outlined does not necessarily attempt to restore this relationship between the poet and the speaking “I”—if this relationship ever existed. It is impossible to imagine that there is a “coincident” relationship between the two at this point in critical discourse. Both Notley and Myles exist within postmodernity; they are aware that selves are constructed, relational and slippery. They often show us how the self is unstable, whether this be through Notley’s iterable and mobile self or Myles’ performed one. What does seem important to me is that autobiography helps render the poet more *visible*. To imagine that the author is dead is restricting, producing a sense of readerly myopia. The discourses that I write *against* are those that seek to obscure and fragment the subject. Perhaps here is a way for the “I” to triumph even as the poet’s corpse lies strewn on the battlefield.

If Lowell and O’Hara are dead and cannot be reanimated—what are Notley and Myles? The poet is perhaps no longer unambiguously alive, but instead cobbled together from missing

pieces and scraps of meat. For Myles and Notley, “the poet” exceeds lyric, it is a creature of assemblage, with the left foot of poetry stitched to the calf of autobiography. It is a poet whose presence we cannot assume exists, but who wants to be seen anyway. The poet of our ages lies on the table, waiting for reanimation. Electricity, restless, leaps from the machine, waiting for release. Pull the handle.

I do.

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