

“The event is the adventure of that moment”: Hejinian Happenstance Happiness

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From Lyn Hejinian’s long poem *Happily*: “The event is the adventure of that moment.” (Hejinian 2000a, 9) Come. Come into that moment, meant to make the world happen, take place differently. Moment, not meant, change of stress. Vent – some air blowing into our comings and goings, *venire*. A point of origin, out of which a singular happening comes (e-vent), aimed at a point of destination (ad-vent), the path towards which is unpredictable, adventurous, full of inertia, momentous. We are set on a path, on a course, “driven” : “The writer over the page is driven down but like a robin by a worm.” (8) Food for thought. Take a chance, venture it, under the sign of perhaps. How does one move from origin to destination through language inside language, if not by making up an aphorism – a momentous sentence, a phrase in which we are “sentenced haply” (Hejinian 2013, 134) – seeking to capture the passage from beginning to end? No way out of language into meaning, toward what the “mot” meant, only the “moment,” a fleeting echo, unstressed, of the event/advent that triggered it, in which we are suspended. No, not to end but forever beginning, sensing the “ent” that links these words together, just on that side of what is meant, “driven down” to find sustenance in the worm/word split in halves by that “writer over the page”.¹ Event advent moment. Ent – *Ens?* Aka entity. To ent. We are entering language

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1. Emily Dickinson’s robin momentarily/momentously coming down the walk:
A Bird, came down the Walk –
He did not know I saw –
He bit an Angle Worm in halves –
And ate the fellow, raw –
(Miller 189)

– this is the event. Or more exactly, “Enters language,” the reassuring, almost lulling, sound patterns that enable us to come out of and reenter just such an energized field of meaningless meaning, untying words from any representation outside the very field they invite us to explore. Drawn forward by this moment (serendipitous, auspicious, an occasion that happens), we see the shapes of words in a new light, suddenly alerted to the movement (moment) taking place within language itself, as the words *happen* on the page: the root word (vent/*venire*/come) now expanding into a shifting syllable that weaves out (emerging, coming forth, event) and in (coming towards, adventure) of the words. Event. Advent. Invent? Driving us down *into* the thick of language, where it “takes place.” Lyn Hejinian writes sentences that don’t make sense, or don’t *only* make sense, but rather, but also, sentences that *make us sense* that something is happening *to* language *as* language – language becomes its own event to itself, the only one there ever is, the only one that ever *takes place*.

Constantly I write this happily
 Hazards that hope may break open my lips
 What I feel is taking place, a large context, long yielding, and
 to doubt it would be a crime against it
 I sense that in stating ‘this is happening’
 Waiting for us?
 It has existence in fact without that
 We came when it arrived (Hejinian 2000a, 3)

There is a sense in which the sentence “The event is the adventure of that moment” means that something that happens at a given moment (a moment as “happenstance,” or “occasion”) only becomes an event when it meets “us,” an adventure, a going out of itself and back into itself transformed – when the moment becomes momentous, imparted with a new velocity gained as it intersects with our own trajectory. What is taking place is a fold in the structure of taking place itself, a complication, if you will, of what is happening when “stating” (the text as static assertion) and “waiting” (the context as expectant form) meet and energize each other. The event is the moment when the moment is waiting for us, for our coming into it – a shape which becomes

filled and fulfilled by our happening upon it, by chance or good fortune, happily. “Happiness,” Hejinian writes about Gertrude Stein, “is a complication, as it were, of the ordinary, a folding in of the happenstantial.” (Hejinian 2000b, 371). In the terms of the passage just quoted – being the opening lines of Hejinian’s “Happily” – the happening takes place (literally) inside language, when “I feel” or “I sense” – the sense of an “I” – comes in touch with the moment that will both be the “context” for the event, and the very event itself.

But such “folding in” is also, crucially, the change of lines in what appears on the page (as one would say, “on the face of it”) to be a poem: the language event in the sentence “I sense that in stating ‘this is happening’/Waiting for us?” happens precisely in the middle of it, when the change of line allows that sentence to *turn into* (or even more abruptly, *veer into*) a question. This veering, or *versus*, is “the adventure of that moment,” when the abstract exploration of happenstance suddenly becomes not only a context for the event, but the event itself, coming out of context into text, shifting in nature from theory to practice. The sentence enacts its meaning more than it expresses it, thus becoming an event, or more precisely, becoming “becoming-an-event”; it spreads the thinking about its own eventfulness across the page according to a poetic model. “What happens to thinking when it’s phrased (sentenced) as a poem?”, Hejinian implicitly asks.

Happily is just such a hybrid text – a text which has the feel of theory while being laid out on the page as a poem. As such, it could easily fit in the category of poems that critic Jed Deppman defines as “trying-to-think poems,” in which a poet (in Deppman’s study, Emily Dickinson) “continue[s] thinking without the foundations of strong metaphysics” (Deppman 201), more specifically letting the poetic form affect and transform her mode of thinking. As a matter of fact, *Happily* was published in the year 2000 both by The Post-Apollo Press, as a chap book, and by The University of California Press, as the last essay in Hejinian’s collection *The Language of Inquiry* – a title strongly reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose sentences the poem-essay so obviously emulates. This double space of inscription is characteristic of the way in which Lyn Hejinian conceives of poetry, as a category

and form of thinking; such a hybrid raises interesting questions about what kinds of language events happen in her texts, but also *as* her texts. Thus, *Happily* is a text in which the theory of happening itself happens – which raises many questions about the very possibility of anything happening in the moment when we observe it happening. “Theory asks what practice does,” Hejinian writes in the preface to her essay on Gertrude Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, entitled “Common Sense.” She then goes on:

and in asking, it sees the connections that practice makes. Poetic language, then, insofar as it is a language of linkage, is a practice. It is practical. But poetry, insofar as it comments on itself (and poetic form is, among other things, always a poem’s self-commentary), is also theoretical.

Theoretical thought examines, theoretical thought makes meaningful, it takes into account and in doing so it makes what it is thinking about count. But there is a difference between thinking about and thinking, and thinking itself is meaningful too. Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* is a poem in which thinking takes place in and of itself. (Hejinian 2000b, 356)

It is this emplacement in and as a poetic form that turns not only Stein’s *Stanzas*, but most remarkably Hejinian’s poem-essay *Happily* into an event of thinking. As suggested above, this place – or more accurately this “taking place” (a possible synonym for “happening”) is also a moment. The way in which Hejinian gives moment and momentum to her sentences is an attempt at making us perceive the happening of them as an event. She achieves this by letting them appear to be improvisational, simultaneously not quite finished and not quite unfinished – a quality she sees as typical of Gertrude Stein’s own “meditations,” thanks to which the stanzas are turned from static (“stating”) forms into dynamic transforms, structures of becoming: “The improvisational approach, therefore, makes the artistic event *an adventure of the moment*. It occurs in time, and is concerned with precisely that – with being in time. And it takes place through the taking of a chance – the taking of one’s chance, or the taking of one’s chances.” (Hejinian 2000b, 374, author’s italics)

What happens is, paradoxically, but so appropriately, waiting. Waiting/Writing.

This becoming, or “coming-to-be in sentences” as she calls it – one might say this “eventing” of the sentence – has to do with a certain inner disposition of Hejinian’s sentences. It is not really an open-endedness, but rather a particular way they have of expanding from the inside out, combined with interruptions between them that make them jostle with each other – imparting her texts with a sort of rough fluidity, so to speak, that brings them close to the very texture of life itself, the randomness happenings of life. “*Happily* takes the shapes of thinking, the phrases of poetry, as manifestations of life, and the essay, ultimately, is an affirmation of living,” she contends in the preface she wrote for her poem-essay in *The Language of Inquiry* (384). She then goes on to detail the technicalities of her sentences:

here, in addition to the question of happiness, I was interested in the happenstances it inhabits, and in the “incorporation” itself of happiness – in the incorporation of thought as a coming-to-be in sentences. The grammar of sentences, both standard and invented, had again become a subject of fascination and even a pressing concern, and this continues to be the case.

One grammatical device appearing in the work is the one producing “accordioning” sentences, ones with solid handles (a clear beginning and a clear end) but with a middle that is pleated and flexible. My intention was to allow for the influx of material that surges into any thought, material that is charged with various and sometimes even incompatible emotional tonalities. These emotional tonalities make it impossible to say with certainty that one is happy, for example, just as they make it impossible to say that one is not. (384-5)

A typical example of how Hejinian blurs the inner boundaries of her sentences to create the kind of emotional ripples she seeks, could be the following:

There is music recognizing recognition we know about
boundaries and boundaries wound up

No straight line the riddle set I am tempted to say rough circles
hazards lips that only things can differ (Hejinian 2000a, 8)

The firm beginning of the sentence provides a “solid handle,” to take up Hejinian’s metaphor, and alludes to an implicit lyric condition: if “There is music,” then a poem might ensue. But the sentence immediately gets willfully bogged down into repetitions or syntactic twists which allusively riff on the idea of how much more difficult it can be to actually *say* anything at all, let alone anything *lyrical* or poetic. Instead of tidy verse, there seems to be “No straight line” as the middle of the sentence becomes “the riddle set I am tempted to say.” This middle/riddle captures the moment of the event in/as the sentence, contradicting its own unfolding with an impossible geometry of lines and circles. Consequently, the “I” in the middle of this sentence can no longer have any poetic agency, can no longer be the lyric origin of any poetic declaration, so that happiness gets separated from any center of awareness that might be able to feel it. Instead of the clear poetic diction initially promised by the music there is, we get a syntactically bumpy journey, full of grammatical equivocations, whose twists and turns suggest simultaneously the *temptation* and the *attempt* to say.

This pleating of emotions, packed in the sentences and rippling through them, is reminiscent of Arno Bertina’s arguing that, for him, reality is made up of a complex texture of events exceeding the real. The task of literature is to make a finer description of reality – what Bertina has aptly called “reality compounded by its own ghosts.” In reality nothing gets lost, everything remains active at all points, layered in strata: literature should therefore attempt to account for this by describing “links in space” (*des liens d’espace*, quoting French novelist Claude Ollier).

I think this is precisely what Hejinian calls “sentenced haply” in her autobiographical text *My Life*. Indeed this now canonical book in the American postmodern corpus, first published in 1987 then expanded over the years as the author’s years grew, gives us a glimpse of what it means for writing to be the event of life itself, letting it happen, almost serendipitously, letting it coincide with the happy happening of its sentences. In writing *My Life*

– a text composed according to a procedure by which the total number of stanzas (or paragraphs) in the book is equal to the total number of sentences in each stanza, both being in turn equal to the number of years of the author’s life at the time of writing – , Hejinian wanted to show what happens to life, to *my* life, when it’s taken to the letter; how a life falls down upon a page, or, to put it differently, what makes of life an *occasion*. Thus, to be “sentenced haply” means to be laid out in sentences according to what happens by chance, or by accident, the happy happenstance of life, what happens constantly, the flow of events: “Constantly I write this happily.” Obviously, however, “sentenced” also has a legal meaning, a sense in which it is often used with the word “life” in the phrase “sentenced for life.” In her writing, Hejinian places life constantly under the sign of what happens to it, what happens to life “for life” when it is turned into those “pleated” sentences. To be “sentenced *to* life,” sentenced into a life happening here and now – this is what Hejinian’s writing is all about.

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