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Electronic version
URL: http://transatlantica.revues.org/7409
ISSN: 1765-2766

Electronic reference
Marie Olivier, « Lyn Hejinian's Conference, "The Sneeze, Oversignification and the Zone of Encounter" », Transatlantica [Online], 1 | 2015, Online since 19 November 2015, connection on 01 October 2016.
URL : http://transatlantica.revues.org/7409

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Lyn Hejinian’s Conference, “The Sneeze, Oversignification and the Zone of Encounter”

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1. This conference was held on November 29th, 2014 at Université Paris-Sorbonne Nouvelle on the occasion of the opening session of the laboratory VORTEX headed by Marc Porée and Isabelle Alfandary. The latter introduced American poet, literary critic, translator and publisher Lyn Hejinian and thanked her for presenting this paper to the members of VORTEX in addition to the one she had given the day before in the context of the Partner University Fund conference.

2. Lyn Hejinian started her presentation entitled “The Sneeze, Oversignification and the Zone of Encounter” by reading an epigraph written by contemporary American Bay Area activist and poet Sara Larsen:

   what they didn’t want me to sing I sing
   what they didn’t want me to say I say
   what they didn’t want me to see I see
   I live for hell in a boat. (Larsen, 2012)

3. Her talk dealt with aesthetic devices used by contemporary activists, which she gathered under the term *oversignification*. This term covers “two correlative functions: one whereby the voice of the poem provides a running commentary” (by and large, this function leans toward Angus Fletcher’s notion of “allegory without ideas”) and a second whereby irony is surpassed and even annulled. Not only does it point to what one thinks or does not think, but it also points to many other directions. *Oversignification* “is a zone of high turbulence, a signifying whirlpool or a merry hell.”
Taunting with Gavroche

Lyn Hejinian introduced Victor Hugo’s Gavroche, shot on the barricades during the French Revolution, whose words (“I’m going to sneeze subversive couplets at them”) inspired the title of her presentation. Depicted as the epitome of Romantic sensibility, Hugo’s character is not unfamiliar to the sphere of aesthetic realism and knew the rise of industrial capitalism. “His inspiration comes from the streets, not the trees,” Lyn Hejinian stated. According to her, the only lesson realism can teach is quite close to what one may call despair.

To Lyn Hejinian, the “cannibalistic” capitalist system may have caused a pervasive cynicism vis-à-vis contemporary representations of power and may explain why expressions from the street are so brutally angry. She believes that Occupy revolutionary poets have much in common with the French Romantics, although the latter’s anti-bourgeois stance is often self-critical. If it is delusional today to feel any Romantic exhilaration, the poet argued that “it is possible to feel Romantic fervour in one’s protestations against the spoliation brought about by today’s neoliberalism.” In the zone of encounter, irony pertains to the unsaid but it precisely incarnates what is being said.

To Lyn Hejinian, in the Occupy movements the irony of encounter lies in their refusal to send any kind of message and let the interpretive power to the media. In 2009, the Occupy movements did not have spokespeople but they had encampments all over the world with the perplexing slogan “Occupy everything, demand nothing.” The allegorical meaning of this slogan is deemed to be merely emblematic of sheer negativity and, according to Lyn Hejinian, may only be symptomatic of the excitement of the moment.

After quoting some lines from African-American rapper Mos Def’s song “Hip Hop” taken from his album Black on Both Sides, Hejinian argued that activist and anti-state poery shares some elements with hip hop in terms of rhetoric and energy. She then turned back to Victor Hugo’s insouciant and sassy Gavroche, a rapper avant la lettre, living for the present rather than the future, homeless. She described Gavroche’s couplets as “satirical, improvised, thick with signifiers”:

La nuit on ne voit rien,
Le jour on voit très bien
D’un écrit apocryphe
Le bourgeois s’ébouriffe,
Pratique la vertu,
Tutu chapeau pointu! (Hugo, 1963, 413)

From his vantage point, Gavroche sees under the garments of the French bourgeoisie and peeps at the men’s impotence in an apocryphal text (meaning secret, outside the canon, obscure). Like its author, the verses cannot be grasped or seized. Lyn Hejinian declared that “their unstoppable vital energy breaks through the barricades of tyranny”, including that of global capitalism, and added:

Lived intensity is the essence of aesthetic experience. The force of lived intensity is always to some degree political. Gavroche taunts not out of malice but out of experiential intensity. His couplets, improvised and irreverent, like his alternative lifestyle as the head of an alternative family, a squatter and a recycler, leap into being out of a praxis in which the political and the aesthetic converge.
The poet demonstrated how Gavroche’s poetry is an inchoative one, directly preceding the resisting art of the avant-garde. Contemporary activist art must, according to her, “remain indebted to the intuition of love and justice lived in real time and experienced in a community of shared unruined space.”

Oversignifiying as Occupation

Lyn Hejinian returned to Sara Larsen’s quatrains “Merry Hell,” which she had first quoted as an epigraph to her talk. She read in the poet activist’s verse the same insolence as in Gavroche’s couplets and the same signifying excessiveness as in hip hop songs. After demonstrating the semantic and geographic ambiguities suffusing the quatrains, she showed quite à la lettre how Larsen’s poetics counters the epic poems’ narrative authority by inverting the Homeric “darkwine sea” epithet:

i stand at the banks to conduct their Dis appear ance into cruel darkwine thalassa... (Larsen, 2012)

By breaking down the word “disappearance” into three fragments: “dis,” “appear” and “ance,” the speaker invokes Hell to clear Helen from the responsibility for the Trojan War. But Helen is not the only mythical woman Larsen invokes in her poem. The dedication reads “for Helen, for women of the Paris Commune” such as Louise Michel and André Léo, who were accused of being arsonists in the agenda of the anti-socialist propaganda during the last days of the Commune. Lyn Hejinian pictured French anarchist Louise Michel as a contemporary xxth-century black bloc anarchist combatting the edifice of capitalism but whose poetry does not oversignify contrary to Larsen’s or Gavroche’s poems. She also pointed out Michel’s admiration for and correspondence with the French Romantic Victor Hugo.

Being openly overdetermined, “hell” in Sara Larsen’s poem is presented through a wide range of impressions and effects, and is read by Lyn Hejinian as “the overflow of numerous currents.” Larsen’s Hell may be seen as one of the possible instances of “zones of encounter” where riot cops meet rioters on the barricades, in general assemblies at occupied encampments. Nevertheless, she nuanced her argument by stating that these zones are not merely spatial and she quoted from the American theoretician W. J. T. Mitchell, who defines occupation as “an art of duration and endurance [...] and a new language that keeps renewing itself” (Mitchell, 2013, 105-6). According to Lyn Hejinian, occupation is about intensity and intensification; it demands prolongation and a slowing down. It is “both the not yet and the already under way state of social revolution as its long middle,” located in a revolutionary picaresque happening now, while also being yet to come. She then referred to the demands made by some activists of the Vancouver Occupy movement of 2011 as reported by Stephen Collis:

We demand to be able to take time and talk. [...] Capitalism isn’t built for this however, it is built for efficiency. It requires a top-down structure because it needs to move quickly [...]. We demand that we don’t move quickly anymore. Moving quickly has gotten us nothing but environmental destruction, social and economic inequality and exploitation. (Collis, 2012)

Lyn Hejinian showed that this slackening of pace is also made visible in the prosody and in the phrasing of Sara Larsen’s poem. A semantic delay is embodied in the enjambments which also contribute to making the phrasing, and therefore the voicing, more visible if not more readable. Such a fragmentation of sentences evokes speech awkwardness as
well as the “human mike” used in protests. While Larsen focuses on individual words and dismantles them to their very linguistic core, she also uses “agglutination” as a device reminiscent of DJ-sound production and hip hop. Such devices help create a sense of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” in Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s sense of the terms (Deleuze, 1972).

14 Black American rhetorical practice involves a high level of irony and is all about redirecting reference, diverting attention. As Lyn Hejinian pointed out:

It sneezes. [...] Signifying along with other subversive language usages, whether the street argot of Victor Hugo’s France, thieves’ cant or prison slang might all be deemed languages of ‘merry hell.’ There are vital correspondences between all of them and their subtextual political agendas and their antagonistic relationships to structures of established power and authority.

15 In Larsen’s “Merry Hell,” each linguistic unit is turned into a barricade reiterating the slogan of second-wave feminism: “the personal is political.”

16 It also hints at the now very popular book Our Bodies, Ourselves first published in 1971 in the United States and translated since then in many languages. This book did very much to help women reappropriate their bodies and their subjectivities, but Lyn Hejinian suggested that it was not—and still is not—about identity or certainty but about “potentiality, vitality, living.” When relating capitalism to bodies, the effect and result have proven to be mostly vicious and almost cannibalistic. Even though capitalism lacks a body—one’s body fundamentally being personal but not essentially private—and even though the body is very often political, it remains a space of hope according to the poet. In “Merry Hell”, “spirit, semen, CASH” happen to be the currency of a broken “author ity.” Lyn Hejinian argues that such a fascination with etymology and an opening out—if not deflagration—of words seem to contaminate the readers who are being drawn into this explosive and implosive syntax. Not only does the poem contain oversignification and vitality, it also produces them. Its turbulences are not merely thematical but prosodical and deeply structural. Finally, Lyn Hejinian proposed the following argument:

with a poem like ‘Merry Hell,’ we are witnessing an instance of politics as aesthetics that is more than merely analogous to the instances of Occupy that appeared around the world a couple of years ago. Within this perhaps short-lived and certainly decentralized though not necessarily marginal sphere of disobedience, questions of efficacy are moved, questions of sheer intensity and endurance are not. ‘hi, i’m still here’ says the poet of ‘Merry Hell,’ hello i’m alive there is not much bread then again there never was.’

17 Lyn Hejinian interpreted the last line of the poem as a sheer statement of fact, an assertion of presence in the long-middle. She related it to radical women activist writers being in the midst of a struggle to “create an undamaging non-emmiserating unimpoverished life.” She added: “It does indeed seem that it is however merrily hell,” before open-endedly quoting from the last line of the poem:

There is not much bread then again there never was
Discussions and Debates

The conference was followed by questions dealing with the relation between oversignification and Judith Butler’s notion of resignification, the latter redirecting the meaning of words in common speech. Lyn Hejinian was also complimented by the audience on her demonstration and reminder of how subversive Gavroche’s famous and popular lines actually are. The deictic dimension of Larsen’s poem was pointed out through the pun on “dis appearance” (as in “this appearance”) of the poem. She also explained that she was considering changing the term “oversignification” to “hypersignification,” this term being defined by multiple words pointing to multiple meanings and being endowed with a centrifugal force rather than a centripetal one, which might be more appropriate. The pressure on Avant-Garde movements to cut sharply with the past and address political situations was reflected upon before moving on to the lack of funding of the Humanity programs in the United States.

Eventually, the debate ended on the French ZADs (Zones à Aménagements Différés) notably in Notre-Dame-des-Landes and in Nantes. These are ecologically sensitive zones which have to be protected from industrial developments such as airports or dams. From “zones with a deferred building project,” they became “zones to defend” (Zones à Défendre)” and are now being defended by activists named “Zadists.” One could say such zones are “zones of encounter” in the Hejinian sense of the term, or in other words “a zone of high turbulence, a signifying whirlpool or a merry hell.”

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MOS DEF, “Hip Hop” in Black on Both Sides, Mca Distribution, 2009. CD.
APPENDIXES


NOTES

1. “Sara Larsen’s *Merry Hell* was designed and printed by Michael Cross & Stephen Novotny over the course of a hectic week in September in anticipation of Sara Larsen’s reading with Thom Donovan & Suzanne Stein on September 14, 2012” (http://compline.tumblr.com/post/31970657230/sara-larsen-merry-hell).
2. The irregular typography and spacing as they appear in the text are in the original poem.

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*Subjects*: Actualité de la recherche

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