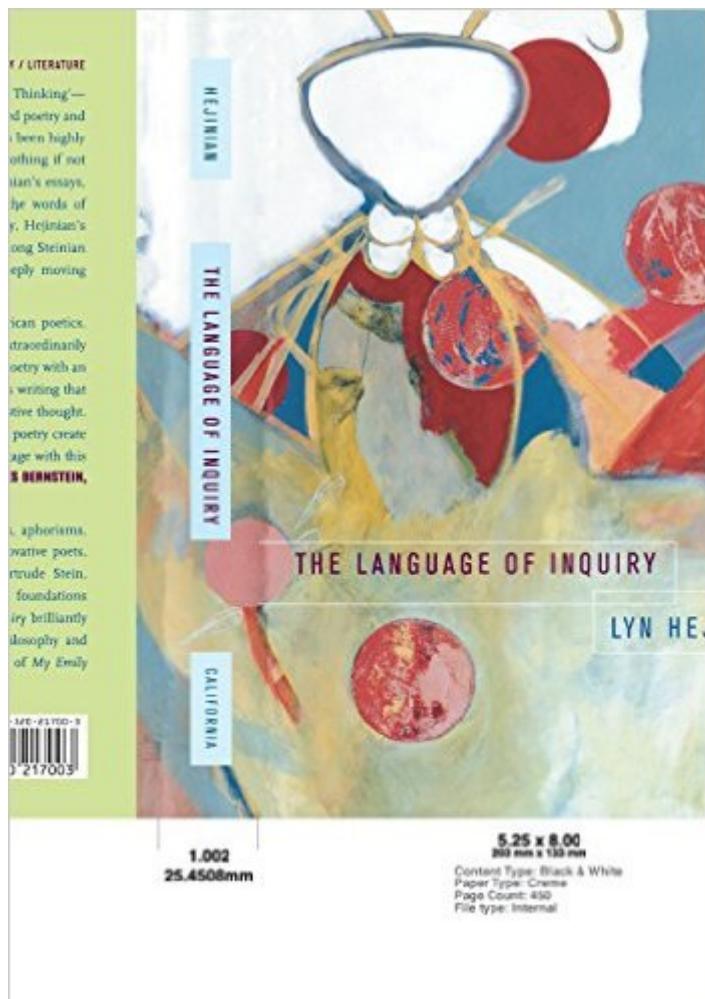


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The Language Of Inquiry



Synopsis

Lyn Hejinian is among the most prominent of contemporary American poets. Her autobiographical poem *My Life*, a best-selling book of innovative American poetry, has garnered accolades and fans inside and outside academia. *The Language of Inquiry* is a comprehensive and wonderfully readable collection of her essays, and its publication promises to be an important event for American literary culture. Here, Hejinian brings together twenty essays written over a span of almost twenty-five years. Like many of the Language Poets with whom she has been associated since the mid-1970s, Hejinian turns to language as a social space, a site of both philosophical inquiry and political address. Central to these essays are the themes of time and knowledge, consciousness and perception. Hejinian's interests cover a range of texts and figures. Prominent among them are Sir Francis Bacon and Enlightenment-era explorers; Faust and Sheherazade; Viktor Shklovsky and Russian formalism; William James, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger. But perhaps the most important literary presence in the essays is Gertrude Stein; the volume includes Hejinian's influential "Two Stein Talks," as well as two more recent essays on Stein's writings.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Lyn Hejinian is a language poet with a philosophical bent who has written a highly thought-provoking book. Although, at times, parts of *The Language of Inquiry* seem to lapse into obscurity, she offers penetrating insights and contentions bound to provoke, many of her own making and some fashioned by the authors she quotes (who must fill her prodigious library). I'm providing a few brief excerpts from her book below, interspersed by my own stray thoughts. She

quotes Benjamin Lee Whorf: "Every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness." My sense is that this is a somewhat extreme view. Translation is an imperfect art but there are many shared cross-cultural constructs. Some parts of foreign thought, nuances in particular, are, however, refractory to translation. So I think there is some truth in what Whorf says. The Whorf quote also glosses over different levels of consciousness, that is, the distinction between raw and primitive experience that is not, or has not yet been, parsed into language as contrasted with reflective language-laden thought. The "lyric dilemma" after all (which Hejinian mentions later in her book) posits that speech is inadequate to the description of experience. Hejinian also writes that "language is an order of reality itself, and not a mere mediating medium" and that "poetry takes as its premise that language . . . is a medium for experiencing experience.

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