



Three Ladies, Three Bodies, Three Poets: A Retro-Neo/phytic Semi-essay

by Maria Damon

*Presented for the Segue panel on “Language Poetry and the Body” in New York City on
May 12, 2007.*

The very fact that I’m focusing on three women poets tells you something about the perhaps antiquated orientation of my thinking...antiquated but not entirely irrelevant because, as I hope to suggest, theoretical models that came into the mainstream of intellectual life in the US during the 1970s-90s still have some purchase on our readings today, just as Language Poetry, which really found its way into public consciousness during the same years, still has powerful reverberations and a significant legacy, and in fact it isn’t “over;” it’s practitioners are still active contributors to public expressive culture and its heirs, now in their early ascendancy, are very much in conversational lineage with its principles and principals. Although only one of the poets I’ll mention is centrally a “language poet,” that is Carla Harryman, the point I want to make is not about coteries and categories but about the ongoing liveliness of the theoretical texture surrounding and inspiring these works and their creators, and the spatialized biopolitics of contemporary poetry and poetics –in the hope that this

theoretical surround still has something to offer in the current political terrifyingness and, especially, in its accompanying anti-intellectualism.

The experience of reading the first two installments of *The Grand Piano*, an “experiment in collaborative autobiography” in which ten of the west coast language poets “get personal” underscores, in my reading, the degree to which an urban, bohemian, relational movement through and across cityscapes informed the intense matrix out of which the movement (always a vexed term in that it implies boundedness and authority) constellated itself. But perhaps the poet to verbalize the spatialized movements of consciousness most acutely is Leslie Scalapino, someone with a salutary (and salutary) relationship of adjacency to language poetry. “buildings are at the far end” from her classic “that they were at the beach” (1985) places a hyper-alert observational consciousness in a series of disorienting urban spaces, one of which includes the body of a dying beggar against a backdrop of large ships in a harbor, a reminder of the centrality of the Bay Area to the military-industrial complex which was named in an Eisenhower address to West Coast intellectuals in the 1950s. Surface is the space of engagement in Scalapino’s text, reminding us of Walter Benjamin’s brilliantly idiosyncratic reading of Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle in his study of the poetics of 19th century capitalism, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” The poet’s consciousness (and the eventual page of the published book) is the surface membrane, the page of human tissue, on which the everyday trauma of history is written; the poet’s mandate is to record all these shocks while refusing to succumb to the lure of that compromised form of numbed, individuated consciousness that relies on repression, that is, the division of awareness and unconsciousness, which makes life

bearable for most people. However, unlike Baudelaire and his fellow poets, whom Benjamin describes as fighting for their lives in the act of writing –dueling, stabbing, jabbing the page with the pen in a demented complement (with an e not an i) t the way in which an overstimulated, automatized businessman parries his way through a crowd –Scalapino empties out a form of attached to individualism into pure sensorium and hyper-awareness leads to non-resistance rather than reactive jolts of consciousness. This attempt at a generative but not glibly re-orienting receptivity is not without its own costs, difficulties and traumas, however, and therein lies the drama and human interest of Scalapino’s psychologically and phenomenologically ambitious projects. One might argue that gender plays a role in this tightrope walk of all-seeingness and acute sensitivity to bodies and buildings in relation to each other in a journey through an urban landscape, though, through what she describes as an intention to “change *location’s relation* to construction of meaning –that one would reproduce construction of self as context, in that, *ground itself is altered first*, and occurs as only relational,” (R-hu) Scalapino raises the intellectual and ethical stakes of what might otherwise be a banal and overly familiar female paranoia into an empowering exercise in nono-violence and non-duality.

The other Benjamin text to which it would be illuminating to juxtapose “buildings are at the far end” is, of course, Eingangstrasse, or “One-Way Street,” in which the dedicatory epigraph spatializes the body of the author in an alarming attempt at romantic (small-r) declaration: “ This street is named/ Asja Lacis Street/ after her who/ as an engineer/ cut it through the author.” One can find there some wonderful aphorisms that are congenial to the Language enterprise, such as “only the more feeble

and distracted take an inimitable pleasure in closure, feeling that their lives have thereby given back to them.” And throughout, moments in which space itself is affective or anthropomorphized: “the horror of apartments,” “At the beginning of the long downhill lane that leads to the house of ——, whom I visited each evening, is a gate. After she moved, the opening of its archway henceforth stood before me like an ear that has lost the power of hearing.” Although it’s possible and even somewhat amusing to read “One-way Street” as a declaration of the inevitability of amour fou, that is, that Benjamin’s infatuation with Lacis is a matter over which he has no control, it is more interesting to see it also, as in “buildings are at the far end,” as a study of spatialized subjectivity and the distribution of agentic energies across a myriad of urban, industrial, pastoral (the “industrial park” phenomenon), and/or interiorized city-scapes or, in anthropologist Arjun Apparudai’s term, ideoscapes.

Second instance. Carla Harryman opens both her contributions to *Grand Piano I* and *II* (the ten-part “experiment in collective autobiography” co-written with nine other poets) with discussions of bodies in the military, male and/or female, then and/or now, Viet Nam and/or Iraq, as cannon-fodder. In part II, moreover, she addresses the urgent issue of Habeas Corpus under threat, and “loving to fuck on the beach,” in the same paragraph. The body of Harryman’s work is an eroticized, optimistic body that understands the stakes of its own optimism; that is, it is sensitive to social tragedies at local, national and global registers. She writes about war as a gender tragedy in the US, and the strange, class-specific way in which the environmental conservation movement in California was born in reaction to a 1969 oil spill. Moreover, her Part II opening’s direct invocation of Kathy Acker (“my language is stained with her

language” she writes in relation to her borrowed phrase “I absolutely loved to fuck”) indexes both an era of sex radicalism *and* the ways in which women’s deaths are still often tied to the relatively undervalued nature of medical research on women’s health and reproductive issues. Harryman’s autobiographical snippet moves back and forth between the 1970s and the dismal state of current US politics –and thru it runs a strong embodied presence; as witness, especially in Part I, the barely veiled expressions, on the part of several of the other autobiographers, of desire recollected in tranquility that is nonetheless somewhat wistful.

However, despite her keen and sustained attention to the ravaged materiality of bodies under the vicious Moloch of the state, one of the most dramatic statements Harryman makes about bodies and gender –linking the question of authorship to that of the body –is not in her discussion of the military as a means of acculturating boys and increasingly girls to an unhappy national socius, but in her challenge/homage to Robert Creeley in Part I:

Now if I write this here:

I will go to the garden.

I will be a romantic. I will sell

myself in hell,

in heaven also I will be.

How does it differ from Robert Creeley’s having written it? (p. 31)

This is, several decades later, a direct confrontation of Foucault’s iconic, non-rhetorical question: “What does it matter who is speaking?” She responds, “The poem does not cohere, if I author it” because, as a “lady,” she cannot both identify with the word

“Lady,” which appears elsewhere in the poem, and with other words that point to the lady’s function as a negative space, a gate for the poet’s consciousness to enter a romantic/poetic space. Can she be both gateway and consciousness availing itself of gateway? (Is this something that Scalapino, with a different, non-Western metaphysics, is attempting?) For that matter, what is difference, and how did the body come to be fetishized as a site of difference? What is the relationship between authorship and its productions and reproductions, and the social and biological production and reproduction of gendered bodies? No so much the body in space/mind, as Scalapino’s work attends to, but the gendered body in history, is Harryman’s focus.

Third and finally, the love-child of Mikhail Bakhtin and Hélène Cixous who can only be Nada Gordon. This the youngest of my thumbnail sketch case-studies both biographically/biologically and in terms of writerly lineage: also a West Coast poet, she studied with the first generation of Language poets in the 1980s. Nada’s most recent book, *Folly*, instanciates a happy throwback to the glory days of *écriture féminine* of which, like the usefulness of the work of Benjamin and Foucault, we have not seen the last (just a few weeks ago, an MFA student in poetry at the University of Minnesota asked me breathlessly if I’d heard of this amazing essay by “Lucy” Irigaray entitled “When Our Lips Speak Together!). Though Gordon uses Erasmus rather than Cixous or Kristeva as her textual referent throughout *Folly*, the hegemony brigade is smiling in the wings of her burlesque show. Although we all have our problems with the type of reductive, stylistic essentialism of which French feminism can be an instance at its most triumphalist, certainly one can’t help but think of the relevance to

Gordon's work of an essay like "The Laugh of the Medusa," with its emphasis on the irrationally, terrifyingly ludic under a specifically feminine (though not necessarily biologically female, whatever that might be) aegis of the man-killer with an over-active head of hair, dementia and brainpower. The artwork featured in *Folly*, drawings by Gary Sullivan of the author's collages (reminiscent of Djuna Barnes's drawings for her Ladies' Almanack), foregrounds voluptuous female figures with animal heads, some in fact decorated with snakes or pendulous hairlike parts, such as the dragon/gorgon-headed and plump-thighed dancer on p. 17, or the crowned Al-Jolson-style-blackface woman in a tight evening dress on p. 49. One could construe *Folly* –the book and the concept –as a utopian alternative to *Madness*, as in the Last Poets' anthemic "This is Madness," a political poem they performed at every concert in the 1970s (and still do).

Gordon delights in pressuring and questioning the category of "the human" by hybridizing and grotesquing it through masks, mythology and placement of it in various threshold or border contexts: flying fish with women's heads, dream or web-derived content, and so forth. Need I actually utter the word "carnavalesque?" To contrast Gordon's relationship to the city to Scalapino's twenty years earlier, one can look at "Coney Island Avenue," a giddily exhilarated catalogue of sensory stimuli from a crowded street of small so-called ethnic businesses; in a way, it's a nostalgic reclaiming of a Woody-Guthrie-style patriotism, especially as reflected in the Klezmatics's posthumous rendering of Guthrie's Mermaid Avenue, a paean to Coney Island's "diversity" that, in their lush, overproduced version, approaches Gordon's hyperbole-as-style. The poem, a kind of defiant response to post-9/11 nativism, is unmarked by Scalapino's disembodied but diffuse alertness or the traumatized,

compensatory deadness of Benjamin's nineteenth-century creatures adapting to automatisations. It celebrates an ethnographic sense of "local color" that is both anachronistic and, perhaps, a meaningful intervention into the predations of neoliberal globalism.