

The Content of Essay Form: On Reading Carla Harryman's *Adorno's Noise*

by Jill Darling

...whereas this prose even as it changes from instant to instant sustains a certain angularity that may have everything to do with there being no more casement windows to open, which is a phrase written by someone else.

-- Carla Harryman

I.

The above quote, taken from her essay titled with a line from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, "*no more casement windows to open*," in many ways elucidates a reading of the whole of Carla Harryman's new book, *Adorno's Noise*. The book is divided into two sections, "Adorno's Noise" and "Headless Heads," each of which includes a number of essays that together create a text that "changes from instant to instant" while it "sustains a certain angularity" that, well, may or not have everything to do with the lack of casement windows...though upon that thought we could certainly ponder further. This particular essay begins with Anaïs Nin and a discussion of the casement windows, continues through some memories of the narrator's own relationships with a few particular windows, casement and otherwise, and reflects on the moment in Berlin in which the essay was written. The Adorno line, like a casement window, opens the view of the essay onto a scene of reflection and connection as it focuses on, and moves around, Nin:

...first she writes then she impresses the writing on paper. Or, as these are

actions in a series: first she loves then she writes then impresses the work on paper. Or as these are a plural labor: first she engages in a sensual communication that ultimately creates a vertical and horizontal access then she revisits mentally the pleasure just engaged positioning herself in an upright seated position. Using a pad of paper and a quill, she converts the work into labor, giving birth to it dissonantly, then facing a black machine many times her own weight and with a heavy rolling mechanism clutched, Anais thrusts ink back and forth on its flat plane across sheets of paper until the record of every maneuver including the forceful thrusts are consigned to the immortal life of circulation.

(Harryman 6)

The description is literal and metaphorical as it details the action of writing and self publishing on a printing press, but it is also sensual—pointing to the erotic nature of some of Nin’s fiction writing maybe—in which the repetition and movement of the language turns the printing press process into a physical experience that creates a text, that births an artifact of love, that will exist and circulate long after the creator of the work. As I move through this essay, only the third piece in the book, I realize it is at this moment that I dive in completely—into the rhythm and sound of the prose, into the dream that moves between Nin and the image of the narrator nearly decapitated by a non-casement, vertical push-pull window (that only after the detailed description, do we find that “it never happened even though it does correspond to a perception, if not a feeling, that I could not communicate in any other way” (8)). And here once again we are aware of the movement of and within the

text that challenges our own preconceived notions of genre and narrative, of language and poetic strategy, as we read from both inside the text and hovering above it while revising our own understandings of what it means to write, and to read, a book of essays. Harryman writes, “If we are referring to her Diaries, Nin wrote in much closer proximity to actual experience than I, if actual experience is taken to be what happens. If we are referring to her novels, then, instead, the writing is a dream or dream state being enacted on the page” (8). The space opened via the negotiable “form” of essay, as Harryman presents it, incorporates the dream and the “what happened” into a prose style that relates experience in literal, and other, ways.

In *The Next American Essay* John D’Agata writes:

I want you preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts for the sake of facts. A fact comes from the Latin word *factum*—literally, “a thing done”—a neuter past participle construction that suggests a fact is merely something upon which action has happened. It’s not even a word that can do its own work. From the same Latin root for fact we get the words “artifice,” “counterfeit,” “deficient,” “façade,” “infect,” “misfeasance,” and “superficial.” “There are no facts,” Emerson once wrote, “only art.” Let’s call this a collection of essays, then—a book about human wondering.

(1-2)

The essay then may be a place for a great degree of openness and discovery, a place to throw open the casement windows and let the fresh air blow in. In *Break Every Rule*, Carole Maso considers the lyric or hybrid nature of her own fiction writing,

and the possibilities that open when a writer pushes against the constraints of traditional narrative construction. She writes, “Prose, it seems to me, has the great ability to *dramatize* states of mind, as well as incorporating other kinds of “action” and development” (32) and “this sort of work requires a strange combination of both utter control and complete recklessness” (34). The writer has to be willing to expand the process of construction so that “states of mind” can be enacted in complex, thoughtful, and active terms. She has to be willing “Not to tyrannize with narrative. [To] allow a place for the reader to live, to dream” (48). In “Human Universe” Charles Olson explains exactly this: “Art does not seek to describe but to enact”; in the merging of form and content, the work is rhythmic, kinetic, energetic (162). “For any of us, at any instant,” he tells us, “are juxtaposed to any experience, even an overwhelming single one, on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive which we inherit can declare” (157).

“Juxtaposed to any experience,” he writes. Not only is there no single perspective on an experience, whichever angle one chooses may be impossible to articulate—or reenact—through language. Instead, each (re)telling is always, only, a representation of that experience; it is here that the real and fictional merge.

In another essay, Harryman begins, “If normality is death then regard for the object rather than communication is suspect” (11). She finishes the paragraph with another meta-commentary on the process/progress of the text itself: “Bear with me for a little while. You and I will go on an excursion together and discover something along the way if we’re lucky. If we are not lucky, neither you nor I will be worse off than when we started. I can’t

guarantee this but it is something I believe with enough confidence to proceed to the next sentence. The next sentence is not a death sentence” (11). This address to the reader, or even possibly to the writer herself, encourages one to keep going on this journey of discovery because it is only by getting away from the comforts of “normality” that we might learn new things. As it moves from one sentence to the next, the text opens both inward and outward offering insights and observations about itself, ourselves, and about the world. The next sentence, in fact, reads: “The thought of strange planets thirty-five light years away produces expansive feelings about this world, the world in which you and I eat, breathe, think and love” (11). The essay continues with a series of thoughts, among other things, on the role of Pluto in the future after its demotion from the status of planet; it moves among contemporary topics, often feeling only minimally like a personal essay with an “I” that is more philosopher than narrator of one’s personal business. The theme of space and extraterrestrial phenomena generally makes for endless musing, yet in this work Harryman constantly turns from any expectation we might have of a writer using space to theorize “terrestrial” existence. She writes, “Rarely do ordinary citizens prefer casting their wishes too numerously. It is horrifying to think of burning out stars, planets, the heavenly bodies with too many wishes” (13). The idea later continues:

It has been said that just as we feel better when we resonate with our wishes, when they send back signs that help us to locate ourselves objectively, so too do we like to dilute the density of wishes: we do not want too much of ourselves to glue up that which we are not. Sometimes the conflation of outer with inner space causes problems, even mass confusion.

Hurricanes flare up impatiently flinging our furniture and debris onto our concrete identities. Our roles in society are attacked by what we own. It is hard in this context to stand up and be simple, to have a body dependant on other bodies, a being contiguous with other beings.

(13-14)

This unexpected perspective on the tension between our inner and outer selves, the notion of the concreteness of the wish—used sparingly so as not to cause more problems—and the call to “stand up and be simple” and to be bodies “contiguous with other beings” becomes plain yet smart advice (following upon a critical observation) for a contemporary society filled with individuals always complicating—maybe unnecessarily—their own subjective experiences.

The essay comes back to earth, deliberates its own status as something between music and narrative, contemplates the connections between language, pleasure, and death, and turns to a discussion of the relationship between the aesthetic and the social:

This is the beauty and the paradox of the aesthetic artifact called a corpse. A theory or language might tell us there is no difference between, let’s say, a depiction of a corpse in a photograph in a war zone and the artifact of the body, which has been made into what we call a work of art...Language says the corpse is a corpse. It cannot distinguish between one body and another, therefore the photographed corpse in a war zone is a universal corpse: we all die. Death is inevitable even if, as we can see, this particular death was violent: it came too soon.

This idea of the aesthetic beauty of violent images in a sense comes from Susan Sontag, yet is turned here in the midst of this wandering, but pointed, essay on the state of contemporary affairs in which there is no personal and no political but instead some sort of complex collection of details and debris which have, somehow, to be arranged. Harryman's text may be one such arrangement. We can read each fragment, each reflection, each image as part of a complex constellation that is human experience. "The beauty of the object betrays the universality of death" (19). The difficulty is in the negotiation of beauty and war. What do we make of ourselves when we find aesthetic pleasure in work that is supposed to "capture" brutality, like in war images or, as is Sontag's example, photographs of 9-11? The inability to articulate our own varied and complex response to intentional or unintentional aesthetic forms cannot always (ever?) be simplified into neatly presented narratives that explain away human nature and understanding. Or, to put it another way, "It is true we have come to know one kind of conspiracy through another. The conspiratorial feeling, its skin-touch and verve, has been tossed into a different salad, one served around the world but not in my backyard where I have already eaten" (Harryman 19).

It soon becomes obvious to me that writing about or in response to *Adorno's Noise* could culminate in my own book-length reflection on all of the ways the essay can be a space of "human wondering." I will try to keep it short. There is no easy and concise way to think about this book. That, in part, is its beauty. Every time I return to each piece something different happens: to me, to the work, to my thinking either about the work or the space of the essay as a space to do something, almost to do anything, but not quite, this

elements” (Adorno 140). The process of creating art is the process of transforming the “real” into something else, into an object that will function on its own terms.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes, “There is nothing in art, not even in the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed. All aesthetic categories must be defined both in terms of their relation to the world and in terms of art’s repudiation of that world” (138-9). We might interpret that it is in this repudiation, in this distancing from the world that the art work comes closest to actually dealing with that world. The translation of elements of the world into aesthetic form both separates the two and brings them closer together. Harryman’s formally motivated essay style—whether we call it lyric, or new, or hybrid—gives us a simultaneous distance and intimacy; she opens the space of the work so that we, the readers, have the opportunity to enter, and linger, and think about the world that the text offers, on our own terms. Adorno writes, “form is essential to art...it mediates content...form is the artifacts’ coherence, however self-antagonistic and refracted, through which each and every successful work separates itself from the merely existing” (142). The content of each of the essays in *Adorno’s Noise* is enacted through its own particular formal style and construction. The variety of textures, layers, voices, syntaxes, and ideas that are constructed into stimulating, insightful, and challenging pieces of writing in the book successfully separates this book from the “merely existing” and moves it into the realm of the extraordinarily important. In its complexity it moves, and is moving. “Artworks move toward the idea of a language of things only by way of their own language, through the organization of their disparate elements; the more they are syntactically articulated in themselves, the more eloquent they become in all their

elements” (Adorno 140).

II.

Adorno's Noise is certainly a work that organizes disparate elements. But before they are organized, elements have to be accumulated. We might look at the work as an example of what Kristen Prevallet calls “Relational Investigative Poetics.”

The Relational poet ... rather than sitting on mountaintops waiting for genius to strike, looks around and begins collecting, accreting, gathering... [Glissant's] emphasis on the accumulation of sediments implies an apprehension of the world not as an unshaped bundle of materials waiting to be formed, but rather as a diverse and extensive patterning that is already formed and transforming, already imbued with a logic. That which is fixed in form is only fixed because of all that moves around it.

(Prevallet)

The accumulation of the diverse and extensive takes on a life of its own in the second part of *Adorno's Noise*, titled “Headless Heads.” This last section of the book begins with another line from Adorno, “it lives in the mimetic,” a line which resonates throughout these last pages. Following a seeming ode to “Headless Heads” is a personal letter addressed to “S” which states that the “writing that follows is addressed to you. You will note that it has headings but no head” (71). The personal address to S weaves in and out of an extended reflection on Kensaburo Oe's novel *Rouse Up Young Men of the New Age*, and a discussion of

Robert Smithson and Oe's interests in Blake, among other associations that appear throughout. Harryman plays with the notion of headless heads in some of its multiple possible meanings; although she acknowledges that "somewhere in the distant background of Oe's novel lurks a postwar history signified by these "headless heads" of state—with each qualifying the power of the other while "heading" the transformation of Japan," this political/historical commentary remains only as subtext in the novel. In any case Harryman turns her attention to the story in *Rouse Up* of "the famous novelist Yukio Mishima's decapitated head" which was captured (the incident of decapitation) on television. Apparently Mishima decapitated himself as part of an intentionally performed ritual "that took place at the Eastern Division Headquarters of the National Self Defense Forces in Ichigaya" in November 1970 (76). Most interesting, in Harryman's reflection, is Oe's non-description of the head and the media's "recessing" of it: "...the head was also recessed in the writing itself as if the writing were mimicking the media's representational tactics. Only a fuzzy impression was offered of the horrifying object and of its owner's long-planned seppuku ritual" (76). The title of the chapter that includes this story, it is noted, is the title of a painting by Blake, *The Ghost of the Flea*, which is "one in a series of "visionary heads" representing portraits of great men" (77). As it turns out, each of Oe's chapter titles come from Blake.

The intertextuality and emergent connections between seeming disparate elements and ideas saturate this work. In the piece "*waning space*," Harryman cites Smithson who comments on "romanticism and materialism" and then himself cites Peter Brooks, who is

citing the novels of Robbe-Grillet, and finally all of this reflects back on the work at hand (Harryman's *Headless Heads*) and the attention to form and aesthetics. She writes, "I have chosen to emphasize certain features of "surface" in Oe's novel, at the expense of "story" or allegory. Perhaps I too am performing a kind of romantic enactment of materiality as aesthetic motivation" (79). The work proceeds to hit a variety of registers concerning Oe's headless heads, the narrator's personal memories and impressions—some of which focus on characters designated only by their letters "G" and "D"—time spent in Germany, and a painting by Gerhard Richter, in which his "teenage daughter is used for a model and in it she appears as a dead adult head—cut off by the canvas just below the neck." Harryman reflects that in this painting "youth, beauty and history do not come together in a single image, but rather the image makes a kind of agitated alliance with that which exceeds its capacity to represent a singular thing" (90).

Finally, Harryman ends this section both coming back to Oe's novel and further commenting on the form and function of the text itself, which concludes yet leaves open the whole of this book:

For me writing often involves a necessary dissimulation, dismantling, undoing, refusing, renegotiating, criticizing, and diminishing of the weight and value of symbols. Or, I could say encounters with powerful symbols including the "phallus," "the flag," "the canonical," ... "the binary," "the war," "the government," ... lead to questions about what is presumed to be held in common.

The essay, in Harryman's terms, surely seems to act as a space for a poetics of investigation and relation. It "intersects with the flow of geography, but also with the flow of plants, people, economies, vocabularies, and histories, it serves as a slowing down of language, fostering attention to memories, documents, languages, and myths, encouraging a spiraling examination of—and thus a taking responsibility for—knowledge and history" (Prevallet). "Through these practices," Prevallet continues, "poetry [or prose] is infused with the flow of larger reality, a space occupied with objects in constant motion, and with people—us—who exist in relation to both our personal histories, our political inheritance, and the strata of the land upon which we are standing." By way of the essay form, Harryman accumulates, extends, and negotiates this land. She creates spaces of investigation, wondering, and discovery, while putting multiple elements (diaparate and otherwise) into relation. In *Adorno's Noise*, we witness, in Adorno's terms, a world transformed, eloquent in all of its elements.