

CARLA HARRYMAN: AN INTRODUCTION

Eighteen years after the publication of her first book, Carla Harryman remains a difficult writer to place. One of the many challenges, from the outset, her writing presents is the question of genre. Of the nine books she's published, no two have been characterized under the same genre heading. In fact, one of Harryman's central achievements is to place the conventions of poetry (especially experimental poetry) in dialogue with the conventions of prose narrative, fiction, essays and plays. In this dialogue, in which not only poetry but also narrative, "might be thought to be a character" ["Toy Boats" AI 107], no genre is allowed a final triumph. Such a dialogue may be precisely what is needed in the present moment to dislodge poetry from its relatively recent marginalized status as a mere aesthetic object.

"Percentage," Harryman's first chapbook, has long been out of print. Some of the pieces in it, however, have appeared in more recent collections. Aside from the title piece, a play for two voices, it includes three other "mixed genre investigations": "Cult Music," the minimalist lyric "Obstacle" and "Heavy Curtains," a collaboration with Barrett Watten. The look of these pieces is characteristically discursive prose, yet the disjunctions between the sentences read more like the sentence-based, philosophical

poetry of John Ashbery. While other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, such as Bruce Andrews, have modelled their work more on the earlier Ashbery of *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), Harryman's early work has far more affinities with the Ashbery of *Three Poems* (1972) and *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970). This can be seen in "Cult Music":

Got worn out screaming in the theatre as if words
could be a substitute for hard work; furthermore,
the soft line of the jaw by pampering leans into
the steaming table, mutton, greens and potatoes.
Fed period music in a boxcar. Something infan-
tilism—roams around, captures monsters, wants
alot. A great mind to waste.

Although meaning is not discarded, the reader is practically forced to piece together how the relationship between words and hard work connects with the jaw's relationship to potatoes. Unlike in most conventional poetry, the "theatre" is not a defined place that is fleshed out in the course of the poem. The traditional expectations that poetry have a locatable "speaker" and "situation" are discarded. Instead, the acts of writing, thinking and selecting are foregrounded. This writing places Harryman firmly in the tradition of the 20th Century "avant garde," whether one sees such a tradition in terms of Stein's "continuous present," Joyce's and Woolf's "stream of consciousness" or the French Surrealists' practice of "automatic writing." The political and cultural themes of this piece—which resonate more strongly to a reader familiar with her later work—are less foregrounded than the style of the writing. The "meaning" of this piece is the liberation from conventional forms that its stylistic disjunctiveness allows. When Harryman writes "A great mind to waste," it may be read as less of a lament for the loss of coherence as a celebration of the power of such stylistic freedoms.

In "Percentage," the centerpiece of this book, Harryman can be seen marking out a literary territory which is more distinctively her own. Although it has been performed as a play, "Percentage" can be just as effective if seen as a dialogue poem. In an interview, Harryman warns against reading it in terms of a conventional play on one hand and poems like Yeats' "Dialogue of Self and Soul" on the other: "[N]one of the speeches are contextualized, so it does mimic perhaps the movement of one's silent speech that could be called a manifestation of the self; however, it is not interested in identity. There is no dilemma of the self being proposed....I wanted to hear the voice liberated from narrative determinants but to allow it speech-like gestures." (68, 69) "Percentage" may not be interested in identity, but it is interested in relationship. The two characters, "D" and "E", are carefully differentiated although it may not seem so on first reading. Because the conversation is presented by means of highly dense metaphorical associations that may require a very well-read mind to catch, it almost seems as if the characters don't listen to each other at the play's beginning:

D: The staggering kind of...

E: I want to talk about the gloves.

D: THE?

E: In town yesterday several kids found a hidden orchestra pit.

D: I want you to tell me what's on your mind.

E: I want to go to the store. You know what I know and then you don't anymore so what happened?

As this dialogue continues, it becomes clearer that their idioms and points of view are presented as opposite. It becomes a stichomythia in which E listens to D more than D listens to E. E is more demanding, playfully judgmental as well as more interested in the improvisatory making of a relationship ("I like presents") while D is more prone to memory, flights of fancy, narra-

tive (s/he tells two stories) and deterministic self-dramatization. Although Steve Benson has written that, "the two personae share a virtually equal status in perpetual imbalances, destabilizing their own and each other's *modus operandi* in an effort to realize equality," (22) there is also a decided asymmetry in which D virtually becomes E's straightman.

When performed in 1978, both D and E were played by women, Harryman herself and Eileen Corder. And, just as narrative is absent from this piece, so are blatant gender markers. Nonetheless, part of the point of this piece, as in her contemporaneous play *Third Man* (whose eponymous character bears more than a little resemblance to this play's D), is to question what has historically been called male and female, and how to reallocate these roles both within a person and within society. Regardless of whether the relationship between D and E is homosexual or heterosexual, the erotic tension between these two voices is undeniable. E plays the role of the seducer, wants to be disturbed, loves imitating, reacts to D's self-absorption. After a while E becomes aware of the futility of ridiculing D and finally says "I'm going to make up my own cardgame so I don't have to look at yours." E's last speech is a complaint about D being absent even while present. D seems to be more to blame for the failure to connect, yet D's last line ("Water seeps in.") shows that E does not win an unqualified success.

Harryman has characterized her second book, *Under The Bridge* (1980), as a book of experimental fiction and poetry. As is usually the case with Harryman, it is hard to specify exactly which pieces would fit under which category. At 58 pages, this book offers a more substantial collection of early Harryman than *Percentage*. Although its 19 pieces, ranging from less than a page to the 9 page prose-poem, "Third Rail," are built around paragraphs rather than stanzas, it remains her most purely lyrical book to date. The prose-poems that characterize it contrast with her later works in that the emphasis here is on the tension

between thought and the play of language. Questions of narrative structures such as characters and plot, though not entirely absent from this book, are less central than questions that may stem from the spatial conceit the title, *Under The Bridge*, raises. Tom Mandel has written that under the surface of this book's writing "there is a strong logic of connected thoughts and literary forms, syllogistic, brilliant, and even learned. But then such knowledge and certainty is held at arm's length, even mocked. The writing toys with, plays upon, improvises against, and just generally swoops all around this underground structure with a tremendous permission and inner illumination that comes from the knowledge of structure." (24) One of the ways a structure is made visible is through its use of the titular word "bridge" as a dividing line between two orders of existence. The structural conceit is that of a bridge seen as a boundary. This boundary, however, is not static, but ever shifting and hard to locate ("Boundaries mark the time spent looking for boundaries" 39). In the "Forward" to the book, Harryman writes: "Abstractions, fundamental photographic representations of unembellished objects, swarm onto the bridge." (9) On the other side of the bridge are "too human humans...who behaved as if thought was a curse on matter." (46) Between these two extremes Harryman alternates between celebration of the times when she's "engaged in the moment the mind collapses under pressure into full detail (40)" and times when she fears these "frightening packages of detail" (41). She is not content to accept the traditional poetic stance of the "fortunate fall" from thought into immanence. Neither is she content to remain an abstraction. The moments of anti-Cartesian synthesis occur most successfully not when "bridges above water follow the construction of the water," (38) however, but when "a bridge collapses water into wave" (40) as well as when:

the conscious woman on the boat in the harbor,
the one who drives everyday back and forth across
the water to the island returning with her catch,
jeers at the animals who bark under the docks,
meaning that she has no patience with anyone who
tries to please her”(27)

Although most of the pieces in *Under The Bridge* subordinate linear narrative to a looser, more lyric, mapping of the subjectivity, even in this book such clear narrative passages are not absent. Perhaps the best example of such a straightforward narrative is “Au Nom:”

It was after midnight. There wasn't any moonlight
that I could see but lots of light inside. I was there.
You were permanent. It seemed like there was about
to be a dance. It was all very agitated. The street seemed
loaded down. We couldn't hold each other up. No pre-
planned program. It wasn't exactly like that. It was
more like a space we didn't notice. “Do you like this?”
“I don't know, I like everything about you.” What's
enough. We were oversensitized. I tried to hit you in
the stomach. You tried to block me. Neither one of us
missed, although neither one of us was precise. (33)

This piece, reprinted and recontextualized in *The Middle* (1983), puts the lyric musings on abstract dualisms that are more central to many of the other pieces in the book in dialogue with narrative conventions. It may seem that the speaker is speaking to another person, but it's equally likely that the other the speaker is positioning herself in relation to is the *writing* itself. By making the relationship between the form and content of the writing part of the content of the writing, this piece foreshadows such later work of Harryman's as “Sublimation.” Another piece con-

structured around a tight narrative, "Architecture and Landscape of All Countries," begins, "Sometimes it seems that people are children living in caves," and presents a comic picture of a matriarchal family in the cave in which the speaker casts herself as a child. Aside from the playful feminism in this piece, it also raises a riddle about representation. For if people are children living in caves, then the mother and the father presented here are not, strictly speaking, people. By calling attention to the fictiveness of the family romance painted here, Harryman opens up a space for alternative representations of the family.

The dominant pleasures of *Under The Bridge*, however, remain more the abstract ones of experimental lyric poetry than those of narrative. In "Sex Story," for instance, Harryman writes "I've been trying to get to the sex story but it's hard not to be crowded out." The long poem, "Third Rail" is probably the best example of the difficult joy to be had in such crowding out. Although Harryman is not usually celebrated for purely aesthetic pleasures, Mandel finds them in "the movement of the vowels through this work" and shows how Harryman is "more devoted to that variety and enjoyed for that variety than any writer I can think of: ('broom in hand, mama's rose, pudgy in baby's eyes' 25)."

According to Mandel, in between *Under The Bridge* and *The Middle* (1983), "Balzac, Colette and Stendahl entered Carla's writing (or emerged from it), and *Property* (1982) is like some incredible historical novel about kin who move about on vehicles of instant apprehension: it used to take 500 pages to get to the west; now it can be done in 22." (27) But although *Property* certainly constitutes a radical departure for Harryman, it is not a novel. In fact, it is more genreless than any of her previous books, partially because it, provisionally at least, accepts a wider range of genre conventions. Divided into 7 sections this writing, though mainly prose is, in the words of Jean Day, "likely at any moment to jump straight into dialogue or snatches of verse

skimmed off the flux of daily life. Its behavior is polymorphous. Its impulse isn't formal experimentation per se, but a push accurately to be as well as represent an hectic, ordering and partial language." (120) It combines the dialogic emphasis of "Percentage" and "Third Man" with the avant-garde lyricism of *Under The Bridge* with startling results. More explicitly than in *Under The Bridge*, the idea of private sentiment and the inflation of the individual voice is completely undermined. Yet, unlike other L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, Harryman does not reject subjectivity or the person. Rather, she reminds us that the root meaning of "person" is mask and, as such, is always and already social. Day's useful essay/review of this book gives many examples of how verbal forms become "characters and as such engage in power relationships.... 'Intentionality,' for instance, 'is obstinate'." (120) Harryman herself has written that "*Property* imitates characters as if they were words or syntax" (70).

The Middle (1983) shares with *Property* a wide stylistic range. Yet, its emphasis is more didactic and polemical. If *Property* seems to work against the backdrop of a traditional novel, *The Middle* works against the backdrop of a traditional essay and the seemingly autobiographical and narrative elements weaved into the polemic could recall Virginia Woolf's rejection of the strictures of the conventional essay in her *A Room Of One's Own*. Like Woolf's "essay," *The Middle* was originally given as a talk. Because of the digressive leaps and mixed genres here, critics have claimed that Harryman has no point to make. David Seidlower has argued that *The Middle* is "not a polemic; it's a book about a certain kind of experience.... aspects of issues are raised but conclusions are not drawn" (27,29). Yet, in an interview, Harryman herself makes it quite clear that that book has a didactic element that should not be overlooked. "In *The Middle*," she writes:

Freud was used as a household word or as a location—or as an excuse to localize an examination. The place *Freud* is related to the place *tragedy*—“an interior cosmogeny of fate.” Tragedy, when viewed from the perspective of being central to culture, is not an extreme. Same with Freud. When seen from the point of view of an improviser, one who works off the idea that if there is a “center” it is everywhere and where one might choose to move to, or make, or be in..., Freud might represent an extreme of cultural identity and place—interior.”(62)

In addition to this critique of Freud’s tragic deterministic view of life, *The Middle* also challenges Freud from a feminist perspective:

[A]n outsider like me, i.e. a female, one who provides the “background” or subcentricity to the male—the central figure in Freud—might feel free to create an outsider’s vocabulary. And I do not have access to tragedy in the same way because of, for instance, social uses of languages. In one scenario, *Man* is a tragic figure and *women* and *children* are merely victims. In another scenario man is a tragic figure and women and children are demonic. All of this is a kind of frozen and all-too-powerful ideological hysteria.(62)

Yet, *The Middle* can not be reduced to a critique of Freud. It may be read as a transitional work in which Harryman sets up a wider range of idioms in which to work out a problematic similar to the central one of *Under The Bridge*. Whereas we are still invited to see the moments of synthesis in the earlier work as strictly subjective or linguistic, here Harryman’s characterizations of “the middle where what’s enlarged (subjective) and

what's reduced (external) by speaking gather" is more dramatically dynamic.

In Part One, she quotes and comments on writings she's published elsewhere. But the dialogue made possible by this recontextualization foregrounds and subverts the institutional nature of the distinction between "text" and "commentary;" the writings she sets off as "primary texts," whether her own or others, equally comment on their commentary. A particularly insightful example for readers of contemporary poetry is the contrast she makes between Bernadette Mayer and Robert Creeley:

[F]or Creeley, the daily proliferation arouses an argument to simplify.... Where 'one' lives produces a series of conceits: house, body, mind. So no matter how reduced the aspect there is a potential for clutter. Conceits might be what's given to us, with pressure. Pressure to accept what's unacceptable. "Must be literal fact of so-called objects is unacceptable," says Creeley.

Creeley: inside the mind.

Mayer: inside the family. I.e. Bernadette Mayer's MID-WINTER DAY.

Even though we live neither in a tribe nor a community nor near a grandfather but in these rude, private and ignorant separate houses where love is like fame and fame is more like sin and for love to be so tricky for a family is just asking for it....

This poem about daily life is an expression of the acceptance of that life. The challenge of the poem and the life is time, to rush through a day in a day. The world of objects is tackled by the mother; it is almost celebratory of there being no conflict from outside the family and friend world of the poem.(11, 12)

The tension between these juxtaposed points of view is similar to the tension in *Under The Bridge*. Here, however, Harryman's appropriation of other texts allows her the illusion of exteriorization more fully. Later sections of *The Middle* contain Harryman's most blatantly sustained quasi-autobiographical narrative to date; her social critique becomes more effective as she becomes more willing to argue as a character rather than a disembodied spokeswoman for indeterminacy.

Animal Instincts (1989) is essentially Harryman's first "Selected Works." Although published three years after *Vice*, all the work in this collection was written earlier (spanning from the late 70s to the mid 80s). It republishes the entire chapbook, "Property," the title play of *Percentage* in addition to reworking previously published material. Most of the work, however, appears for the first time in book form. It is certainly her most difficult book. It may strike some readers as ironic that a book entitled *Animal Instincts* should begin with a piece entitled "Sublimation." Yet one of Harryman's points in this piece is that sublimation, contrary to popular belief, is an animal instinct. Sublimation is seen in both its erotic and writerly contexts here and it becomes hard to tell whether the erotic drama is a metaphor for the relationship between a writer and a reader or vice versa. In "My Story," Harryman interrogates "realistic" representation of a singular originating birth in a way that complements Montaigne's similar critique of "death" in his essay "On Training." Throughout *Animal Instincts* (especially in "The Male," "Beginning To End" "Typical Domains," "Counterplan" and the title piece) Harryman weaves a dense polyvocal and polygenre web that no summary can do justice to. She shows us the kind of structures that have to come into being in order for us to begin identifying with the dilemma of a protagonist, gives us enough of narrative to want more, and then pulls the rug out. One can read in the fact that she knows what makes a narrative tick a more acute awareness of the limits of narrative than either

those who unreflectively churn out stories like machines or those who work in strictly essayistic or strictly poetic forms are capable of.

Harryman's next book, *Vice*, (1987) is as expansive as the work collected in *Animal Instincts*, but it lacks the tightly woven interlocking structural complexities found there. In an interview, Harryman appears, for this reason, to be uncertainly apologetic about its place in her oeuvre:

Vice was written in between my child's naps when he was an infant and to a smaller degree at the museum where I worked during ten to fifteen minute breaks. At that time in my life, I either had to learn to write under literally fragmented conditions or forget it...The work is constructed from the experience of having to make do with what I had easy access to, because I had very little time to contemplate otherwise....The technical constraints on the work itself are semiautobiographical but the work itself is not autobiography. It is a method of playing with the conditions of one's life...rather than of experiencing some kind of defeat because the conditions are all wrong for what one wants to do.

Yet such a disclaimer is also a defense, not only of *Vice* itself but of a freeing of writing from standards of coherence and consistency. The looser and longer sentences in many of the passages are more like "automatic" writing than anything else in Harryman while at other times (as in "Warhol and De Chirico") a more lyric use of page space prevails. The critiques of Noam Chomsky and a catalogue for a Max Beckmann art exhibition lend *Vice* the tone of a Renaissance "commonplace book." Despite, or perhaps because of, the admittedly "all over the place" quality of *Vice*, it may be read as a quest both for subject matter and for a form that suffices, for "an adequate vice to limit

the liquid of this voice"(8). The search for such containers leads Harryman to expound on the virtues of "Biscuit tins" (69), "the stabilizing you" (89) and other forms that "invite spatial resistance." But the intellectual, emotional and political restlessness that often characterizes Harryman's writing is so attenuated here that such "vices" never last for long. The ending of the book is very telling on this point:

Once the reader has come to the conclusion that a monster lurks behind every habitual expression, the jig is up and one's own quotidian problems reassert themselves....No longer under "its" spell, one's experience of having read the book seems about as spectacular as having eaten a candy bar. But, once starved, then satiated, and now dissatisfied, one goes out for another. (94)

That there is never a single adequate vice found is not so much a failure as the recognition of authorial identity as a function of particular, albeit undefinable, situational contexts. Some passages, however, sustain more of a structure than others. Two of these were reprinted in *There Never Was A Rose* under the titles "The Rock" and "Vice".

Harryman also strategically adopts a kind of neoplatonic stance when she writes "I believe in an order that does not exist, that will never exist and that one must seek in order to preclude its existence."(26) It would be a mistake however to read Harryman as a vulgar neoplatonist. Rather, one could apply her characterization of Jane Austen's "transformed earthly social Platonism" (WT 155) to her own work as well. For Harryman's notion of identity as a mask, a role, distinguishes her from both mimetic "realism" as well as a "pure poetry" of abstract, and finally merely aesthetic, idealizations and allows her art a more methetic, intersubjective, stance: "When entering the room

where the others had already settled, I had the sensation of becoming a person. I do not recall having thought about being a person before that moment, as if until then my own existence had never caused the slightest uneasiness within. Each person in the room was an extension of my own desire to burst out of my skin and dissolve into light.”(38)

Although *In The Mode Of* (1991) contains two aleatory poetic ruminations — “Dimblue” and “Why Yell”—that bear a closer resemblance to the work in *Under The Bridge* and certain passages in *Vice*, this collection’s most celebrated pieces—“Of” and “In The Mode Of” return to the philosophical and poetic uses Harryman made of conventional narrative structures in *Animal Instincts*. Here, however, the pact Harryman makes with both fairy-tale and pornographic narrational conventions is even more sustained and thereby accessible to a wider readership. Harryman calls attention to the power of fiction to embarrassingly contextualize a poetic/philosophic audience who would rather, presumably, be “condemned to an irrelevant and private zone” in which neither it nor the author can “identify their own smells, colors, textures and lives with the story.”(23, 24)

The story in “Of,” in between the theoretical and philosophical framing one comes to expect from Harryman, is a deliberately conventional tragic-comic fairy tale about a girl who lives in Iraq during the Gulf War. The story heats up when the protagonist is visited by a cloud (that bears a stronger resemblance to the ghost in *Hamlet* than it does to the sun in Frank O’Hara’s “A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island”) who tells the girl to be on the lookout against those “mendacious ones” who will destroy her city. Harryman never explicitly identifies these “mendacious ones” with either the USA or Hussein’s government; the suggestion that they can be read as *both* governments is part of Harryman’s point. According to the cloud, these people “will tell you they are dividing the good from the bad...but no one knows whether or not they can really tell...or if they are

just making it up”(25). The cloud’s message puts the girl on a doomed quest for conceptual clarity. By the end of the story, the girl’s refusal to even think about good and bad (though the cloud told her only not to say the words) can be seen as a kind of self-censorship that avoids ethical responsibility. On the other hand, the fairy tale ends with a tender vision of a somewhat realistic domestic reunion that may go beyond victimization or demonization.

It is the *story*, however, and not the piece itself that ends with the domestic reunion between mother and child. The “happy ending” does not smooth over the darker elements of those whom Harryman referred to, in *Third Man*, as “warring ignoramuses.” A large part of the controversial value of “Of” is the way it humanizes Iraqis and provides insight into a more complex situation than the one put forth by the anti-Arab propaganda so prevalent in the American media since the breakup of the USSR. In this light it becomes highly significant that the Iraqi girl’s mother is an engineer—for such a characterization challenges even the so-called “liberal” American intellectuals justification of anti-Arab sentiments on the grounds that women are allegedly more dehumanized there than they are here. Yet, Harryman goes beyond mere topicality to emphasize, among other things, the centrality of the mother-child bond that gets left out of most official historical accounts.

“In The Mode Of” begins by parodying of the “unobstrusive” narrator of many a novel:

I will conclude now that “I” am no more than the story.
The “I” identifies with the story in a neutral light; therefore,
“I” do not know my own sex. (33)

Such an attempt to find a synthesis that does not require gendered immanence, though futile, still holds tremendous satiric possibilities. The author places her genderless self in an art

gallery viewing a female nude. The situation is almost nothing more than a pretext for intellectualizations on the issue of gender. When Harryman writes "a woman can almost experience a nude in the mode of a man," (36) it becomes clear that putting one sex in the other sex's shoes, as it were, allows more drama than the urge to find a spot that's neither male nor female. Yet, because these intellectualizations exist in a highly elaborated dramatic context, one can not simply sum up "In The Mode Of" as an essay on gender construction. Among other things, Harryman also manages to take to task the marriage of censorship and capitalism:

The collector is making a large contribution to some fanatics who want to censor art. The removal of nudes from public art spaces will give them the glamour, forbidden pleasure of a black market item and drive the prices up. (38)

Even this, however, ties back to the central theme of the value placed on the nude bodies of actual women. Though this piece can be read as feminist, it avoids the pitfalls of an ahistorical essentialism as well as those of a purely constructivist view of gender. Although she severely satirizes the need of male "collectors" to commodify the female nude in order to be attracted to it, Harryman does not deny its sex-appeal. By the end of the piece the narrator is willing to let herself imitate the nude while at the same time taking on the role of the observer, as she observes the nude as well as the men who look at it.

Memory Play (1994) is Harryman's only booklength play to date. Compared to the four plays collected in *Animal Instincts*, it most clearly resembles "Third Man" in its length, its number of characters and the complexities of the relationships between them. Like Harryman's other plays, it works at least as well as a "closet drama" as it does in theatre performance. According to

Barbara Henning, "the dramatic events are not central to this play. It is the proliferation of meaning that is the most remarkable here." The themes of this play can not finally be separated from character differentiation, which is more central than plot. The three main characters are carefully delineated in their attitudes toward memory in the self-characterizations that make up the Prologue. Reptile is initially presented as sincerely earnest, if a bit naive:

If I provide you with several of my most esteemed memories, you will probably believe there are more where those came from, and I will have earned your respect. This will make theatre a little more like real conversation. (9)

Pelican's attitude is a polar opposite to Reptile's and can be seen as either worldly or mercantile, depending on one's viewpoint:

I have a job and it is virtually all I can think about; however, I think this: memory is nothing but words stored up in an inefficient computer. What you will remember of this conversation will be nothing like what went into its construction. Such understanding promotes success in business. I know that people want to see the tip of the iceberg only. Business is like a successful cabaret.

In contrast, Fish's attitude can be seen as a kind of synthesis. Fish is clearly the protagonist; and insofar as there is drama, it revolves around Fish's attempt to position herself in relation to these other two attitudes towards memory and sincerity:

I had suffered for a long time from the illusion that

remembering inhibited one's experience. Now that illusion is almost my only memory—and that I am cold and have been cold for a long time and that this coldness was brought on gradually by an illusion. Yet, it is likely that I will not be cold later. Then I will remember something else and not this. I will have forgotten the story to which I currently refer. (10)

It would be unnecessarily reductive to read *Fish* as torn between the viewpoints of Pelican and Reptile. The other characters in the play complicate and decentralize its morality play psychomachia. The Miltonic Humiliator is a bully to Reptile, but is easily deflated by the others. A Child (whose mother is Fish) and a character named Instruction round out the dramatis personae.

According to Henning, *Memory Play* “refuses to present memory as a simple interiorization of experiences or the art of theatre as a re-presentation of an interiorized experience.” It also qualifies Pelican's more mercenary view of theatre and memory. The dialogic tension between Fish and Pelican (who, in the natural world, is a character who eats fish) is especially interesting. For most of the play, Fish is somewhat willing to heed Pelican's advice that she needs “a little more theatre” (20) and “a few more characters” (30). Yet Fish is also prone to soliloquies that disrupt the ideas of “a successful cabaret” Pelican so resolutely adheres to. Pelican's view can seem to be victorious insofar as *Memory Play* does accept such narrative conventions. Yet, Fish does not, in the end, join Pelican's “toy movie set.” (39) Pelican bullies Fish as the Miltonic Humiliator bullies Reptile. He (Pelican) is, however, unable to successfully bully her child in one of the play's most effective stichomythias (Act II, scene ii) and, in the dramatic climax of the play, Fishy turns the tables on Pelican by utilizing silence as a deflationary strategy (57). In their final encounter, Pelican exclaims with approval: “Now you've got it! You're start-

ing to act like a professional” to which Fish replies “You are starting to let down your guarantees.” (60, 61). It is her last word in the play proper. A stage direction reminds us that when Fish exits “identity becomes fluid as memory.” In an epilogue, however, Fish returns with Child to remind us of a world outside of the play, a world that, in short, is nothing but a creative potential. This brief synopsis, though reductive and distorted, illustrates that the works Harryman has so far published in the 90s tend to be less self-protective about their tendency towards myth and allegory. On a mythic level, *Memory Play* shares similarities with both “Of” and many of the new works in Harryman’s selected *There Never Was a Rose Without A Thorn* (1995).

Among the previously uncollected pieces in *There Never Was a Rose* are the lengthy title piece, which among other things favorably contrasts the writing of De Sade to the writing of Rousseau, as well as selections from the forthcoming manuscripts: *The Words* and *Games*, a collaboration with visual artist Amy Trachtenberg. Although all these works deserve attention, the eight pieces from *Games* mark a new stylistic direction in Harryman’s work. The concision and clarity of expression makes these pieces among her most accessible without sacrificing any of the abrasive, playful, skeptical intelligence that marked her earlier work. These pieces make especially plausible Jewell Gomez’s assertion, in the blurb, that “her newest work is an alchemical gem that sparkles” and that “each new image settles irrevocably inside us.” And there does seem to be a reliance on an authority outside the relationship(s) presented in these poems that Harryman does not second guess, even if it is unrepresentable. The centrifugal vertigo one comes to expect from Harryman is still here, but each piece is structured and ordered around a kind of metaphysical conceit that both utilizes and explodes binary logic (mind vs. body, self vs. society, margin vs. center, male vs. female, etc.) These prose-poems, however, are also meant to be literal games. In “Mud” Harryman asks, only half mockingly, “If

this were a board game would it be better than Monopoly? Would it be able to compete in the marketplace of games?"(46)

Some of these Games ("Mothering", "Murdering", "Mud") foreground Harryman's project of rewriting patriarchal myths, while others ("Margin," "Membership" and "Magic") foreground the tensions between the individual and society. These two central themes overlap in complex ways. The central relationship in "Matter," for instance, can be read as between a male and a female, as well as the speaker's relationship with an abstraction, figured alternately as "love" and as "my body" or even the poem itself. "Mud" rewrites patriarchal myths by deconstructing the traditional connotational associations of women with "cabbages" and men with "skyscrapers." For Harryman, "the Amazonian mud woman's original condition" remains something "we can't quite picture."(46) But rather than lamenting the lost original, Harryman celebrates the freedom of representational maneuvering such a loss allows. In recognizing the limits of language, games, self-characterizations and acts of identification, Harryman is able to assert her own myths as myths here in ways that celebrate women, and even men, as fiction-making animals.

"Membership" is constructed around a distinction between an "us" and a "them" and is one of Harryman's most powerful social critiques to date. It begins with a characterization of those who:

placed their demented musings outside themselves,
and called the displacement society and public space.
Therefore, society and public space were the projected
fantasies of individuals onto the ground we once occupied.
(95)

One of the many ways this statement can be read is in terms of the contemporary debate between the L=A=N=G-U=A=G=E writers and the "humanist" values of authenticity and private

interiority that dominate mainstream contemporary American poetry. It almost seems as if Harryman is retracting the very values that elsewhere ground her work. Yet, this is only the case insofar as Harryman identifies more with the "we" than she does with the "they" here. As the piece progresses, it becomes clearer that such an assumption about where the speaker stands is not at all a safe one. The narrator may be more like these "lunatics" than the "rest-of-us" whose perspective she ostensibly speaks from. The "rest-of-us" may be those who, in their proud victimized complacent sense of self refuse public responsibility for their actions and writings. Harryman, however, rejects easy binaries and reveals the inadequacies of, but necessity of dialogue between, both stances:

Those who had been all made institutionalized
and those who had shirked imprisonment, all made up
a reciprocating form of knowledge (97)

Harryman here, as elsewhere, gestures to a place both "within and without the institutional walls" (98). Her relentless examination of the inescapable roles institutions play here should not be read as a de-humanizing or a de-personalizing but rather as a refiguration of what it means to be human. *Games* may be able to bring this central message of Harryman's to a wider audience, even if Milton-Bradley refuses to take her offer seriously.