

Review of Carla Harryman's *Adorno's Noise*

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Adorno's Noise Carla Harryman Essay Press (\$14.95) by
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I first read Carla Harryman's new book, *Adorno's Noise*, on a plane. Flying home from Detroit, aided by the laser focus of jet travel discomfort, I turned page after page in rapt attention. Along with five other poets, Carla and I had just presented a live performance from a serial work in progress, *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography, 1976-1980* (Mode A/This Press), the product of a longstanding community of writers whose manifold relationships span critical dialog, collaboration, rivalry, and friendship. The individual accounts of times past are strikingly various and say as much about now as they do about back in the day. Despite our long familiarity, as authors we remain in many ways mutually mysterious. In

fact, the appeal of the unknown, a different way of perceiving and responding to the world, was what first attracted us to one another in the first place.

Energized by my in-flight encounter with *Adorno's Noise*, I resolved to write about it. Back on land, however, I found that to be easier said than done, and not only due to the capaciousness of Harryman's rapidly shifting frames of reference. I also discovered that to understand the place of this book in contemporary praxis as thoroughly as I'd hoped, I'd need to tackle another work: Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (Verso Books, 2005).

An attractive and difficult work, *Adorno's Noise* doesn't fit neatly into any preconceived categories; it straddles the boundaries of essay, journal, performance, poem, and play. Even the book itself is a curious object. For example, there is something strange about the chapter titles. On the Contents page they appear at first glance in two distinctly gendered fonts, an archaic feminine script and a modern sans serif in all caps. On further inspection, one realizes that one font represents section headers, the other, chapter titles. Yet some sections lack chapters. Then there is the disconcerting appearance of the section dividers, white

drop-out type on dark pages with dim images like blurry x-rays, sometimes beginning on the right-hand page with words cut off at the edge, only to repeat in full when you turn the page. These tricks of the eye are the work of designer Jeff Clark, whose contribution to the book is that of a collaborator fully engaged with the author' s thinking.

Harryman' s thought stretches out in so many directions it hard to know where to start. Indeed, *Adorno' s Noise* seems to perform a kind of essayistic yoga, creating new spaces inside the body that knows. Since the known is always bordered by the unknown, the work has a kind of erotic charge, as desire vies with security for the attention of the mortal. New spaces are continuously opened up then occupied, leading to a series of encounters. Hence, the exercise of thought leads inevitably to play, but it is an unrelentingly and often hilariously thoughtful play, peopled by incongruous characters with wills of their own. The play, Harryman seems to say, trumps thought, because it realizes the interplay of the known and the unknown. As Adorno put it in *Minima Moralia*:

Only at a remove from life can the mental life exist, and truly engage the empirical. While thought relates to facts and moves by criticizing them, its movement depends no

less on the maintenance of distance. Essential to it is an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it. Thus every thought resembles play, with which Hegel and Nietzsche compared the work of the mind. The unbarbaric side of philosophy is its tacit awareness of the element of irresponsibility, of blitheness springing from the volatility of thought, which forever escapes what it judges. We read Adorno today with mixed emotions; he was a Cassandra who, in addition to assessing the implications of the Holocaust for art in his time, also foresaw what our world was to become and recoiled in horror. Our admiration of his prescience is unqualified by the fact of his enclosure in history. Still, scandalized as he rightly was by the commodification of everything, his trepidations fall short of the relentless replication of empty signs that has become our global environment. "Relax," we want to tell him, "You ain' t seen nothin' yet."

Against Adorno' s grumpy old man, Harryman proposes an altogether lighter yet still obdurate figure: the radical sylph. Unlike the spleen and vanity displayed by the sylphs of Pope' s satiric *Rape of the Lock*, Harryman' s figure injects

lightness and air into every argument, causing bones of contention to slip their moorings and float free into the medium of creative action.

She walks to the window and flings it wide remembering a similar gesture made by Elizabeth Taylor and Alice B. Toklas... Air intoxicates better than a drink after a day's work. [13] The injection of air into closed spaces containing multiple objects is reflected everywhere in Harryman's prose. This notion of injected space may offer a clue to how Harryman's insouciance may emerge from the caustic irritability of Adorno, who noted "Beauty of the American landscape: that even the smallest of its segments is inscribed, as its expression, with the immensity of the whole country." Harryman's sense of space is rooted in her childhood in Southern California, the apotheosis of American landscape, a coastal paradise peopled by settlers from the vast continental interior. Perhaps her sense of light and open space is derived from the physical environment in which she grew up; in the chapter "The End of Nationalism," she give us an intimate portrait of her family life in 1960.

Subject matter in *Adorno's Noise* is a moving target; themes of sexuality, death, normality, repression, power,

desire, and art flow freely and intermingle throughout. A passage on Anais Nin reflects on the action of the essay itself, proposing publication as a mechanical harnessing of sexuality. After love, “Anais thrusts ink back and forth... across sheets of paper until the record of every maneuver, including the forceful thrusts, is consigned to the immortal life of circulation.” [14]

The politics of *Adorno's Noise* offers a visceral response to the policies of the recent Bush administration. In a wittily violent scenario, Harryman's sylph is physically pinned to the floor by “the president,” a sadistic tyrant, and abjectly offers to work in his library. “A Privatization Document” is an abstract description of a found document that exposes the actual machinations of a Bush administration think tank that included Iraq-war architect Richard Perle and other inside-the-beltway, right-wing career intellectuals. The document is described clinically in terms of its form—headers, bulleted sentences, paragraphs, etc. – with only occasional snippets of content that gradually reveal its subject, concluding with “Israel will not only contain its foes; it will transcend them.” Thus is performed an unmasking of brutal authority.

In “Just Noise,” we are presented with several paragraphs

of sentences quoted from philosopher Hannah Arendt, critic Elizabeth Grosz, novelist Kenzaburo Oe, poet Jocelyn Saidenberg, anthropologist Michael Taussig, performance artist Karen Finley, poet Etel Adnan, novelist Kathy Acker, and poet/performance artist Jackson Mac Low. These sources are cited in a thicket of footnotes, which are then reprised as the next page of text. As with the mercurial headers and titles that cue the book's action, the push-pull of interchangeable foreground and background stands in metonymically for larger questions of language and truth.

"Beware of Seeking Out the Mighty" begins, "in writing a poem she is not writing a novel in writing a novel she is not writing an essay in writing an essay she is not writing a diatribe..." and continues for 23 pages, a tour de force. It's worth noting that a less engaged, more conceptual approach might seek to automate the process, replicating the formula ad nauseum, but that is not the case here. Harryman rings small changes on the variations, keeping the interplay of thought and gesture alive all the way through.

In the final chapter, "Orgasms," Harryman writes:

With the flick of the switch aggression exposes erotic drives to blindness. On the other side of this blindness is an orgasm in the public void. An orgasm is an elegy in which there is no consolation. Machines, like orgasms, are inconsolable things. Adorno metamorphosed from an instrument to a machine to the unnameable, a figure in the Beckett he had admired. Text is the electricity that moves the body from one thing to the next even as it cannot break out of its instrumental rationality. [180]

Harryman's essay, an argument overheard, starts at A. The first sentence reads: "A might be an abbreviation for something inside itself, inside A." Is A a letter? Or a person? Is the essay about persons? Or is it about the means by which persons understand one another to be persons—that is, the symbolic? Does A stand for Adorno? Or is it only the first letter in a sequence of textuality through whose generative unfoldings we might yet realize our liberation? "People thinking in the forms of free, detached, disinterested appraisal were unable to accommodate within those forms the experience of violence in which reality annuls such thinking," Adorno wrote. "The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us."