Tadeusz Pióro

Autobiography and the Politics and Aesthetics of Language Writing

Abstract: The article begins with a description of *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography*, which was written by ten Language poets from San Francisco, focusing on the paradoxes implied by "collective autobiography." It then proceeds to close readings of three contributions to this work, by Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian, examining the relations between poetics, politics, gender and ideology their texts bring to the fore. Harryman anecdotally describes her critical stance towards the Romantic lyric and its enduring influence on some avant-garde American poets (Robert Creeley is the victim in question), while Hejinian, combining personal reminiscences of political protest with attempts at situating it within a tradition of critical thought, from Adorno through Said to Debord, makes a case for the relevance of Language writing to a future remaking of the *polis*. The article is, in the main, descriptive, not critical or polemical; the only doubt I voice in it concerns the difficulty involved in reading Language poems and the uncertain status of pleasure such difficulty implies, for surely it is for the sake of future pleasures we would like to have the *polis* reinvented, or at least improved?

Keywords: Language Writing; San Francisco Language Poets; (Collective) Autobiography; Aesthetics/Politics; Gender Politics; UC Berkeley strike 2009; Robert Creeley, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian; The Grand Piano coffeehouse, San Francisco

The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography was written by Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten between 1998 and 2010. Its ten volumes number over 1600 pages sextodecimo. Each volume contains one contribution by each of the ten authors. The title *Grand Piano* comes from the name of a coffeehouse in San Francisco, "where between 1976 and 1979 the authors variously organized and took part in a reading and performance series that became a venue for many in the literary community to present and hear new work." No less important than this titular reference is the announcement that follows it: these ten volumes are an experiment in something that, to my knowledge, has not been done before, certainly not on such a grand scale. The notion of a collective autobiography seems to go against the definition of the genre, with its implicit emphasis on individual authorship. *The Grand Piano* also breaks with the usual autobiographical practice of recounting the author's life from birth to the time of writing. Although there are partial accounts of each poet's life in these volumes, it would be hard to assemble them into a well-rounded life story. Instead, we have at least as much analysis and reflection on aesthetic and political issues as recounting of biographically significant

events. To a large extent, these are intellectual autobiographies, and should be of interest to most readers of avant-garde poetry.

Language writing became known as such in the 1970's, although texts that could be classified under this rubric date back to the beginning of the 20th century and Gertrude Stein's experiments in poetry and prose. Stein's, however, was a solitary voice, appreciated when all things avant-garde were in vogue, but later dismissed and marginalized for several decades. Yet by the mid-seventies, there were enough poets developing on her insights for a movement to be definable and geographically localizable, with its main nodes in New York and San Francisco. The poets who lived in San Francisco at that time were seriously committed to collaborative work, but also involved in creating and maintaining a group identity. *The Grand Piano* may be seen as a recent effort at retaining this identity, while also pushing it ever so slightly in the direction of myth or legend. Yet by no means should we consider this a myth of some golden age: as Ted Pearson recalls, "the period in question began at the end of the postwar 'economic miracle' and at the onset of a long and devastating recession, deepened by the astronomic debt and social misery that resulted from the pursuit of imperial ambition, if not yet, as is now clear, overtly global hegemony" (II 21).[1] He goes on to quote Barrett Watten's remarks on that time: "The culture we lived in was fragmented, ugly and incoherent. . . . There was no money, and few agreeable jobs." There was, however, Pearson writes, a "surfeit of rage" that "led all too often to self-destructive symptoms of emotional exhaustion, chronic depression, and psychic stress." He also notes that "this was the moment when a continuing erosion of civil and human rights began . . . when the nation's 'unlimited drift / to the right' emerged from conservative think tanks and fundamentalist pulpits, leading . . . to the Reagan revolution of 1980 . . . and continuing under the twin signs of 'compassionate conservatism' and unrepentant neoliberalism to this day" (II 22). Pearson concludes this recital of woes with Barrett Watten's "wry injunction from those years, 'Start writing autobiography'" (II 23).

I am uncertain whether Watten was implying that things would get better, or much, much worse, that is, whether the future function of autobiographical writing would be to serve as merely a memento of hard times, or as a form of tragic witnessing. Yet the fact that his advice suggests a strong functional aspect of autobiography carries over to *The Grand Piano*, a project he initiated, coordinated and saw into print over a period of twelve years. The work is, among other things, a genealogy of West Coast Language writing, as well as a kind of canonization, albeit in a sense that runs counter to the one practiced in academia. If there is a central, canonized figure in *The Grand Piano*, it is not a person, but the coffeehouse itself, a site of symbolic exchange. Ted Pearson appositely quotes King Charles' II description of coffeehouses as "places where the disaffected meet and spread scandalous reports

1 Parenthetical references to *The Grand Piano* indicate volume number, followed by page numbers.

concerning the conduct of His Majesty and his Ministers" (I 63-4). *The Grand Piano* memorializes a historical process involving a series of literary events which resulted in the creation of a community (all of the Grand Piano readings are listed at the end of each volume). The autobiographical texts it consists of were made possible in part by this process. Thus the coffeehouse is not merely a symbolic origin of the genealogy of the San Francisco Language poets, but also the actual origin of their *necessarily* collective autobiography.

The use of the term "autobiography" is just as provocative as the mock-canonization of *The Grand Piano*. If we were to apply strict generic distinctions, the work would have to be called a group memoir, or something to that effect, yet without the "bio" root, that is, without the Greek word for "life" in it. As it stands, the title suggests that the lives of the poets in question had their symbolic beginning at The Grand Piano and were possible thanks to everything this site of exchange made possible, thus marking the passage from individual to collective *bios*. Obviously, the conventions of an individual autobiography cannot be adhered to in such a work.[2] My purpose in this paper is to examine the affinities between this experimental autobiographical project and the poetic theories and practices of its authors.

I must add right away that this has already been done, directly or obliquely, by each of the "Grand Pianists," and all I might hope to do is provide a synthesis of their reflections on the issue at hand. Yet even a synthesis would be hard to arrive at in a brief essay, since each poet chose to focus on a different aspect of the relation of their current autobiographical project to his or her own poetry as well as to Language writing in a broader sense. So instead of making general claims, I will limit my remarks to entries by Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian. I have chosen these poets because their contributions to the book clearly, directly and fairly succinctly refer to the oppositional politics and aesthetics of Language writing, revealing the breadth of its concerns, as well as Language writers' alertness to the political implications of any and all aesthetic judgments or presuppositions. While Harryman foregrounds gender issues, Hejinian's main concern is the influence of neoliberalism on civic awareness and responsibility. In each case, the authors are personally involved in the tensions and conflicts they describe.

Some of the volumes of *The Grand Piano* appear to have a guiding theme, although not every entry in these volumes addresses it explicitly. The main theme of the first one is love. If indeed love is what we actually talk about when we talk

2 Antoine Cazé's incisive and extensive discussion of the formal aspects of the books that make up *The Grand Piano* should be mentioned here, since it lucidly presents the tangle of theoretical problems raised by the experimental autobiographical *project* as such, as well as the evolving approaches of the authors to its realization, and, just as importantly, the final (?), material form it now has. My casual remarks on these issues merely scratch their surface. Antoine Cazé, "Intimate Communities: The Theory of Practice," in *Theory That Matters: What Practice After Theory*, ed. Kacper Bartczak and Małgorzata Myk (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

about poetry, Carla Harryman's essay suggests ways of making this statement less of a truism by placing its main components—love and poetry—within a specific, historical context, and also by bringing in talk, understood as a discourse on poetry, from time to time assuming the form of literary criticism. She begins by linking love to war and manhood, only to point out the anachronism of this connection, due to the increasing participation of women in warfare. She then brings in her employment at the American Poetry Archive and Poetry Center, where the most frequently reproduced audio recording was of Robert Creeley's "The Door," a poem from his important, early book, *For Love*. Finally, Harryman recalls meeting Creeley for the first time at a party and feeling uncomfortable as he keeps asking her "Where are you from?" In addition, she mentions two seemingly minor events involving this book. A colleague tells her how during his military service in Vietnam, in 1971, a helicopter dropped some books at his camp. When he could finally get at them, there was only one left—Creeley's *For Love*. Also in 1971, Harryman was in Paris with a college friend, who "upon parting gave [her] a copy of *For Love,* saying she had been disappointed by Creeley's poetry" (I 30-35). In the midst of these reminiscences, Harryman quotes one stanza from "The Door," and builds her essayistic argument on it, as well on the events I have just retold.

This is the stanza she quotes: "I will go to the garden. / I will be a romantic. I will sell / myself in hell, / in heaven also I will be" (Creeley 201). She then ponders what it might mean for her to have written these lines, how they differ—once she has written them, even though this is just a quote—from the very same lines as written by Creeley. Obviously, on account of the Lady in the garden in Creeley's poem, gender and subject position become important issues. Harryman finds that she "cannot identify simultaneously with the Lady and with the words such as 'shadow' and 'door' that stand for her." Hence, Harryman claims:

> the poem does not cohere, if I author it.... The shadows are an aspect of the environment the Lady inhabits but they are not attached to her even if, paradoxically, they are dependent on her image to work their 'magic.' As the writer of the poem, I am attracted to this unfixed effect of language; the stable image, which is the Lady, now seems to me to be a secretion, or hallucination, from the shadows of language. As Lady and author, I experience myself then both as something secreted (secret-ed) from language and as someone, contradictorily, producing the shadowy and excessive poem. (I 32-3)

In the stanza Harryman quotes, as well as in the poem as a whole, Creeley enacts an ironic surrender to convention, proclaiming he will risk death if only he can satisfy his desire to possess the Lady. Romantic clichés are piled high in this stanza, which may have led Harryman to feel a kind of poetic and critical solidarity with Creeley even before she first met him personally. As she puts it, during that encounter she "naturally identified with him as a person who makes." After all, she had imagined

saying to Creeley, upon reflecting on "The Door," "it's a trap": "even if the romantic tradition is impossible to engage, one is in it or has been trapped by it" (I 33). Harryman then suggests a way out of this trap: "Because the romantic tradition is impossible, I could get rid of representations from the poem, there might be nothing left of the poem, or maybe there would be a 'language poem:' wall worship / dresses door / beyond it." While some readers might see this poem as an invitation to rewrite Creeley's "The Door" once again, this time in full, I would rather consider it as a synecdoche, not of any other poetic utterance, but of a manifesto, or statement of purpose. By removing the Lady from her version of "The Door," Harryman eliminates its main stable point of reference, at the same time showing how unstable it actually is, having for its ground mere convention, baleful tradition, and the like. By doing so, she shifts the ground of reference to subjective experience which nonetheless remains communicable. Is this what Barrett Watten meant when he told Ted Pearson to "start writing autobiography?" Before I begin to answer this question, I must go back to Harryman's first meeting with Creeley.

This happened in 1980, nine years after her initial encounters with *For Love*. After the party at Larry Eigner's house, Harryman's *esprit d'escalier* turns on her answer to Creeley's insistent "Where are you from": she wonders what would have happened if, instead of answering "Costa Mesa" (which is a small town in Southern California), she had said: "Jean Genet." "If I was a 'man' then he was what? If I was a man, 'queered,' then what? If 'I' make and am made, then the same goes for you—Bob, Barry, Steve, Creeley" (I 36), the first three names referring to co-authors of *The Grand Piano*. Harryman emphasizes the issue of gender put forth by her hypothetical questions, linking it with Language writing's critique of "the self," and of male authority in poetry, as well as with the antagonisms and attacks evinced by this critique. She concludes by asking: "Didn't the questions we were raising about subjectivity and authority have everything to do with a critique of gender that would cause a reaction in others invested in the self-oriented, or romantic, poem" (I 38). The two things I would like to emphasize about this turn in Harryman's essay are, first of all, the difference between two proper names—Costa Mesa and Jean Genet—and then, the path of her argument, from autobiographical incident to her involvement in a highly programmatic, or theory-based, literary movement.

Costa Mesa, a geographical location, is an autobiographical incident, which in and of itself precludes comment or debate, while Jean Genet, apart from being queer, was also a French novelist whose presence in Western culture has been primarily textual. Harryman's putative substitution of Genet for Costa Mesa entails a replacement of the historical circumstances of her origin by textual ones. In other words, she feels that Creeley's question requires an asymmetrical response which would immediately allegorize the gender/power relations it has brought to the fore. When one maker asks another where s/he is from, "Costa Mesa" or " Queens Park" can hardly be relevant answers, even though most of us would regard them as perfectly natural, the normal thing to say. Harryman's belated recognition of

the power imbalance involved in her exchange with Creeley turns naturalness and normalcy into pejorative terms, or at least suspect ones. Creeley's rudeness made obvious what might have been merely a suspicion.

Harryman recounts her move from supposition, or theory, to practice, by bringing in Language writing. All of the autobiographical events she mentions appear to have been motivated by this final expansion from private to collective experience, or from the empirical to the textual. Such a method of composition, with all of its aesthetic and ideological implications, can be seen in many of the essays or sketches in *The Grand Piano*. For some of the contributors, lived experience might have served as a either a substitute for, or introduction to, theoretical statements. Since a basic awareness of the theories motivating Language writing proves useful in attempts at engaging with the actual poems, the purpose of autobiography might have as much to do with setting down a historical record of the movement as with providing a reader's guide thereto. Still, it's hard to imagine Barrett Watten's trying to talk Ted Pearson into writing a reader's guide to a poetry just being born—clearly, more than pedagogy was at stake.

So what *was* at stake in the mid-seventies for this group of poets? In the second volume of *The Grand* Piano, Lyn Hejinian, with a little help from Hannah Arendt, gives a plainly-worded answer, or at least one likely, *and* plainly-worded, answer, to this question. She quotes Arendt's definition of the *polis* as a space of rhetorical presence or appearance, while appearance itself is valorized as that which constitutes reality through public discourse, and thus allows "even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses" to emerge from their "shadowy existence" and become "transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized . . . The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (Arendt qtd. in II 70). Hejinian is quick to contrast this assertion of presence through public appearance with the *disappearance* from the public sphere of specific things or values, the absence of which significantly diminished her sense of well-being: fuel shortages, the Iranian hostage crisis, and, most importantly, its indirect result—Reagan's victory in the presidential election of 1980, which meant that "a half century of social progress was on the way out" (II 72). Hejinian recalls her participation in Quaker Meetings and one of the protests she took part in: along with a handful of people, she would stand "every Sunday for an hour holding up a long banner demanding an end to weapons development toward the blank windows of University Hall, which housed the offices of the top UC Berkeley administrators" (II 74-75). As a parody of political protest, this is quite pitiless—University Hall was empty on Sundays—but Hejinian takes this account of futility a step further when she links it to writing poetry: "The political is an ordeal. Or rather, to undertake politics properly is to undergo an ordeal. Not poems then, but poetry and the dialectics of writing (Ron's 'Not this. What then?') If the polis could serve as a site for the appearance of writing, might not writing serve as a preparation for the polis?" (II 75).

While plainly worded, this passage could stand some elucidation. If undertaking politics "properly" is "an ordeal," why does the next step in her argument require making a distinction between poems and poetry? Writing a poem can be an ordeal, but is such an ordeal comparable to that of undertaking politics properly? Possibly so, but only if politics becomes radically textualized. The difference between poems and poetry would then be as that between an aesthetic object and a political process. The collective nature of the latter is as important here as its negative dialectics, epitomized by the opening of Ron Silliman's poem: "Not this. What then? Not this" (II 75). Thus writing as a preparation for the polis requires both a belief in the polis as Arendt understood it and in the political usefulness of poetry, perhaps of Language writing in particular. Earlier in her essay, Hejinian claims that the reason she brings in Arendt is that the excerpts from *The Human Condition* which she quotes seem "to describe a fundamental (and, in this broader sense, political) facet of the social space of Language writing in the period of its 'becoming.' It was a polis" (II 71). While this social space has its most obvious material shape in the Grand Piano coffeehouse, the question of Language writing *as* writing that serves as a "preparation for the polis" is not developed in this essay, nor is the somewhat enigmatic issue of the ordeal of politics. Yet both questions become clearer if we examine a much longer entry by Hejninian in the tenth volume of *The Grand Piano*.

This essay moves back and forth between an extended account of the author's involvement in the student and labor protests at UC Berkeley in the Fall semester of 2009 and her appreciations and analyses of Jean Day's poetry. While not a Grand Pianist herself, Jean Day has been closely associated with most of them, and her first book of poems was published by Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press in 1971. One of the concepts Hejinian discusses is lateness, whether of style, as in Adorno's and Said's musings on late style in music and literature, or historical formation, as in Jameson's view of Postmodernism as a symptom and product of late capitalism. She questions Jameson's claim about critical and historical accounts of the latest phase of capitalism: "the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic . . . the more powerless the reader comes to feel" (X 66). Hejinian was aware that even if the students and workers won their dispute with the UC authorities, whom she represents as agents of the most rapacious capitalist interests, this would not bring down global capitalism; in fact, she thought her side had no chance of winning. And yet, she did not feel powerless: in spite of Jameson's warning that his argument might cause readers to lose "their impulses of negation and revolt," the better she knew how capitalism operates in the state educational system in California, the more determined she was to act against it. If not a definition, this might certainly be a good example of the ordeal of politics.

A good example of an intellectual ordeal would require summarizing Hejinian's efforts to link the sense of not feeling powerless to Language writing. To put it as simply as possible, she traces a complex analogy between negativity,

resistance, abandoning the urge for control, which is a part of received constructions of subjectivity, as well as a feature of late style, then the political meanings of allegory, and, finally, an ongoing process of inventing and proposing "a different use of everyday life," as Guy Debord puts it in his blueprint for overcoming the capitalist system from within. It is this last step in her argument that I find the most relevant to the appreciation of Language writing undertaken by the authors of *The Grand Piano*. "A different use of everyday life" necessarily entails a different sense and use of language. This should find its way into both *ars politica* and *ars poetica*, "facets of a pragmatic activism experienced from within, rather than from above or outside" (X 101). These claims do not sound particularly rebellious, excessive or irrational. Yet the poetry they refer to would lose much of its meaning and force if these qualities were to be barred from it. As features of everyday life, they are part of the ordeal Language writing wants us to go through in order to find what? Some pleasure soon?

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