

Hive and/or the Dark Body of Friendship
A Response to *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography*

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The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography Part I, San Francisco, 1975-1980. Detroit: Mode A, an imprint of This Press, 2006.

The Grand Piano is a fascinating read and for this reader, it comes at a propitious moment as I, and it seems to me other people struggle with the notion of community as it pertains to writers, and perhaps particularly poets. Maybe this preoccupation with community has a particular inflection among writers interested in a literature that is socially engaged and experimental or innovative. It is such a small pond. What is a writing community? Is there such a thing? How does community differ from friendship. Is the writing community a nurturing place? Or does it look more like the global community, rife with competition and disparate investments and access to capital and power? Maybe it's really high school all over again—with the cool kids, the nerds, the druggies, the outsiders. Though the various factions have different labels, their behaviors may be the same: someone may speak to you on one occasion, at one reading and not another. In less or differently loaded terms, maybe community is the entire poetic literary enterprise—the collective sum of current and past writers, texts, literary readings, publications, etc. with which, as a writer, one is in conversation and argument? Some of these questions turned up in the blogosphere on K. Silem Mohammad's blog limetree (<http://limetree.blogspot.com/>) in September of 2006 as he responded to a post made by Lisa Robertson at the Poetry Foundation web site

<http://poetryfoundation.org/dispatches/journals/2006.06.26.html>) in which Lisa ruminated about “how community is a common currency right now.” She writes: “Certainly I primarily write to my friends and for them, seeking to please and delight them above all, and sometimes mysteriously and painfully falling out. But I don’t want to call this community. I want to preserve the dark body of friendship.” In a nutshell, Kasey disagreed with Robertson’s favoring of friendship over community. He asserted that “Friends are a personal, erotic happiness. Community is a pact that ensures the discrete structure of a hive” (blog). While Kasey’s construction of friendship and community provides for some overlap, it suggests bifurcation with desire on the one hand and utilitarian function, labor, and survival on the other. This way of constructing the difference is interesting though it seems to me things are much messier and less clearly delineated. Enter Robertson’s “dark body of friendship” with its danger and “its corporal erotics, mostly not institutionalized, not abstracted into an overarching concept and structure of collective protocols” (<http://poetryfoundation.org/dispatches/journals/2006.06.26.html>). The authors of *The Grand Piano* grapple, retrospectively, to understand or construct a poetics of their particular collective, one in which the personal and the communal are traversed by desire and what Bob Perelman articulates with some trepidation—love: “I propose that we consider a basic issue facing writers: love” (Perelman 9). The question of love is taken up by most of the writers in some fashion or other. The partial ghosts of this love include, among other things, Robert Creeley’s book *For Love*, Victor Shklovsky’s *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*, the structure of love as a force for social change in the 1960s and 70s, as well as the gendered constructions of the *troubador* and the lady as object of that love and the poetry that gets made in its service. So much to unpack here!

As the serviceable brown paper dust cover on the almost pocket-sized paperback volume states, *The Grand Piano Part I* is the first of a 10 part series and an, “experiment in collective autobiography by ten writers identified with Language poetry in San Francisco.” *The Grand Piano* takes its name “from a coffeehouse at 1607 Haight Street, where between 1976 and 1979 the authors variously organized and took part in a reading and performance series that became a major venue for many in the literary community to present and hear new work” (70). At the end of the book, there is a helpful and impressive chronology of the Grand Piano Reading Series from 1976-1979. As its very title asserts, this project is one that is at odds with its own premises and requires a negotiation from aslant, or as Bob Perelman whose sentence on love begins the volume, writes, “The single sentence [on love] sits in front of a number of stuttering stops. I want to counterpose it to the kind of pleasure I used to get, and still do if truth be told, from veering off from given words and structures” (9). This veering off has, surprisingly in the context of the book as a whole, a trajectory that seemingly proposes itself as queer. By this I mean to use queer not necessarily in its nominative form, as a noun, an identity, but in its adjectival or verb forms. I use the word surprisingly above because New Narrative writers such as Robert Glück and Bruce Boone criticized the Language poetry project from a queer perspective. Robert Glück writes:

Whole areas of my experience, especially gay experience, were not admitted to this utopia [of language writing], partly because the mainstream reflected a resoundingly coherent image of myself back to me—an image so unjust that it amounted to a tyranny that I could not turn my back on. We had been disastrously described by the mainstream—a naming whose most extreme (though not uncommon) expression was physical violence. Political agency involved at least a provisionally stable identity....Bruce and I turned to each other to see if we could come up with a better representation—not in order to satisfy movement pieties or to be political, but in order to *be*. We (eventually we were gay, lesbian and working-class writers) could not let narration go” (“Long Note” 26-27).

For these New Narrative writers, to eliminate the subject is to eliminate the opportunity to parse

experience's entanglement with the material, historical and the ideological. Interestingly, Carla Harryman's section of the book, "Love, Discord, Asymmetry" proposes part of the hostility garnered by Language poetry stems from the fact, "that through 'language writing' the male authority of the poem was actively questioned" (36). *The Grand Piano* posits a version of its history as a challenge to normative culture and the construction of gender and its relationship to literature. However, eliminating the subject or fragmenting it alone cannot constitute a queer strategy. While the text produces a polymorphous veering or straying from a variety of cultural, textual, gender and social norms of which *love* is suggestive, this veering gets contained or bound ultimately in a number of ways; for example, by the connection of love between parent and child—a connection brought up by several of the male authors—Perelman, Watten, and Benson. It also gets folded textually into heterosexual partnerships. But more about that in a moment. *The Grand Piano* is itself a veering off and an investigation and a playing or experimenting with the materials of language, history, textuality and temporality, the personal and political, poetry and community. It is also a project that participates in the articulation of its own accounting for literary posterity. It is simultaneously an accounting that is too late and too early, though, perhaps as the Stones' line goes: time is on [their] side. As Perelman writes, "But at the moment, it is my guess that love, in writing, does depend on some deep-set stance turned toward permanence" (11).

The text is at once a collective or group project and simultaneously an autobiography, a self-written or perhaps, self-assembled account of a life story, in this case the story of the collective life, giving precedence to a place—the Grand Piano—a locus of collaboration and creative meeting and exchange. As outlined at the end of the volume, each of the ten writers will

have an opportunity in the 10 volume sequence to be the first writer in the sequence. Therefore, each writer retains his or her particularity as writer while simultaneously participating in the collective structure of the text; the author function is problematized and deployed. The text is an experiment, a testing ground for what such a form might do and how it might work.

Given the premises articulated by these various writers in previous writings, such a project, however, is fraught with complications and challenges. Language poets have a history of criticizing the naturalized self/individual occupying a central and preeminent place in American poetry, perhaps now most fundamentally as a consequence of the Creative Writing industry with its university creative writing programs, workshops, degrees and institutional publications, but also as it manifested itself in the New American Poetry of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan. *The Grand Piano* has appeared nearly 20 years after the publication of the collectively authored (by 6 of the 10 Piano authors) “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto” published in *Social Text* in 1988. In this earlier article, situating themselves in an avant-garde trajectory, the authors are not differentiated. Collectively, they define their work as effecting a breach in American poetry and address the “the contradictory response—from enthusiasm and imitation to dismissal and distortion—to our work” (261). In this essay the writers address some of the criticisms launched at their work, such as, for example, the accusation that in their work the individual or self is under attack. They write: “The individual is seen as under attack, and this is largely true: the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing in a number of ways.” (263). The attack on the self is strategic for these writers because the poetry that results from the focus on the lyrical individual produces a “kind of worked-over accounting of ‘experience,’ [that] we think, is primarily

responsible for the widespread contemporary reception of poetry as nice but irrelevant” (264). The various disruptions investigated and performed by this writing are aimed at returning poetry to a field of social relevance. The article goes on to enumerate a number of problems attached to the technology of the self: “What we mean by the self encompasses many things, but among these is a narrative persona, the fictive person (even in autobiography) who speaks in his or her poem about experience raised to a suitably aestheticized surface” (263). Even though it is not poetry, *The Grand Piano* inherits the problematic set forth in this article and one cannot help reading this text, too, as partially an extended and continued explanation and defense of the work while it is at the same time a retrospective meditation on and re-visioning, from the present moment, of its history. It is an “erotic happiness” (probably intermingled with various unhappinesses) and the “pact of the hive.” It is a project that is engaged in constructing its own— if not a narrative—a poetics of the collective. *The Grand Piano*, like *The New Sentence*, *The Constructivist Moment*, *The Language of Inquiry*, and others, continues to establish a discourse of and for Language poetry and provides a mechanism through which the work of these writers engages with the world and ensures a place for itself in literary history and the academy. This is the sort of practice that is strategic and engaged by many writers seeking a stake in the literary future. The anthology *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women* edited by Mary Margaret Sloan and the journals begun by Kathleen Fraser, *(HOW)ever* and *HOW2*, seek to gather, preserve and create a venue for experimental women’s writing; the anthology *Biting the Error: Writers on Narrative*, edited by Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, and Gail Scott, assembles various writers who worked together to create New Narrative and then mentored several generations of writers practicing a writing indebted to New Narrative; and

recently, Laura Moriarty in reference to her own and the work of Norma Cole and others has begun to articulate another Bay Area Poetics, the A Tonalists (see <http://atonalistdoc.blogspot.com/>). The Language poets engaged in this process early in their collaborative writing projects. This kind of activity, it seems to me, constitutes in part, the “pact of the hive.”

In the individual sections of *The Grand Piano* the reader can trace the various strategies employed by each writer as she or he grapples with the textual negotiation of the self or individual in relation to the group or collective and the problem of time and retrospective understanding. Nearly all of the sections employ the first person though Barrett Watten also makes use of the collective *we*; others variously address a collective or individual unidentified *you*. Kit Robinson’s section is written entirely in the third person while Ron Silliman makes occasional use of this perspective in the sentence which follows directly from a paragraph in which he discusses “my grandparents”: “The person who moved to San Francisco for the second time in 1972 was a mess” (46). The effect of these writing strategies is to suggest (as 6 of these writers noted in the *Social Text* article) that first and foremost, these writers write for one another and are engaged in a collective and collaborative project for and with one another as well as the larger literary field, past, present and future. The use of the second person in these pieces suggests a hermetic relation rather than one that is addressed to the general reader. Secondly, the writing gives form to the struggle and experiment that it is to write as a Language writer in a genre that while being reconstituted is also at odds with the project. A number of the writers attest to the various difficulties with writing their sections. For example, Carla Harryman writes: “This piece was very difficult for me to begin” while Bob Perelman writes about his beginning

with love: “It was hard for me to write it there, above, posing it as a term in a discussion of writing” (29, 9).

There is much to discuss about this engaging book, but I want to return to the question of love, and particularly to my assertion that it is presented and in some cases, ultimately contained as a queer force subtending and traversing relations. This move is a surprising one in some respects, and perhaps one that can only be made retrospectively. For example, in discussing the group performance at the Grand Piano of Zukofsky’s “A,” Watten writes, “And we were in love. Note that the concept of “we” here has perceptibly changed. Suspicious of each other, we entered into the binding constraints of a publicly authorized performance...” (14). The next paragraph continues: “We were married by Zukofsky, in the State of Modernist Apotheosis, County of Temporal Crisis” (15). Here, Watten seems to suggest that it is the members of the group—Lyn, C, Steve, Kit, Bob—who are married to one another and to a kind of knowledge of Zukofsky’s text and language via the performance of “A.” Watten’s next sentence, “Later, in temporal fact and legal fiction, as it happened, we were married in the State of California, County of Alameda,” suggests that those being married are Watten and C, who is “revealed” as it were at the end for those who might not know as Carla Harryman: “But in the real world, where love is true affection, C—stands for *Carla*” (23). This is one location in the book where its imagined readership includes those outside of its producers. Watten interrupts his own text just prior to this revelation to discuss its staging: “(A lady asks me, why the object of love in this writing is not named. It is because, where love is authoritarian will, the construction of its object can only be ideology. Milton’s Eve is a construction, an important one for his literary authority and the perverse utopia it names” (22-23). Here and earlier in the text, Watten discusses differing

conceptions, problems and ideologies around love, some of which he articulates as the problem of love and authoritarian will (“Love became the hitting end of a big stick, the final authority by which all difference, particularity, and belatedness would be put down forever” 20), alluding and promising to “write brilliantly on” the controversial evening in 1978 in San Francisco when Watten presented a reading of Zukofsky’s “A” in the middle of which Robert Duncan contested Watten’s reading of Zukofsky’s rewriting of Catullus¹. Here, though it is absent from the text, the question of love, sexuality, poetry and experience become complex and intermingle particularly since undergirding this debate is the question of sexuality and homosocial/sexual desire in the context of experience, poetics and reading/interpretation. (See Watten’s web site where he discusses this: http://www.english.wayne.edu/fac_pages/ewatten/)²

Interestingly, Watten’s text is followed by Steve Benson’s in which he details the writing of his section during his “last few days of my paternity leave from full-time work in a non-profit mental health clinic” (23). Benson’s piece is staged from the perspective of the present as are many of the pieces. However, it is interesting that he begins his writing from a locus of a heterosexual partnership and from the perspective of a father. The writer introduces the personal life of the author, and thus invites the reader to consider this personal life, this penumbra or shadow of the author function. This strategy is itself queer because it elides Benson’s own personal sexual history. For example, Benson writes: “I had identified myself as gay since 1976,

¹Some 6 or 8 years later this controversy would be re-ignited in the pages of Poetry Flash when David Levi-Strauss wrote an article about the rescreening of the Duncan and Zukofsky public tv film out-takes, making negative remarks about Watten’s talk while affirming Duncan’s participation and reading.

² On his web site, Post 3: 09/25/04, Watten writes: “Duncan’s presentation involved a strong rebuke of my argument on Catullus—specifically, that Zukofsky could not translate Catullus, in that he could not enter into the spirit of his passions. An expressivist reading, as opposed to my constructivist one, here found a defining moment. For Duncan, Zukofsky’s experiment was (though he did not use the term) perverse in masking the eroticism of the original...”

but I found my orientation changing unexpectedly and dramatically in 1992"

(<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~wh/visitors/bensonbio.html>). The same biographical piece notes that "Carla Harryman, an undergraduate writing student who often came to graduate fiction-writing workshops, became my best friend and partner." We might argue that Benson's personal sexual history is his own and indeed it is. Yet, somehow, in the context of this particular text which ostensibly covers the years 1975-1980, and its specific investigation of the trope and structuring effects of love and implicitly, sexuality, and given the kinds of containment that this reader sees happening in various places, it is curious and anomalous that Benson's section veers away from the queer, aiming his writing from a place of heter-normativity. Ron Silliman's piece uses the trope of sexuality to set up differences between "friendships in the political world" which "must be the friendship equivalent of anonymous sex" with the "relations of poetry" which "were and are for me the polar opposite of those grounded in the political activity of the American Left" (48-50). The relations of poetry, for Silliman, are "a model of correspondences (not unlike this dialog) over a serious expanse of time" (51). So, poetry friendships are something more and better than anonymous sex and perhaps less than relations of love. Time and work seem to differentiate the two.

Carla Harryman's section takes up the Lady in Watten's section. She writes: "Even if the heroic storybook tale, the Provençal poem, or the epic were no longer read, their themes would linger in abundance" (28-29). Through this framework she examines how traditional gender relations and the constructions of romanticism continue to permeate our culture particularly as they are deployed by the media and government. Such constructions permeate our understanding and productions of all sorts, including war. Our culture is saturated by these constructions which

exert powerful affects, despite the material realities of, for example, the existence of women soldiers today or fathers who “mother” their children. She deftly explores how Robert Creeley makes use of the figure of the Lady in his poem, “The Door,” and takes apart that trope and its structuring of gender and the poet. Harryman writes: “In imagining the poem as one that I have authored, I see myself split as the person who wrote the poem and as the object of the poem...The poem does not cohere, if I author it” (31). Yet, despite the complex problems presented by Creeley’s poem and Harryman’s criticism of its gender dynamics for the woman as author, she also asks, “If I love this poem not because of what it said but because of what it did, what did it do?” (34). One of the answers to that question is that upon discovering it, “Then and there I was a writer” (37). In the end, Harryman asserts not only for herself but on behalf of the others, that “...it almost goes without saying that opposition to the regulation of gender in literature had everything to do with formal innovation produced by us, as men and women” (38). This makes sense to me as an analysis of what’s going on in Harryman’s own work. I’m less clear at this juncture how this applies to some of the work of the other male writers. In much of Ron Silliman’s work, for example, despite its *New Sentences*, the absence of any stable narrative and the use of the second person interrogative in a poem such as “Sunset Debris,” the queering of gender is, in my reading, minimal. However, on some level, Harryman’s argument here resonates with Jack Hitt’s recent article in *Mother Jones* about reactions to Hillary Rodham Clinton. Our feelings about Hillary, as this article argues, are really about ourselves and the persistent presence of and agitation against proscribed and insidious gender roles: the ghost in the machine of culture. Since Language poetry generates such extreme affective reactions, one must wonder what it is about the literary community and ourselves that this writing pushes up

against? As Rae Armantrout writes, “Pronouns don’t go away” (62) even if, in some ultimate staging, the person vanishes.

If Robert Grenier’s “I HATE SPEECH” is seen as an inaugural moment of Language Poetry as it is by Perelman (*Marginalization* 38), one might argue as Watten does elsewhere³, that the project of Language poetry is grounded in a moment of negativity and critique even though it posits the group or collective as an other significance, one that underscores or exposes the ideology underlying and propping up the social movement of the “canonical individual of the ‘expressivist’ tendency” (*Social Text* 273). In this inaugural, engaging and rich first installment of *The Grand Piano*, these ten writers who are “still identified” as opposed to identifying themselves as Language poets, posit love as an ultimately affirmative force in their relations over time. Lyn Hejinian states it directly: “I saw myself...as having been energetically engaged in affirmation....we were undertaking it for love” (57). As Ron Silliman writes in closing his piece: “Not that there have not been difficulties, rough spots, contradictions—in fact, precisely because there have been these and we have come through them and continue to do so here” (51). There is an abundance to linger over in *The Grand Piano* even as and perhaps because of the large gaps and contradictions. But this is an ongoing, serial work and I look forward to reading future installments; maybe there the matter of the dark body will materialize.

³ See *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003.

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