

Love, Like Pronouns

Julia Bloch

Love Like Pronouns

Rosmarie Waldrop

Omnidawn, 2003 (Richmond, CA)

ISBN: 1-890650-14-5, 120pp. \$12.95

In her essay “Thinking of Follows” (published in Mary Margaret Sloan’s anthology of innovative women’s writing, *Moving Borders*), Rosmarie Waldrop writes, in response to feminist arguments about phallic bias and the signifier/signified, that language itself is the actual other “in its full range.” It does not belong to male or female provenance, but is commonly held by and to be entered into by all. The poems in Waldrop’s new collection of poems from Omnidawn, *Love, Like Pronouns*, deal with a range of language’s discrete parts, using them as subject and signifier, disrupting conventional uses of grammar and form to call attention to language as something that is an other, that yet yields shades of meaning. From the book’s epigraph, by E. Tracy Grinnell (“that love, / like pronouns / divides its questions:”), these economical, almost halting poems use sparing syntax to offer up complex, often lush discussions of the false divide between literal and figurative.

Largely, the field of inquiry in these poems is the realm of relationships — romantic connection, desire, and sexuality — as in the sensual discussion of language in “Enhanced Density”:

What can I do but let my thoughts roam in the field around a word. The way
desire roams through my body? It’s called the meaning of the word because
we cannot touch the ground water in any other way. (46)

Here and in other poems, Waldrop suggests how language might actually direct or define physical experience. In the long poem “In Anyone’s Language,” the speaker seems to address a confidante, working with short lines and stanzas to interrogate the materials of speech: “my trying, when the map, scaled down / it seemed, would help to know what I ‘want’ and / what is a word, more having / an interest in facts ...” (49). The poem also suggests that when action is more immediate than language, it is most important to attend

to the mechanics of language: “when, in anyone’s language / events withdraw, you, / more as if prepositions / had force, attentive to, / one must think of, in writing that is, / everything except meaning” (50). But alas, “pronouns can be so / mistaken, so without” (52): parts of speech can, and do, fail us, manifesting as a rocky terrain rather than the steady road that appears earlier in the poem.

Parts of speech can also destabilize the reader’s experience, as in the poems in the section titled “Impossible Object,” in which question marks turn the poem on itself and on the reader. In “Initial Conditions,” there are no conclusions: “The question: Why? is most nostalgic. In twenty years of marriage one might be in love with one another. Or with another?” (32). “Object Relations” goes as far as to ask, “What if language is not communication? If facts refuse coordinates?” (34).

Why, then, in “The Material World,” does Waldrop write, “If, close to morning, you see the physical fact of language it’s best to take a prophylactic attitude” (39)? Is it because language threatens and shackles us, as in the ominous images later in the poem? Or does the line suggest we take a preventative approach against our impulse to live outside of language, to objectify it? Later, the poem refers to that particularly physical instance when feeling arises unconnected to speech, and can “threaten to erase your skin”(39), or your body’s very boundary. This line feels intuitively true, but by this point I’d lost the thread of the poem, snagged by the perhaps oversimplified wit of the first line. Perhaps, instead, the poem must be read as another example of how Waldrop is interested more in juxtaposing than isolating units of meaning in the poem: “Pressure just below the phrase level,” almost as if language coasted on the underlying fact of the physical, but only sometimes.

Although Waldrop’s poetry takes an equal-opportunity approach to language-as-other, she doesn’t suggest that language is without its gendered implications: near the end of the book, she takes up the subject of Eve and the tree of knowledge. If the apple is knowledge, it is probably also the word; but in the story of Eve, it is also the physical, as in “Admiration of Animals”:

Parts common to all animals, sometimes denied. Starting out with nothing she never bothered to bite an apple. Although born female, she watches the purple flower throw its shadow on the wall. The word is not itself. The Christian ideal is not just to dominate passion, but not to experience desire at all. A perspective as abrupt as a child's drawing. Our brains destroy us. (94)

In this mightily complex poem, Waldrop constructs an architecture of references that pull the reader both further into the story and into a net of juxtapositions that trouble the story itself. Waldrop is interested in a sort of action that happens between the words in the poem, and in "Admiration of Animals," references — including apple, word, the female body, grammar, and the Christian ideal — intersect to create almost a hyperlinking of ideas that continually foreground the language that expresses them: in "Thinking as Follows," Waldrop says, "as I begin working, far from having an 'epiphany' to express, I have only a vague nucleus of energy running to words. As soon as I start *listening* to the words, they reveal their own vectors and affinities, pull the poem into their own field of force, often in unforeseen directions, away from the semantic charge of the original impulse" ("Thinking," 610). The story of Eden appears in later poems, too: in "Reverse Archaeology," we see "an unripe idea dropped from the tree" (109).

The cover of *Love, Like Pronouns*, a collage by Keith Waldrop, suggests a juxtaposition of an apple-cheeked doll with red beams of light for legs and an apparition of what might be the Twin Towers propping her up. At the end of the book, Rosmarie takes on the topic of September 11 in a moving sequence. The language in this section is no less syntactically generative than the rest of the book, and startlingly clear: "Like a movie. Like a comic strip. Please distinguish between. Crumbling towers and the image of crumbling towers. The image, repeated, multiplies. Locks on the plural. Crowds" (113). Waldrop also returns to concerns from elsewhere in her book: "And on an adverb we build war" (115). In a fitting tribute to her ongoing inquiry into the mechanics of language, Waldrop directs her attention to disaster, reminding us that even if we are aware of speech's surface, even if we remind ourselves that "Nothing is hidden" (116), images can feel visceral, as can our descriptions of them.

Julia Bloch grew up in Northern California and Sydney, Australia. Her work has appeared recently in *Five Fingers Review*, *Mirage/Period(ical)*, *How2, 26: A Journal of Poetry and Poetics*, *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Small Town*, *Stolen Island Review*, *Laundry Pen*, and the “new brutalism” anthology from Avenue B, *Involuntary Vision: After Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams*. In 2003, she won the Joseph Henry Jackson Literary Award. She lives in San Francisco, where she works as an editor and writes epistolary poems to Kelly Clarkson, the tow-headed winner of the first American Idol reality TV series.