

FINDING GRACE: MODERNITY AND THE INEFFABLE IN THE POETRY OF RAE ARMANTROUT AND FANNY HOWE

Ann Vickery

Macquarie University

ABSTRACT

When truth is deconstructed, how does this affect our concept of the person and the direction of thought? What happens to our relation with language or a community? This paper explores recent poetic investigations into the relation between the material world of the everyday and the ineffable. Taking as example, the analytic lyric of Rae Armantrout and Fanny Howe, it examines how their work may be read through the social and spiritual philosophies of Simone Weil. More specifically, it focuses on the role of gender in embodied thought, particularly in terms of sexuality, language, desire, motherhood, and violence.

It is now a commonplace that modernity is marked by the passing of Romanticism's idealization and interiority, corresponding with a crisis in representation. Words lead only to one another in an endless circle of signification —strangeness disappears and banality reigns. America becomes one great picture-screen, commodifying everything from the upswEEP of wind to human voices into recognizable sound-bites which are then readily consumed. The pathos of history defaults in face of the recycled and the nostalgic. Don Byrd, along with other American poets and critics, have argued that it is not so much the loss of meaning, but the loss of value which is at stake (154). In a movement of foreclosure, the other is no longer sought, let alone heard.

When truth is deconstructed, how does this affect our concept of the person and the direction of thought? What happens to our relation to language or community? Are the terms to any argument already set? For many modernists, the task was to find and fight for some sort of wholeness outside conventional forms and forces. "I tried to make a paradiso/ terrestre," wrote Ezra Pound in his final notes for *The Cantos*

(802). In hindsight, the authority placed on the writer's talent seems both arrogant and naive. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out, these projects were often engaged in a masculine show of force, with figures like Pound " 'bursting thru'...to haunting, luminous and completely traditional versions or images of paradise...for which he claimed 'they cohere, even if my notes (i.e. metonymic registers) do not cohere'"(191).

Never quite at the center their world, women have either been "beside" knowledge or its object. In poetry, the subjugation of muses has reinforced a gendering of perspective. Language, too, has always been already burdened with the traces of colonization, the relations of social power determining who speaks. Both through ideology and rhetoric, then, women's relation to thought has been from the margins. What I contend is that the feminist search for value is often coupled with a philosophical investigation into the alterity of self. Part of this concerns the possibility of communication with the other, a dialogic dimension. Furthermore, I would argue, this project has developed largely out of an analytic lyric.

Characterized by its starkly non-narrative form, Language poetry has generally been thought to disavow lyric, even to advocate non-referentiality in its poetics.¹ Yet, as the work of many women writers associated with the movement reveals, the experimentalism can be lyrical and very much grounded in the world. Language poetry emerged in the Bay Area of San Francisco and New York in the late 1970s, and was influenced by a range of post-structuralism and socialist politics. This combination lead logically to a questioning of the relation between the abstract and the material. Following recent social philosophers such as Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt, women Language poets have realized that the search for the invisible must be focused on the visible world. Writing becomes mediation, the lyric a site of reflexivity. Meditating on the constraints of language on consciousness, these writers are informed by a feminist epistemology.

This paper will focus primarily on the poetry of Rae Armantrout and Fanny Howe. Perhaps because their poetry seems to come from the hermeneutic tradition of Mallarmé, Beckett, and Celan, Armantrout and Howe's work has received less critical attention than some other Language writers. The irony and playfulness in their work is always tied to a serious exploration of the poem as experiential, open to forces which remain unclear. A sense is left of what Rae Armantrout calls "mysteries without boundaries"(*Suite 22*).

Both Armantrout and Howe are indebted to a poetics of theology, although they draw also from the social and the psychological. In both of her critical texts, "The Contemporary Logos" and "The Ecstatic," Howe acknowledges the influence of Simone Weil on her work. Weil's philosophy would be attractive to many women Language writers because of its social and ethical ramifications. Weil held that we each hold a fundamental responsibility for the other. She herself was opposed to all forms of oppression and committed throughout her short life (she died at the age of thirty-four) to challenging them. She would participate in the Spanish Civil War and the French Resistance during World War Two. A Christian Hellenist, Weil's spiritual writings are informed by her extensive reading of Plato, as well as the Greek tragedies, the Gospels, Hinduism, Judaism, and Taoism. Today, she remains a marginal figure in the French tradition, better known for the religious rather than sociological, political or philosophical currents in her writing.

Weil's predominant focus would be on the relation between supernatural love and earthly existence. "The object of my research," she states, "is not supernatural, but this world. The supernatural is the light. One must not be so bold as to make an object of it, or else one degrades it."² Writing then attests to faith in a presence which is invisible. Weil condemned words that were only "signs," feeling that wars were often fought for signs.³ Instead, she sought meaning inside the realities of human life. Her own life was rooted in physical activities such as agricultural and factory work, unionism and community participation. Weil would have been deeply dubious of a term like "Language poetry," and indeed, Howe also distances herself from such labels. Instead, the poet is singular in her labor. What links the poetry of these Armantrout and Howe, then, is the degree of attention to be found, or more specifically, its consistency and rigor.

This said, they share a surprisingly similar profile as residents of San Diego (although Howe is originally from New England) and in their role as mothers and teachers. Both have elaborated their poetics through a number of critical articles and in extensive discussions with contemporaries such as Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, and the broader constellation of writers attracting the term "Language Poets." Presented without judgment but tied with contradictions, their work is difficult to fit into conventional feminist frameworks. However, their observations often foreground the oppressive structures of social hierarchies, clearing the ground for future critique on behalf of the reader. Rather than contemporary feminist theory, their poetry seems to follow not only the social philosophies of Simone Weil and to a lesser extent, Hannah Arendt, but also the radical negativity of a number of medieval women mystics.

DUAL FORCES: GRAVITY AND GRACE

In "The Contemporary Logos," Fanny Howe argues: "Two shocks run in continual opposition: one is the shock of visible existence; the other is the shock of the invisible. That is, consciousness"(47). This is similar to Weil's categories of gravity and grace. "Two forces rule the universe: light and gravity," opens *Gravity and Grace*, Weil's study on the same (*Gravity* 1). Gravity is marked by self-interest and self-awareness, and is defined by the attempt to secure existence or one's place in the world. It gives the self an egotistic weight. In contrast, grace is a falling away of self. It fills empty spaces "but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it"(*Gravity* 10). Weil saw this void emerging from "decreation," the subject's movement towards disintegration and weightlessness. "We must take the feeling of being at home into exile," she advocated, "We must be rooted in the absence of a place"(*Gravity* 34).

This absence or nothingness can be found in silence. Howe quotes from Samuel Beckett in *First Love*:

At first I heard nothing, then the voice again, but only just, so faintly did it carry. First I didn't hear it, then I did, I must therefore have begun hearing it, at a certain point, but no, there was no beginning, the sound emerged so softly from the silence and resembled it..." The origin of sound is silence. Space on a page can produce sound ("Contemporary Logos," 51).

Armantrout seems less concerned with dualisms, although she too, holds to a value of silence, which like Weil's category of grace, is not based on need:

A Pulse

Find the place
in silence
that is a person

or like a person
or like not
needing a person.

After the heart attack
she fills her apartment
with designer accents —

piece by piece...

Light changes:

Separation
anxiety refers
to this

as next
tears itself off...

Just a quick trip back
to mark the spot
where things stop
looking familiar (*Made to Seem* 21-22).

Bearing only a few words in every line, Armantrout's poem is sparse, even fragmentary. In his volume, *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben contends that such hesitation and truncation is characteristic of modern poetry. "[A]lmost all modern poems since Mallarmé are fragments," he posits, "in that they allude to something (the totality of the poem) that can never be invoked in its integrity, but only rendered present through its negation." In drawing attention to the space surrounding and even threatening to overwhelm its words, the poem invites silence. Indeed, it could be said to provide a textual void that parallels a physical void experienced by the female figure that it takes as its center.

Weil asserts, somewhat contrarily, that grace creates a void in order to be found: "To accept a void in ourselves is supernatural. Where is the energy to be found for an act which has nothing to counter-balance it? The energy has to come from elsewhere. Yet first there must be a tearing out, something desperate has to take place, the void

must be created. Void: the dark night”(*Gravity* 10). The heart attack in Armantrout’s poem brings to attention the fragility of human existence. Yet, it is important that Armantrout records the aftermath of this disabling illness. Like the woman, the words of the poem register a pulse —both poem and woman go on in the face of not knowing.

In “The Contemporary Logos,” Howe suggests that affliction renders the voice all but inaudible. This is “the point in affliction,” as Weil postulates, “where we are no longer able to bear either that it should go on or that we should be delivered from it”(*Gravity* 73). Affliction renders the familiar strange —the world is met with new eyes and without speech. Elsewhere, Armantrout characterizes silence as “The power to be irretrievably lost”(“Travels,” *Extremities*). Like Edmond Jabès, she locates the desert as the metaphoric space of absence and exile:

Going to the desert
is the old term

‘landscape of zeros’

the glitter of edges
again catches the eye

to approach these swords!

lines across which
beings vanish/flare

the charmed verges of presence (7)

Howe too, foregoes civilization. For her, detachment requires a renunciation of material possessions and comforts:

You can only go wild
in the away —tracking

your miles like words in the sky

Each act is extinct
As soon as invented

and each thing too
This way you know it’s not fame
but a high

time you are hunting
for in the way of

I AM. (*The End* 58)

In going “wild,” Howe plays both on the savage self and on the metaphoric space of the wilderness. Existence for both writers is confirmed by some sort of risky crossing, giving a heightened sense of death (whether through “swords” or simply becoming extinct). As Susan Howe points out, the medieval Latin term for a knight is “miles” (211). Both Armantrout and Fanny Howe could be said, then, to view wandering as a spiritual quest on earth. Weil states that unlike the hero, the saint remains without armor to protect herself from the sword. In her wild state, the “You” of Howe’s poem could be said to present a nakedness, while Armantrout leaves the meeting of swords open, although the “landscape of zeros” suggests a baring of the soul. Hélène Cixous has written of this movement towards death, “Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveller in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be”(86). In this light, grace is not submission but non-enclosure, providing an opportunity to go beyond what can be adequately comprehended. In articulating this nihilistic movement in positive terms, Cixous is perhaps too quick to transform it into some sort of freedom palatable to twentieth-century feminists. According to Weil, grace is not intentionally sought. It is not a self-determining act, but a withdrawal from subjectivity.

ATTENTION

The key to grace is attention, that is, the ability to hold “pincer-like” in the mind seemingly incompatible truths, as well as to face harsh facts. Weil posits that “Attention consists in suspending thought, in making it available, empty, penetrable by the object”(*Waiting* 92). Accordingly, attention is a turning away from ego and expectation. Nathaniel Tarn characterizes expectation as

“assurance in a state of awaiting the coming about of a favourable or unfavourable circumstance arising out of a moment or ‘now.’ Attention, absolutely and completely open to the moment as it arises (i.e. defines itself) and to the quiddity of whatever then is, has no such assurance and does not desire it. In fact, it cannot know any desire or expectation”(“Voice,” 44).

Weil and Tarn’s description of attention is similar to Hannah Arendt’s reading of “detachment” in *The Human Condition*.⁴ Both are shown through the act of waiting and not taking the place of the other. Waiting, for Weil, is when we touch the absolute good. This state of attention can be found in Armantrout’s poem, “Dusk”:

Spider on the cold expanse
of glass, three stories high
rests intently
and so purely alone.

I’m not like that (*The Invention of Hunger*, n. pag).

Solitary, the spider is in a state of both temporal and spatial suspension. He exists under extreme conditions, without home and warmth. Although the spider appears in a lowly position, he is in fact, closer to the light. This paradox is in line with Weil's levering of forces: "A going down, the condition of a rising up"(84). She further believed that a higher order could be introduced into a lower order "under the form of something infinitely small." (Quoted by Thibon in his introduction to *Gravity and Grace* xix). Armantrout's last line, "I'm not like that," brings gravity to the poem. Recognizing the spider's state of grace and the contrast it provides to herself, Armantrout perhaps more fully approaches it. As Weil discerns: "The virtue of humility is nothing more nor less than the power of attention,"(*Gravity* 116).

LANGUAGE

Given the traces of other thoughts, other meanings, that are already apparent in language, can writing be said to be an act of attention? How does a poem enter its own space? In "Close Up," Howe explores the possibility of writing as meditation:

The orange flower on the other side of the pane—
Paper or fate?

Put your finger in the light, eyes and draw
A white field. A lamb made of lambs.

Before the world is round
There's a line of traffic
Which shakes aside all sparrows.

Triggers follow feeling but precedes acting on them,
A feeling triggers a feeling, then the heft
Of the hand to work.

A human face is pressed on glass; mirrors, like armor
Break shapes into targets,

The woman's face on the other side of this pane—
Paper or fate?
Written in light, in either case (*The End* 5).

An analytic lyric turns in on itself, questioning the limits of its own form. Given that the word, "close," can mean alternatively "to shut" or proximity, Howe's title reads both as giving an intimate perspective and discerning language to be a closed system. The poem does not describe what is on the other side of the window, but has a reality of its own which is artificial and man-made. In the phrase, "A lamb made of lambs," Howe promotes the abstract or Platonic idea of lambs, suggesting that words express aspirations, rather than referring to objects. Using color as an example, Weil

argues that we do not experience shades passively. We sort and select colors, positioning them along a spectrum.⁵ Language, then, works by association. The whiteness of a field contrasts with the orange coloring of the flower. Yet, it also leads to a relation with the whiteness of a lamb and the blankness of the page.

Because Howe explicitly directs the reader's attention to war-like violence, with the mention of "armor and targets," there is also the association of the lamb and image with sacrifice. The use of the word, "trigger" also recalls the gun and representation's inevitable violence of the other. Alternatively, it can mean language's meaning-system works by association. Howe contrasts the suffering caused through social violence with potential linguistic violence. This is reinforced by the repetition of the phrase, "paper or fate." A choice is presented. Are they the same? How do they differ? The last line of the poem is "Written in light, in either case." Howe herself, argues that "Words which consciously aspire to the future are heightened by the desire to rise above, be free of, the tyranny of history. They aim for a heightened place — a paradise" ("Ecstatic," 18). On the other hand, Weil would suggest that through affliction, we approach a state of grace. Those who suffer social violence may also reach the light.

In "The Ecstatic," Howe elaborates her belief that ecstatic poetry, like Weil's "perfect thought," is necessarily involved in the process of experiment. In yearning for paradise, such poetry must move outside habitual grammar. Hypothesis, rather than metaphor, defines its premise. Her use of the word "sparrowings," echoes the syntactic shifts of a favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who also transforms nouns into verbs. "Sparrowings" gives a sense of humble song, another target for violence by the written.

Following this, Rae Armantrout speculates on the violence of history, more specifically drawing out its links with fiction and the imagination:

How we came to be

this many
is the subject

of our tale
One story

has been told
in many ways

In the beginning
there was just one

woman
or one language

or one jot
of matter

infinitely dense

It must be so
but who can believe it? (“It,” 135-6)

It is significant that both Howe’s poem, “Close Up,” and Armantrout’s “It” feature a woman rather than a man at the center of their epistemic investigations. In doing so, Howe and Armantrout reverse the philosophical standard, “man,” used even by Weil. Traditionally a figure of silence, the woman is placed in a new relation to language. Yet, there remains an uneasy awareness of the possible elision between the specific being, historically and socially located, and the timeless category of Woman. What happens to the tales of women? Are they condemned to silence, through being subsumed by myth?

The archetypal story of origins, the story of the ark, is simultaneously a story of survival, evolution, and faith. Yet, the last line, “who can believe it?” raises the figure of the projected reader of the story. What if nobody is listening? Nathaniel Tarn has argued that “the poet can *suffer* pushing into an ‘originality’ which, in many ways, has already proved itself to be ‘unoriginal’ and as to what the individual and collective components in the making of poetry might be” (*Views* 346). The poet puts her poem forward, knowing that it is doomed to an end in any event.

In a further poem, “You,” Armantrout emphasizes the inability to communicate with the other:

1
Simple identity of slack
wires with shadows
on a white wall,
god-like
in the long pause.

2.
When the boy who
sees a snapshot
can’t get in
through remembering,
he must ask his mom
“What were *you* thinking?” (*Made to Seem* 56)

Here, Armantrout deliberately recalls Plato’s cave, in which representation is a double displacement —people watched the shadows of objects cast by a source of light, the objects themselves being copies of an abstract ideal. Here, shadow-like images and the mechanics of identity are visible. Weil herself wrote that thought will inevitably be shaped by the form of its expression. The process of writing is one of translation or shadow-play. Like Howe’s “Close Up,” the scenario allegorizes textual production. The white walls may be associated with the blankness of the page, the figure behind the wires, the poet herself. In the second stanza, the god-like figure has taken up dual authorial roles, occupying the position both as mother and photogra-

pher. The other is unable to recognize the picture of himself. The separateness of self is made apparent.

Howe also writes:

Strange in content,
though not in form,

the round world as I saw it
change around the edges,

Pallid waters, scummy at surface,
produced a red sail,

constant invention,
like colored leaves you can see thru.

What is shook down, shakes up again,
artificial off the real,

a lot like wishful drinking (*The End* 49).

Language may resemble nature, “like colored leaves” and appear transparent, but on closer inspection, the waters are “pallid” and “scummy at surface.” The three-dimensional “round” world changes at the edges, and on closer inspection, it turns out to be one flat plane. Many of the images are allegorical —“red” sounding the same as “read” and the leaves also suggestive of a book. The redness of the sail is “like” autumn leaves, yet when shaken, found to be not the same. Like the work of Samuel Beckett, there is a heightened sense of language, with the wit of the last line lifting the poem, even performatively give a sense of the floating alluded to in the rest of the poem. Because we are used to the phrase, “wishful thinking,” Howe’s final line (so close to it in sound) not only throws it into question, but brings thought back to a material base.

Howe’s poetry engenders Weilian paradox through this unsettling moment. Another version of this kind of strategy is found in irony, which provokes the reader into taking a second thought or a second look. As Armantrout contends in her essay, “Irony and Postmodern Poetry,” a person can be both “in the know” as well as aware of her own state of ignorance. “Irony, in its broadest sense,” she argues, “marks the consciousness of dissonance” (“Irony,” 674).

View

Not the city lights. We want

—the moon—

The Moon
none of our doing! (*Extremities* 25)

Armantrout creates a temporary check here through the judicious use of irony. The poem begins on a negative proposition, “Not the city lights” which then turns into a whimsical desire for the moon. The moon itself is elliptic, both in the sky (rendered less clear by the haze of city lights) and on the page (separated from the expression of desire by the two dashes which surround it). With the declaration of the last line, “none of our doing!” Armantrout undermines the poetic mood. Philosophically speaking, the moon still exists even if we cannot see it or, in Armantrout’s words, have nothing to do with it. Weil herself would make this very same point (*Lectures* 70). Armantrout’s phrase, however, is deliberately non-philosophical. Rather, it is a commonly heard one, the retraction of individual responsibility for forces which seem invisible or beyond our control. As Armantrout points out, irony has sometimes been dismissed as politically ineffectual. Yet, is it presumptuous to believe that one has the answers? Here, she merely points to the absurdity of this denial, the lengths to which it is mobilized in contemporary life.

Howe also makes use of the ironic, but gives a much darker example of indifference:

That’s the break of a day’s
crime, what comes with a clang of pails

and leaden scarves
off the back of cars. Four bodies, fallen

into an amalgam frieze,
all young black girls, are felled

by some clasp of a mean man’s hand,
while the day’s men planned

in smokey diners, and the kitchen
of the Ritz hotel lights up (*The End* 36).

Poverty’s “clang of pails” is presented against a backdrop of wealth, comfort and security. Howe reinforces this discrepancy, by counterposing the “frieze” of bodies (the pun on “freeze” being supported by other suggestions of coldness such as the “leaden scarves”) and the lights of the Ritz. While the Ritz “lights up,” these four girls are “fallen.” The cliché, “break of day,” is also used to effect, as Howe adds the word “crime” to it in the next line. In doing so, she contrasts the routine-nature of crime, the structural break in the actual poem, and the broken bodies. Her poem demonstrates how powerful irony may be as a strategy. “To the extent that it can foreground social dissonances,” Armantrout states, “it can serve a political end by increasing people’s discomfort” (“Irony,” 675). Howe carefully alludes to unseen structures of masculine power, drawing a link between the “day’s men” and the girls’ anonymous murderer.

No explanation is provided for the girls’ death. There is little affect as the girls remain undifferentiated from one another and distanced through the plastic nature of

representation (the “amalgam frieze”). The city continues. Following Marx, it is possible to argue that it is precisely the evils of capitalism which alienates individuals and creates indifference through economic hierarchies. In its lack of judgment, Howe’s poem makes itself available to these multiple readings of oppression.

NATURE

According to Weil, alienated labor encourages *malheur*, a kind of living death. She saw the pre-industrial worker as being in a kind of primitive balance with nature. Such a worker is fully aware of the structures pertaining to his work and can participate in them fully—it becomes a liberating act. Yet, while a worker may build and respect the natural weight of a stone, there is a temptation to forget nature, to increase power and disrupt both natural balance and the limits of control. *Malheur* occurs when the worker is overwhelmed by organization.

Howe explores this in her extended poem, “Scattered Light”:

White slides over
rows of windowed eyes:
stone housing, that is, a hundred years snowed.

Surrounded by more craft
than need, the dross of winter:

Weather inspection
stations the day then passes on information.

See birds beat the ice off their wings
for bits dressed in white,

how the world contains everything
the mind has to live by (140).

As the first part suggests, nature overwhelms human craft. As Howe states in “The Ecstatic,” nature is often found to be in opposition to “human nature.” The expanse of time embodied in the stone housing is contrasted against the immediacy of the bird, beating “the ice off their wings.” Such minor detail more accurately reveals a presence and infinity. Rather than a weather station passing on information, the weather itself inspects and tells us its knowledge. While human life sleeps, the birds are active in their labor. Their labor comes from natural necessity. As with phrases like “sparrowings” and “wishful drinking,” Howe’s phrase here, “a hundred years snowed” not only moves beyond conventions of “real time” (“a hundred years old”) but offers another measure of time. Time is understood through the presence and ongoing season of nature, the word “snow” being flexible to be both noun and verb, action and object.

The effect of labor decreases over time, while nature develops in rhythms and cycles. In another poem, Howe states:

Alchemy's product comes sight unseen,
how a blue sapphire's outer stone

is a gray mention of time.
Pace, as it's slow, has made

laborious morality. And the wall
took years to build. Now I see

the stones decrease, now the ice.
It's a little tree! let me know

honey-slow, the flow
of affliction, that's why it can be
a motion of grace, one way to wise up (*The End* 48).

As the poem suggests, there is purity and grace in the smallest aspect of nature. Language reflects this. The strongest sound is probably that of the "o" as found in "slow," "know," "flow," and "stone." There is also the more subtle repetition of the "s," producing a softening effect in "ice," "wise," "decrease," and "see." In "The Ecstatic," Howe writes that "the slow structures given to words might be viewed as an imitation of our motion, showing us the way its pace determines our perspectives, morals and aspirations. Language is structured like the unknown, but poetic language, in its rhythms, tells us something about time which is hidden and only waiting to be restored to light" (18). The poem's motion helps to create a sense of permanence and harmony. Suffering is instilled with the sweetness and viscous solidity of honey. There is a saturation of the senses, particularly of the ear.

This is stopped by the final line, with its colloquial phrase, "to wise up." Alluding to a hurriedly gained knowledge (one which is street-savvy), it seems at odds with the sentiment of the rest of the poem. The clipped sound of the final word, "up," disrupts long "o" sound that has been repeated throughout. Why undercut such seductive aesthetics? "[A] too stiff syntax can be unfairly weighted in favor of the subject," Howe remarks, "Consequently the enforced passivity (stillness and silence) of any object can only be reversed by adjectives, adverbs, or by a tampering with its usual position. Like an alchemist, the poet restores honor to repressed objects, more so by the extent to which the subterranean, ahistorical associations are made in their favor" ("Ecstatic," 18).

DESIRE AND LOVE

Simone Weil distinguishes between desire (a force of gravity) and beauty (which enables a state of grace). Desire is an appetite, linked to instinct or expectation. In

calling a collection of poems, *The Invention of Hunger*, Armantrout points to hunger or need as an artificial limit. Hungers or needs can be satisfied. Is love, like beauty, different from sensuality and pleasure? The difference is perhaps found in duration. Weil states: "one does not grow tired of beauty. One does grow tired of what is pleasing, of what only flatters the senses" (*Gravity* 184). Beauty immediately suggests what is infinite. "Face to face with a work of beauty," she continues, "we forget our own existence" (*Gravity* 185). In this respect, there is a fine distinction between a love which will sacrifice and a mere need for the other. Weil herself would starve herself to death in the hope that more food would find its way to her beloved French soldiers during World War Two. For Howe, love is much more problematic. It is difficult to separate it from the physical:

The dark night of the body
delivers that soft blow to complacency

which is swallowed alone later,
like a story re outer space or ghosts.

But with you it puts me up against
your fortress, fast, where my limbs

and heart swing onto yours,
and I pray in a pair

we will mount the arc
to the void, and not be flooded apart (*The End* 33).

Howe is deliberately vague (is she referring to a divine "you" or a human "you"?) in order to assess the difference between the two others. Weil wrote: "Do not allow yourself to be imprisoned by any affection. Keep your solitude. The day, if it ever comes, when you are given true affection, there will be no opposition between interior solitude and friendship, quite the reverse" (*Gravity* 60). In Howe's poem, the material separation of body from body undoes a sense of security. Furthermore, there is a fortress of emotion between the lover and the narrator. The narrator takes on responsibility for him by praying "in a pair." In doing so, she hopes that both will reach a state of grace and the cords of attachment will remain unbroken even in death. Weil herself was concerned that the violence of her attachment to a few would blind her to a greater love, the love of Christ: "I think I must love wrongly: otherwise things would not seem like this to me. My love would not be attached to a few beings. It would be extended to everything which is worthy of love" (*Gravity* 131).

Alternatively, Armantrout would sexualize the waiting for death and the eventual meeting between self and supernatural other:

.....
Circles an old woman's
fingers trace

on the nubs of
her chair arms.

Waits for the word to come
to her, tensed
as if for orgasm (*Necromance* 10)

The image seems shocking as we are used to thinking the elderly as de-sexualized beings. Armantrout seems to suggest that the old woman is still capable of desire, but that it holds different meanings for her. Yet, the passage is also shocking in the relation it presents between self and God. To some degree, it recalls the sexualization of spirituality to be found in the writings of medieval women mystics. A visionary's meeting with Christ was often described quite erotically, through the language of romance and love lyric. These visions were immediate and physical, sexualizing the female body.⁶

THE VIOLENCE OF PASSION

The final line of Armantrout's poem reads, "Fear surrounds language." Passion's force is violence. In exploring the relation between this strong emotion and its effect, Howe and Armantrout's poetry takes a strongly feminist slant. They insist that such a question must be viewed in broader social terms. Howe, for instance, writes:

Love between a couple
of men and women has a strange

momentum, witness the long suffering
of many children born

in one flash. Significance
gains with time, the way a raised

fist grows bigger, and the risk
inherent in domestic passion

is all the more daring, fenced
in the electric network

of winter trees around
Boston's red brick projects (*The End* 52).

For Howe, the dangers of passion extend to the children, the innocents who are both born out of "long suffering" and then experience it for themselves. Violence, Howe contends, gathers momentum. Small incidences grow in significance. There is a sense of being trapped in a situation, "fenced in," a family unit to a Boston housing project.

Howe leaves it undecided, whether the violence comes from the circle of poverty or from the redirection of passion. In contrast to the “honey-slow” time of attention, this affliction is “electric,” happening in a “flash.”

Howe emphasizes the collective nature violence, arising not only between man and woman, but between men and women. In calling her poem, “The Garden,” Armantrout also returns to a point of commonality:

Oleander: coral
from lipstick ads in the 50's.

Fruit of the tree of such knowledge.

To “smack”
(thin air)
meaning kiss or hit.

It appears
in the guise of outworn usages
because we are bad?

Big masculine threat,
insinuating and slangy (*Necromance* 11).

Violence and passion, for Armantrout, are deeply connected to the mechanics of desire in representation. Words such as “smack” are open to multiple meanings, being both a sign of passion and of violence. Sexual knowledge is also thought of through the paradox of fidelity and bad behavior. Just as there is little difference between the color and beauty of a flower and of a cosmetic, there is “thin air” between appearance and act. The masculine threat to all women is that a woman invites violence by her display of sexuality.

THE MATERNAL BODY

The ambivalence expressed by Howe and Armantrout is their exploration of love and corporeality is found again in the maternal body. As feminist critics like Iris Marion Young have discussed, the birthing process “entails the most extreme suspension of the bodily distinction between inner and outer.” Howe writes of pregnancy:

A daring blue heron
Hops into place
And a cloud
Sends showers down
Some moves
Provoke endless patterns
Each thing is sewn into time, then

Having a child
 Is the most extreme caprice
 A smashing of space (*The End* 141)

The maternal body could be said to be in a state of being not directed by intention. Howe seems unsure as to whether or not will is a force within the process. Extreme caprice suggests a lack of responsibility, and a going against the patterns of nature in “smashing the space” between self and other. Armantrout would also explore this space, embodied by two rather than one:

The Dark

Particular
 figment
 of flesh.

Grasping.

Lone. Firm. Felt. There.
 Mindlessly?

“When you feel the urge, bear down!”

Great urge to rain (*The Invention of Hunger* n. pag)

In calling her poem, “The Dark,” Armantrout echoes Weil’s dark night of the void. Here, the other is not a figment of the imagination, but of the flesh. There is attachment. It is “firm” and “felt” in an exact physical location, “There.” Weil herself saw labour as being in partnership with nature, as counter-balancing forces of nature. Yet, like Marx, her idea of labor is associated more with production rather than reproduction. While she saw a value in nature, she is silent on motherhood. Armantrout, however, suggests that birth is a moment where the self falls away (is going “to rain”). In “Natural History,” she states:

Discomfort marks the boundary.

One early symptom was the boundary.

The invention of hunger.
 “I could *use* energy.”

To serve.

Elaborate systems in the service of
 far-fetched demands (*The Invention of Hunger*, n.pag)

Here, responsibility to the other is *to have*. Although there is a boundary between mother and unborn child (the wall of the womb), the relationship is as paradoxical, if not more so, that that envisaged by Weil between self and God. As the appetite of the mother is increased by the child, there is an intimate balance between the body of the mother and the body of the child. Satisfying an appetite will not relieve discomfort. The maternal state is one of both affliction and joy, and therefore emblematic of the spiritual relationship. Indeed, Andrea Nye argues that Weil's description of divination is a maternal one (96).

As I suggested at the beginning of this article, Armantrout and Howe are not alone in their contemplation of the ineffable. In an interview with Andrew Schelling, Hejinian states: "[P]utting aside, for only a moment, the problematic relationship between language and consciousness, there remains my fascination with the extraordinary profusion with the effects of things—invisible but not imperceptible" ("Exchange," 5). Like Weil, she would keep a notebook of her thoughts, calling it "Language & 'Paradise.'" Less concerned with spirituality, Hejinian's writing would focus on the psychological and the phenomenological aspects of experience, knowledge, and language. Rather than Weil, her influences are Merleau-Ponty and William James.⁷

Hejinian views language not so much as a form of mediation but im-mediate. Words pursue objects and vice versa, in a reciprocal relation: "Perfection defeats the world//for inspection. There's poem/with anything in it" ("Language," 88). The poem holds its own philosophical and physical forces. Accordingly, there is a restlessness or anxiety between language and objects. Lyricism is then marked by a kind of yearning.

Mayer, too, explored the possibility of paradise, taking up the issue of gender more than all three other writers. Like Armantrout and Howe, her poetry would make use of much Biblical imagery. In "The Way To Keep Going in Antarctica," Mayer writes of a metaphoric and geographic space of openness. Like Howe, she repeats a Weilian sentiment, "There is a great shame for the world in knowing." In this extreme landscape, the self is overwhelmed by forces of nature, panicking "most at the sound of what the wind could do to me"(32). The last line of the poem inscribes a kind of gnostic pain: "If I suffered what else could I do"(33).

In *Moving*, she explores the gravity of human existence from the point of view of an embodied female subject:

fear sure voice music body time listen
 being part. Being trapped
 being part being trapped which is it?
 being trapped masculine
 should you be one
 should you be eight one eight
 anxious
 there's the woman & there's the woman
 the frame of a woman
 rib is a frame
 filling station (34)

The poem lends itself most obviously to a re-reading of the Edenic myth. Mayer plays on the rib as a frame for the body and Eve as Adam's rib, "part" of his body." She is not separate, but defined through him. The aural slippage between "eight" and "ate" draws attention to Eve's consumption of knowledge, and of her separation from Adam. Femininity, she could be suggesting, is being merely a "filling station," a simulacra or body-without-organs.

Reflecting further on this image, it could be said Mayer's poem may also be read as an engagement with Weilian thought. In emptying herself, or becoming void, Mayer questions whether she is mere becoming simply a "filling station." As Weil argues, gravity is found in the nature of the human, in being part of the world. Mayer focuses on the claustrophobia of the stasis of existence, of being unable to move beyond time and space.

As with Weil, she foregrounds the way things which seem oppositional are related—fear can be associated with security, voice to music. Most importantly, she explores the contrast between the singular and the many. There is a punning on the term "eight" with "ate." Weil herself argued that grace is a state of weightlessness. Michelle Boulous Walker has suggested that this necessarily means not taking the place of the other. Accordingly, eating is a primary example of an ethical relation: "Taking the food of the other consolidates [...] weight, it locates us as bodies subject to the gravity of terrestrial being"(6). In her usual tendency to embody thought, Weil would give up her food towards the end of her life, in the belief that "if she ate less, the French would eat more" throughout the German occupation (Quoted in Walker at 17). This would be an extreme act of taking responsibility for the other. Mayer, too, shifts between the "one" and the plural "you." It is significant that the woman is reduced to a frame.

Mayer raises the negative implications of this sacrifice. To what extent is this sacrifice gendered, serving a masculine ethos. In "Eve of Easter," she continues in this direction by suggesting that attention, the slowness of time required for the proper philosophical contemplation of paradise is simply not available to women as mothers:

Milton who made his illiterate daughters
Read to him in five languages...
Milton who turns even Paradise Lost
Into an autobiography, I have three
Babies tonight, all three are sleeping (47).

These babies are the "Eves" of knowledge, the daughters of Milton, Melville, and Hawthorne. Mayer continues:

Retain poise in the presence
Of heady descendants, stone-willed their fathers
Look at me and drink ink
I return a look to all the daughters and I wink
Eve of Easter, I've inherited this
Peaceful sleep of the children of men
Rachel, Sophia, Marie and again me

Bernadette, all heart I live, all head, all eye, all ear
 I lost the prejudice of paradise
 And wound up caring for the babies of these guys (48).

While men have traditionally claimed the leisure of letters, drinking “ink,” women have been occupied with bearing their children and keeping watch. As a single woman, Weil, too, would have the time to keep her extensive notebooks. She would have the opportunity to undertake factory and agricultural work, not to mention her political activism and reading. At one point, she even declares, “Writing is like giving birth: we cannot help making the supreme effort.” (*Gravity* 108). Mayer seems to advocate that gravity itself, a rootedness in the world, may be the way to grace. Furthermore, that the ideas of attention and labor that Weil so strongly advocated, need to be readjusted in light of female-oriented activities.

It would require another paper to undertake a more detailed examination of the complex investigations undertaken by Mayer and Hejinian. While Mayer explores many of the same points as Armantrout and Howe, she does so through different avenues. Her studies of attention are through prose, somewhat paradoxically, like Weil, in a profusion of notebooks and journals. It goes without saying that further work is also required on Weil, whose own poetic writings have been largely forgotten. Yet, perhaps these paths are there as a way to keep moving in thought, a way to keep going.

Notes

- ¹ Debates surrounding the poetics of Language writing can be found in *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Spring 1987) and in *Sulfur* 20-22 (1987-1988).
- ² Quoted as the epitaph to *Simone Weil* by Dorothy Tuck McFarland. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983.
- ³ Andrea Nye discusses this in her chapter on Weil, “Suffering the World,” in *Philosophia: The Thought of Rosa Luxemburg, Simone Weil, and Hannah Arendt* 58.
- ⁴ Arendt’s unfinished *The Life of the Mind* investigates issues previously touched upon by Weil. See vol. 1, *Thinking* and 11, *Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).
- ⁵ Color would serve Weil as an effective and convenient way to illustrate many of her points. Her discussion of colour and differentiation can be found in *Lectures on Philosophy*. Trans. Hugh Price. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1978) 42.
- ⁶ Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff discusses this eroticism in *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994).
- ⁷ Betty McLane-Ilses has examined the relation of Weil’s thought to William James in *Uprooting and Integration in the Writings of Simone Weil* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

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