

## PLAY IN THE WORK OF CARLA HARRYMAN

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### ABSTRACT

“Play” in many senses is prevalent in the work of Carla Harryman. Some of the ways in which it occurs include the mixing of genres, light-hearted experimentation, specific references to child’s play, the creation of games, and the use of the play as genre. Harryman’s work plays with play. This contributes to a sense of absurdity and to her ability to address theory within a creative arena. The playful nature of much of her work allows Harryman to deal seriously with the irrational, to challenge conventional expectations of meaning, genre, and narrative, and to approach theory as a creative endeavor without abandoning aesthetic pleasure.

“it tastes good and that means that I liked  
to make a game of it”

—Carla Harryman, *Vice*

Carla Harryman’s *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* is dedicated “for Barrett and play.” Play abounds in her work in many senses, including the mixing of genres, light-hearted experimentation, references to child’s play, the creation of games, and the use of the play format and performance. One could say that Harryman plays with play. This is key both to the sense of humorous absurdity prevalent in her writing and to her ability to address theory within a creative arena without succumbing to dualism (in other words, negative capability). The playful nature of much of her work is distinctive and allows her to deal seriously with the irrational, to challenge dualism and conventional expectations of meaning and genre, and to approach theory as a creative endeavor without abandoning aesthetic pleasure.

The word “play” itself may be a noun or a transitive or intransitive verb. It comprises seventy-four possible definitions<sup>1</sup>, including the following: exercise or action by way of amusement or recreation; fun, jest, or trifling; elusive change or movement; freedom of movement within a space; freedom for action, or scope for activity; to represent or imitate in jest or sport; to engage in (game, pastime, etc.). There is a lot of room for play within “play.” In fact, by Johan Huizinga’s definition of play, all writing is play.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will divide play into five rough and sometimes overlapping categories: play as “freedom of movement” among genres and voices (mixed genres and collaborative texts), play as “elusive change or movement” (non-linearity, interruption of narrative, general irrationality and absurdity, and Derridean notions of play as slippage), play as literal child’s play and games, play as a form (including performance), and play as pleasure and Eros. Within these categories I would like also always to keep in mind the spirit of play—of fun, levity, and self-sufficiency of purpose—and how this allows Harryman to embrace paradox and achieve her various (supposed) purposes.<sup>3</sup>

## HYBRID TEXTS

The hybridization of genres is important in several of Harryman’s texts, notably *Vice* and *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*. She does this not only deliberately, she calls attention to it specifically: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres./ I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them” (*Vice* 4). This petulant taunt (for of course she proceeds to interweave and juxtapose rampantly) has an almost child-like tone, reminiscent of grade school punishments of writing “I will not [insert offensive action here]” x number of times. This sets up the way the reader approaches the rest of the text—makes one intentionally look for the “offensive act.”

*Vice* is divided into four largish sections. Within these sections, no divisions between what might be separate pieces are indicated. Either we are intended to consider each chunk as a cohesive unit, or we are intended to connect or break connection between pages on our own. The reader is granted some freedom of movement within the work, though just when one might think the train of connectedness has been completely lost, Harryman interjects either a continuation of an earlier thread or an authorial comment. For example, in Part I, she begins with a prose narrative, shifts into something that is still narrative but set up on the page in columns, then shifts to a more poetic stance (i.e. less strictly grammatical and with more intentional line breaks). These sections are partly united by the interruption of the authorial voice on two occasions with “Oh, I forgot I was at work” (5 and 9). This first section continues divergently (including a letter about an airplane ticket) with periodic appearances of short, child-like rhymes:

Next time you send me off to school  
I’ll scream and yell and bellow  
I’ll process all your dumb old dreads  
In the greasy street that’s yellow (13)

And, fourteen pages later,

Mother is an unhappy man  
 Father thinks she's cool  
 The wind is crazy at their best  
 So I won't go to school (27).

It seems that she is almost teasing the reader, as she has asked earlier

Do you know how to play?  
 Does she know how or he, does he play?  
 Do you play with the child?  
 The child!  
 The child is not automatic (11).

Also, while the settings, subjects, and formats keep shifting throughout the section, there are recurring characters, notably the girl, the boy, and the child.

Part II is considerably less narrative and more introspective, yet the pattern of shifting format continues. Much of this section is more essay-like, though narrative fragments interrupt, such as the long parenthetical musing beginning with "But if this were a story..." in the middle of "*Collection from domestic life for the museum of the future*" (32-33). There is also a vaguely discernible cartoon theme throughout the section: "...that person's time would seem fantastic, her face an alien face much less familiar than any figure in a futuristic cartoon" (32) is echoed later with "There is a potential cartoon within any manifestation of destruction" (47). It is interesting to note that Harryman has compared part of this section (pages 43-49) to a cartoon because of its anthropomorphization of a rock. "There is a sense of human beings and their relationship to the natural world," she says, "which is storylike but somewhat untroubled by the direction of the story" (Simpson 526).

This idea of "storylike but somewhat untroubled by the direction of the story" illuminates the effect often produced by Harryman's writing. While this is related to her use of hybrid genres, it is by no means restricted to this particular work and will be discussed more later, especially as it relates to Derridean play and slippage.

Part III of *Vice* is perhaps the most hybridized and disjunct section. Here, Harryman incorporates material from a museum exhibition catalog, discusses her incorporation of this material, refers to two films<sup>4</sup>, and interrupts and intersperses several different narrative fragments with each other. Part III is titled "Somebody, Somebody, and Somebody" which refers back to Part I (*Vice* 12) and thus creates resonance between the sections. Within this section (Part III), the attempted integration of the museum catalog is unifying material; the commentary on the catalog writing becomes a discussion of *writing*. "Writing is a demonstration of the influence of relationships" (54). The hybridization itself is even addressed: "In order to become part of the work, the discrete parts must to some extent yield their autonomous identity. Sometimes they don't yield" (54). How much of the connection we seek for and (sometimes) find within work like this is thus created? How much of it is created by the reader's search for it? How much meaning is inherent simply through placing things (words, phrases,

ideas, etc.) in proximity to each other? As if to call attention to this sort of questions, Part III ends abruptly, mid-sentence. One is prompted to leaf backwards, look for connections perhaps missed on the first reading.

What Harryman seems to be doing throughout *Vice* is making the reader question, struggle, imagine. She is also teasing us. This is evident particularly in Part IV with the re-occurrence of the character “the boy” from Part I. “If you saw a cold-storage truck being carried by an oak tree walking down the center lane of a freeway during rush hour,” he muses, “that would be complicated but not at all as complicated as how things really work” (93). And how do things really work? “If there is a reason for something, people either will or will not believe you...” (93). Does she refer here to the potential response of the reader? (How *do* things really work?) Finally, she ends (as she began) with a specific reference to genre: “The ending of a detective novel leads one into a reverie of other possible endings...” (94). Should it bother us that we weren’t just reading a detective novel? or were we? Either way, we are prodded into questioning our interpretations and perceptions of writing, for “a writing does not attempt to defeat objectivity but to challenge what constitutes objectivity” (Brito 67). The writing itself is suspended at sufficient distance from our conceptions to allow it some freedom of movement.

Another example of Harryman’s playing with genre is “Autonomy Speech” (from *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*). Originally written as a talk, it incorporates bits of several “prior” texts (including Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* and Harryman and Lyn Hejinian’s collaboration *The Wide Road*) to illustrate its challenge to the notion of autonomy. Text, whether it does so explicitly or not, interacts with all other texts. Language has no meaning without context—a single word, for instance, only has particular sense in relation to the words around it. “Autonomy Speech” emphasizes its interactions and the importance of context through the use of these quotes and the occasional bold-type words offset in the margins, whose insertion radically alters potential meaning. For example,

“Structure makes it *straight*  
possible for sensory influence to be transformed...” (*There Never Was a Rose  
without a Thorn* 36).

The play of these combinations of words and ideas “dramatize[s] [the] premise” (40) of the talk. Partly due to this interaction with other texts, there is a playful nature to “Autonomy Speech.” While seriously addressing the subject, Harryman finds room for such questions as “What happens when they have to pee?” (40). What use is theory when it cannot be grounded in reality? The idea of autonomy exists only as a game (i.e. not part of reality), she implies in the first line: “Autonomy never wins” (33). The ridiculousness of the real world, the pervasiveness of interaction, always intrudes. For Harryman, this is integral.

The last “hybrid work” I will include here is “*There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*” (in the book with the same name). This piece includes a “Dialogue Between Writing of Sade and Rousseau”, a brief play (of sorts), material arranged in poetic form, narrative, an extremely long foot-note, and plenty of stolen material. The dialogue in particular illustrates to what absurd lengths context can shape (and twist)

meaning. Here, while Harryman plays the two against each other, excerpts from *The Social Contract* seem to be in congruence with the extreme philosophy of de Sade. The title of the work (a quote from a song from Rousseau's *Confessions*) plays with this tension between the depravity of de Sade and the humanistic idealism of Rousseau. There is beauty in the sordid and hideousness in the beautiful as well. Which is the rose and which the thorn? The use of borrowed material and the way it is pointed out as borrowed brings up the play of organization. What the words are and whose (Harryman's, Rousseau's, de Sade's, anyone's) may be less important than how they are arranged. Conventional syntax and narrative are one mode of perceiving. Deliberately twisting this, taking words out of context and into new contexts, challenges organization and the sense of order. This is not to say that there is no order, but rather that order is just order, that permutation is always possible. As with all of the hybrid texts, this fits with Harryman's "spirit of collision...a method of playing with the conditions of one's life" (Brito 63). Thus all (more or less) distinct parts interact with and against, speak with, and alter each other and the reader (who is, after all, one of the hybridized parts).

#### ELUSIVE CHANGE AND MOVEMENT

The question of meaning is central to my second category of play, that of play as "elusive change or movement," including absurdity, abstruseness, non-linearity, and slippage. I will begin with a brief discussion of slippage and play from the work of Derrida<sup>5</sup> and its significance to Carla Harryman's writing.<sup>6</sup>

Derrida loosely defines play as substitution, permutation, and transformation. Any structure, he says, has a center which permits this play of elements within the structure. This center also, paradoxically, limits play. Because within the center play (permutation) cannot occur, the center of the structure is not a cohesive part of the structure itself. "The center is not the center" (Derrida 279). All this is to imply that because there is no absolute (no transcendental signified), relationship—or play—is the source of all meaning in language. As language is always substituting one thing (word) for another (object), play is also "the disruption of presence" (Derrida 292). These notions of disruption, transformation, and the importance of relationship are all highly visible in Harryman's work.

The disruption of narrative in *Vice* has already been discussed. The sense of continual disruption and transformation is central to "*Animal Instincts*" (in *Animal Instincts* and *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*). This work consists largely of commentary on the process of narrative construction alternating with a relatively cohesive narrative (partly from Balzac?). Several results ensue. One is that our expectations are played with—for, confronted with a story, we start expecting it to make sense. But literal sense (what happens to whom) is not necessarily what is going on. In fact, one character is criticized as "lack[ing] speed and the agility to spot, to move, to draw without burdening herself with meaning" (*Animal Instincts* 39). Is this a warning? The tendency to insist on inscribing everything with meaning is addressed later as well.

There are usually one or two people in the balcony who scrutinize such absurdities for symbolism because the person wearing the flea is an actor, known to them. What is intended to be sequential is stratified. ... the problem with superficial intelligence is that it is unhappy with itself. And as a consequence it finds meaning to be overflowing... So much for making points... (40)

If everything (all words, for instance) is taken to refer to something else, meaning proliferates until even random absurdities (“Enter Flea, followed by Radio” (40)) are gleaned for significance. Is Harryman poking fun at attempts to affix specific meaning to all language, the desire for it all to “make sense”? Near the end of this work she says “In the hands of culture, meaning multiplies, drifts away from creation, blows ambiguity out of proportion and enslaves it” (42). It is not that her language has no meaning, but that it has no *one* meaning. There is no transcendental signified; substitution and transformation lead to proliferation.

The commentary on narrative process within this piece addresses the impossibility of single meanings: “Various incidents occur to me, trail into my line of work and keep me in a continually wavering state. When you see that everything is interconnected the imagination will up and randomize” (34). When she asks “What is the image of a solitary figure I wish to defeat?” (37), she could be referring to a word as well as an object. The recurring narrative sections take on this theme of substitution and proliferation as well. The servant, Lily, early on, considers pretending to be Madame Feuzele. In the final installment, Lily confronts Madame Feuzele’s heretofore long absent husband, accusing him of submitting her to great anxiety... and then removes a mask, revealing herself to be Madame Feuzele after all. While the characters are substitutions for each other, there is no possible single meaning.

About this slipperiness and multiplicity of meaning, Harryman says the following:

Meaning is something that is probably different from the idea of what was really meant in some kind of original place. ... There are these terrains of interrogation but they tend to go from, for instance, looking at what is meant to how it is written to how that is meant because it’s written that way. ... So there’s a lot of reflexive consideration of the way meaning means” (interview 3/14/97).

Also, “there is not just one meaning or finding... nor is there only a cacophony of sounds and jumbled thought” (Brito 65). The writing itself wends its way back and forth in between these extremes.

The concept of play as “elusive change or movement” is the vastest of all my categories. Another feature of Carla Harryman’s work (besides Derridean transformation and disruption) that seems relevant to this category is a general sense of irrationality and absurdity which permeates her writing (and drew me into her work originally). Examples of this abound:

Naked, tied, and down on my knees in a forlorn beseeching prayer position, I promise chicken Lancelot or Morose Algae Stagnant Lake, in time, I will never tell a joke again that doesn’t hurt somebody (*There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* 17).

And, “Or two southern democrats running as first ladies for president since suits are going out of fashion” (28-29). Or,

Would you prefer the examples? the pancakes? or the words? Oh, I have been used as an example so many times, said the Male. I think I ... Do I? Do I think? said the Male. Pancakes are good, I reminded him (143).

Regarding absurdity in general, Harryman states

...the absurd has something to do with making too much sense and that fascinates me that ... making sense —whether it’s pragmatic sense or logical sense or philosophical sense— results in something that’s a kind of enigmatic undefinable object or objective or whatever. At the end of making all of this sense is this sort of objective that’s unnamable. And that is the product of the compulsion that wants that or goes in that direction. ... And I think another pole in that area then would be non-sense which is in a less compulsive dynamic to sense than absurdity (interview 3/14/97).

The acknowledgment of non-sense connects with some of the primary qualities of play (according to Huizinga): it cannot be reduced to anything else, it exists as its own aim, and it is imbued with both tension and pleasure.<sup>7</sup> This pleasure in itself and in the ridiculous is one of the reasons I believe Carla Harryman is able to address theoretical issues in writing and literature without unnecessary abstruseness or convolution and without getting mired in dualism or essentialism. By blurring boundaries not only between creative and critical writing but also between “serious” and “silly” or absurd, she can approach slippery subjects without having to hold them down or subdue them.<sup>8</sup>

## CHILD’S PLAY AND GAMES

The third category of play I have chosen is that of child’s play and games. Both of these appear regularly in Harryman’s work, both as subject matter and as modes of formal construction. Child’s play, while important thematically, is not approached from the point of view of the child. Rather, Harryman is particularly interested in the relationships between children and adults and between children and the world around them. It is the interactions —the friction of juxtaposition— that her writing addresses. She has been influenced in this arena by both her experiences as a parent and by Jessica Benjamin’s *The Bonds of Love*. Benjamin details the importance in children’s development of interactive play with parents that involves mutual influence and mutual recognition, “... the important experience of being and playing alone in the unobtrusive but reassuring presence of the other” (Benjamin 126). Benjamin’s book outlines a general discontent caused by dualism and polarity (specifically in gender roles) and poses play —“a shifting of spatial boundaries between two bodies” (Benjamin 127)— as a way to achieve negative capability (which she mentions in her introduction) and embody seeming paradox. This sense of play as mutual recognition and

interaction fits with Harryman's modes of writing, echoes the way the borrowed materials in some of the hybrid texts re-form each other and mutate meaning. This aspect of play as a formative part of the child's world is also crucial to Harryman's playful style. She says

I think I'm trying to attend to the way an adult can acknowledge how children play. In other words, it's not like I'm trying to romanticize play or be a child. It much more has to do with acknowledgment of things that children do that are related to play and that those things aren't fully destroyed in the adult. I don't think that consciousness eradicates... the forms of knowledge that are prior to itself in age.... And I'm interested in what we bring of the mimetic—children, because of the way that they develop, have a huge mimetic capacity. And what is imitated is anything— it's not value-laden... (interview 3/14/97)

Children's mimesis is directly focused on in "In the Dome of the Imitator." In this work, "the child" draws a picture of a superhero called "The Imitator," who "is so powerful one can't map his power" (*There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* 25). The child's superheroes and other activities are interwoven with discussions of Francois Lyotard's "Domus" and description of the activities in a suburban neighborhood, which include an annoying mockingbird—another imitator. While the child claims that the face of the Imitator is "the only thing that can imitate itself, but it is also the only thing that can't imitate anything but itself" (25), the mockingbird convolutes imitation into imitation of imitation:

...the squirrels now having joined the mockingbird, whose voice has secured an echo somehow, providing an illusion that there are two mockingbirds when there is only one rising into discussion with the squirrel while repeating each of the squirrels' noise sequences (26).

While "the child" is a central character in "The Dome of the Imitator" as well as many other works, Harryman is careful to avoid trying to write from the perspective of the child. She describes the child's perceptions externally: "Completely a child, he appears to assume the mockingbird as part of a stable environment in which there seems to be no separation between a thought and a sound."

(30). About this she says,

I'm interested in breaking down the ruler-ruled implications... I'm not interested in these constructs of writers who make claims to not growing up or always being a child because it's so inaccurate... So that's where my absurd side comes in because I'm sort of compulsive about that kind of precision. It's also not related to a desire to be like a child. And to the extent that it involves desire it has to do with a desire to know that part of consciousness and not make it other or precious or entirely separate, but to try to observe and see how this human community includes this diversity of age within consciousness (interview 3/14/97).



Child's play as literal games is also important. Like Harryman's writing, "games stay self-contained, almost auto-erotic. They meld theory and practice" (Lanham 593). To look at how child's play appears in her writing as a mode of formal construction, I will focus on the following games: "Mud," "Meghom," "Matter," Margin," and "Magic (or Rousseau)" (all in *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*).

"Mud" consists of two parts. The first paragraph is a series of questions about possible situations of mud: "Will it be pig in the mud? Buffalo in the mud? Babe in the mud? Mud pie? Will it be muddy after we go for a walk? Will the game be a walk?..." (*There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* 45). The only variation from these muddy questions is a tangential musing in the midst of them: "I think they [women] have also been born from skyscrapers but what would be really great is to observe the splendid human creatures born from men's suits, lined up in rows, rack after rack" (45). The second paragraph describes the board game of mud. The main character is the mud woman, who seems to be surrounded by treacherous ambiguity. We are asked to illustrate her original condition, "which we can't quite picture" (46). Is this the impossibility inherent in the social position of the woman?

"Meghom" is the "game of minute resistance" (98). The borders —what is part of the game and what is not part of the game— are important. What is actually going on within the boundaries of the game is "to invisibly shift history without the sources of the shift being identified and without the shift being understood as history" (99). What is not part of the game may, thus, still influence the game—so long as it is imperceptible. In this game, as in Harryman's writing, the blurring of boundaries is crucial. As with the mixing of genres, intentionality is important in this game, but, unlike with genres, it is also important never to admit one's intentions. "...The deities of minute effects...can infiltrate your intentions. When your intentions become deified, you are out" (99). Once again, Harryman challenges the idea of concrete meaning:

No one will notice if you refuse, quietly, to fully grasp each sentence in this document or any document. In fact, you can tell when a statesman/woman is not playing the game for they will announce their need to fully grasp something that has been spoken or read, and you will know that this is not true, that the words fully grasp coming out of their mouths, in fact, mean delete what I don't want to know. The phrase fully grasp is an announcement of resistance, an assertion that overtly conceals the desire to resist information (100).

Rather than impossibility and ambiguity (as in "Mud"), "Meghom" investigates possibility and subtlety —yet shows them to be practically the same as their supposed opposites.

In "Matter," love, despite what we may have been told, is a game —or at least a player in the game. Sex and cards are superimposed. The rules are unclear —the narrator is trying to discover them. Love, on the other hand, is a skilled player and impatient with the narrator's ignorance of the game. Like the rock that "turns on its hindlegs and pleads innocence" (*Vice* 43), love is comically anthropomorphized. Love chastises the naive narrator, "If you can't play, you'll never meet the expert" (*There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* 23). This could be translated, in one sense, as —if you can't read with a sense of humor, you'll never understand any-

thing. The last line of “Matter” takes a sudden turn for the corporeal. “When I saw that I and my body were not the same, I knew what card to play and played it as soon as my turn came without second-guessing my opponent’s position in the game” (23). I read this, knowing Harryman is a woman, as addressing the many issues of the female body in writing/ literature. A man probably reads this very differently. In fact, this may be intended: Harryman mentions, in the interview in *Contemporary Literature*, that men and women read the intentionally “gender neutral” narrator in “In the Mode Of” differently. “But the joke (inside joke) about it is that many men identify with the speaker as being male” (Simpson 531). Once again, I think Harryman is prodding the reader to question assumptions. “Margin” describes the game of *Who Do You Think You Are?* and some of its players. This piece looks at identity and marginalization: “One premise of the game is that most people perceive themselves as marginalized” (*There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* 102). The game board itself is blank and the game is developed by adding layers of transparencies to the board. Derrida creeps into this game, for “the center is always empty. We would never be able to agree on anything without this basic concept, much less the rules of a board game” (102). “Margin” also brings up immigration—the identities of legal immigrants, illegal immigrants, and government immigration bureaucrats. Who is really marginalized? Who is acting out of a sense of marginalization? This game plays with our desire to attach definitive meaning not only to everything around us but to ourselves as well—and the ultimate impossibility of the task.

In “Magic (or Rousseau)” Harryman discusses play itself:

In order to play, one needs magic and Rousseau and must remember play...Now remember play has nothing to do with that Rousseauian freedom found in refusal. Refusal more than anything else ends play (109).

This relates to play as voluntary, outside of ordinary reality, and rule-bound. One must be willing to stay in the realm of play in order to have play. This game also looks at possibility and openness: “If it is decided to stay in the ghost game, Rousseau is provided with a series of options that he never recognized when he was alive” (110). Notions of “truth” and reality are left open, as they must be for just about any aspect or definition of “play.”

## PLAY: FORM AND PERFORMANCE

Suspension of reality and disbelief are crucial to this fourth category of play as well, play as form and performance. In this category I will look at *Memory Play*, “La Quotidienne: An Atmospheric Play,” and “Percentage” (both in *Animal Instincts*). *Memory Play* is in two acts, written for performance, and has, in fact, been staged. After both reading and listening to a reading of the play, I was struck at how much more alive, intriguing, and entertaining it was out loud than on the page. The sound of the words is obviously important, and the interaction of the characters and their words with each other. Each character’s “theme” (distinctive train of thought —such as Peli-

can's capitalistic greed) is easier to follow aurally as well. And the humor is much more apparent.

*Memory Play* plays with ideas about memory and ideas of what a "play" is. For example, Reptile's opening lines in the Prologue:

If I tell you one thing that I remember, you will think I'm an idiot for remembering only one thing. This is one thing that makes theater different from real conversation. If I provide you with several of my most esteemed memories, you will probably believe there are more where those came from, and I will have earned your respect. This will make theater a little more like real conversation (*Memory Play* 9).

Pelican counters this with "memory is nothing but words stored up in an inefficient computer. What you will remember of this conversation will be nothing like what went into its construction" (9). Both these statements/ ideas reappear throughout the play. Our assumptions about what is true and what we can expect are played with. Linearity is also challenged: past is memory yet memory exists in the present. The stories the characters tell become what is happening. In Act II Scene 2, Pelican's and Child's overlapping stories play the scientific/ real against speculation/ play. Of course, what we remember from these overlapped stories, the combination of the two, will be nothing like what went into its construction.

Much of *Memory Play* could also have been included in the "elusive change or movement" category for its high levels of absurdity. For instance, the character of the Miltonic Humiliator, skating past the parade, saying "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you" (40). Is it memory itself that is absurd? Or the idea that we can ever understand what is going on around/ outside of us? The interactions between characters in the play illustrate Harryman's notion of

a measure of dialogue in which, on the one hand, somebody asks a question and somebody answers the question; on the other, the person answering the question is only talking to herself, and the question itself is only heard as a question she would ask herself, something that would be a product of her own mind. ... sometimes talking is like sex; you just want to be with somebody, and it's not important whether or not you're able to understand the other person. ... there is a recognition that the characters have more desire to speak to each other than to understand each other (Simpson 517-519).

This sense that all interaction is absurd does not negate meaning, it proliferates it. It is "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world..." (Derrida 292).

"La Quotidienne: An Atmospheric Play" is less literally performative. Many sections have apparently anonymous speakers. When specific "characters" appear, they do not necessarily reappear. Scene 5 precedes Scene 4. This extreme discontinuity reflects the disruption between what we think is interaction and what may actually be occurring (as mentioned above). In fact, an anonymous speaker says "You are cognizant of what's on your mind much more than what's in your surroundings. Also you are aware of other people in relationship to you more than you are aware of them in

their place” (*Animal Instincts* 82). Both the writing itself and the reader’s necessary attempts to situate him/herself within it embody this disruption.

In Scene 6, the subject matter as well as the format is the disruption between the surface / performance and the contents/ “reality.” Two simultaneous, interacting narratives discuss acting, stories, and what people and things appear to be. But things are seldom what they seem: “People who act ordinary are basically people acting like/ things” (86). This section also addresses identity as a performance: “Or a person acts like she is a likeable person, because she is pretending she is someone else” (87). “Percentage” is, according to Harryman, is an exploration of empty space, of “what the effect of a work that had no contextualization of dialogue and in which the dialogue did not develop along the lines of character of plot definition, would have on a theatrical space” (Brito 69). Like *Memory Play*, it is definitely composed for performance, and is rather difficult on the page. Here, the friction and movement is between elements that are not mutually interactive or recognizing. Harryman “wanted to hear the voice liberated from narrative determinates but to allow it speech-like gestures” (69). The result is oddly transcendental and simultaneously impossible except for the sheer pleasure of language. “Suddenly a man with 5 arms and 17 legs uses all of them, easily, successfully imitating abundance. Circles and vapors. Vapors and playing with everybody. That’s what” (*Animal Instincts* 64).

## PLEASURE AND EROS

Play as pleasure, while probably illustrated by almost all the examples I have already given, involves not so much specific texts as prevailing attitudes and tones within the context of text. The friction in Harryman’s work —juxtaposition of oblivious perceptions, of narrative against other narrative or against disruption, of meaning against the otherness of meanings— involves an innate pleasure in language and in narrative. She says:

In distinction from probably a lot of my peers, I’m really interested in issues of allegory and narrative. ...I think where people get confused when it comes to traditional readings of narrative is... I don’t necessarily equate narrative with story...I guess I think of stories as things that occur along with the sounds of the bus in the background [as a bus goes by]... And the way I accommodate a lot of divergence is through a kind of narrative surface that’s self-questioning about its motives. ...This is where we get into play again because the capacity to tell a story for pleasure is very great. ...There’s a reason to tell stories that has to do with the capacity of a story to accumulate expression, information and to communicate the desire to communicate. ...In my work a lot of this is connected up with various erotic interests. ...I see language as a part of Eros... Telling a story can be part of a kind of either seduction or having been seduced by something... (interview 3/14/97)

The sense of adventure and instability inherent in non-conventional or experimental work can also be considered pleasurable. This writing, like play, “creates its own (permeable) boundaries and realms: multiple realities that are slippery, porous,

and full of creative lying and deceit...” (Schechner 26). The novelty and the risk of the unknown, the non-quotidian, represent a pleasure akin to that of the hallucinogenic drug experience. In both this sort of state and in Harryman’s writing, “...disequilibrium intentionally introduced into apparently stable systems forces the search for new balance” (Schechner 40). This is, again, the “spirit of collision,” in which all is fair game for questioning, for reconsideration and reorganization. This may be incomprehensible and terrifying or delightful... or both.

Through these multiple and various uses of play, Harryman’s writing is demanding—in the sense of being difficult and the sense of questioning the reader’s assumptions—and often hilarious. She “draws her readers into a problematic condition, pleasurable, but quite unsettling” (Perelman 142). She manages to meld theoretical and creative modes in a way that enhances rather than compromises both. Her playfulness is also an admonition to those of us inclined to take meaning too seriously—though play is not not serious. Play is very serious: there must always be room for movement and change, for interaction, and for proliferation. Without this room and without the element of pleasure, literature and theory both die.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> Huizinga’s definition of play: “play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life.’”

<sup>3</sup> I shy away from attributing “purpose” to anyone’s work; yet this seems a necessary assumption in order to say anything concrete.

<sup>4</sup> A Godard documentary and *Of Mice and Men*.

<sup>5</sup> Specifically “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (see bibliography.)

<sup>6</sup> I should note here that Carla Harryman does not consider her work specifically influenced by Derrida. In fact, she said in interview that her work does not respond to *any* particular theoretical position.

<sup>7</sup> Huizinga: 28 (see note 2)

<sup>8</sup> Accessibility is still an issue, but it will probably always remain so with any theoretical or experimental writing.

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