

Reading Jacqueline Vaught Brogan's "Notes from the Body"*

MARTINE WATSON BROWNLEY

Writing is supposed (I think so at least) to try and say the truth—it's a desperate deep poet's truth. And truth is always violent; it is a synonym of violence.

—Hélène Cixous¹

In her evolving sequence of almost a dozen poems, "Notes from the Body," Jacqueline Vaught Brogan makes a distinguished contribution to the work of the numerous American women poets who over the last two decades have taken, in Alicia Suskin Ostriker's words, to "the fields of the skin."² For these poets, Ostriker explains, the body "is taken first of all as a reliable reality—"the body cannot lie"—and by extension as the medium whereby realities beyond the body are interpreted, their codes read."³

The poem from Brogan's sequence printed above is her ironic contemporary recension of centuries of traditional love lyrics. In this poem she explores the impossibility of intimate human connections in a world of escalating violence impervious to linguistic comprehension, or to any other kind of care or control. In this kind of world, the inadequacies of language to experience and of experience to language result in the lovers' growing inability to speak to each other depicted at the beginning of the poem. The impossibility of mutual understanding—of reaching anything that can honestly be described as "our vision"—is represented and the reasons for the impasse explored as the poet moves between the public and the private, the body and the body politic, in an effort to break the silence.

Brogan's poem is about gaps, about the gulfs between the lover's concern for a job and the poet-speaker's concern for the world, between

*Reference: *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 204-06.

dying children and a dying continent, and between personal destruction and geopolitical permanence. The poet's stark juxtapositions emphasize that language can only represent, never bridge, such abysses. Drawing on traditional associations of women and nature, throughout the poem she fuses them with contemporary concerns with violence against both. In the poem's world of murder and mutilation, the potential fecundity of women and of nature remains blocked. Within such sterility the plenitude of language itself is ultimately reduced to "syllables" as nature and women—"what tree, what sister"—are "felled again" in an endless cycle of destruction.

At the beginning of the poem, the possibility of a joint vision for the lovers is disrupted by images of a nature desolate ("naked trees"), impotent ("grey light"), hostile ("flashing storms"), or dying ("reddest aspens / of the fall"). Subsequent personifications of polluted air and water emphasize the tragic natural results of limited human understandings through historical time. The "once sacred" tobacco is only after centuries recognized as toxic; the healing medicines taken in excess prove poisonous over the long term; the river can finally appear clean only from a distance. In the poem a revived nature appears merely to suggest experiences denied to the speaker. There can be no human fusion with another and with nature—the chance to bear the lover's children and dance "in the sun- / light upon the waters"—nor can the "aspen smells" associated with love at the end of the poem endure.

This destruction obliterates the individual even as it insures a monotonous global stasis: "And we've all lost our names. / And the map stays the same." The stability of the body politic rests on the bodies of the victims of "every war," where the individuality of each body is irrelevant among the unthinking mutilations endlessly repeated. In contrast to the earlier natural damages in the poem, which can be understood only with the passage of time, the grisly images of bodies desecrated in war emphasize the terrifying sameness of political violence.

Hélène Cixous, in a postmodernist revision of Keats' negative capability, writes that "there is no *invention* possible, whether it be philosophical or poetic, without there being in the inventing subject an abundance of the other, of variety."⁴ For the poet-speaker, it is the internalized "abundance of the other" that disrupts the relationship that

the speaker and the lover are attempting to create. The lover's fear of his or her job, reflecting the narrow limits of diurnal rounds, is placed in ironic perspective by the larger global fears of the speaker. But even as the speaker faces this chaos, she remains acutely aware of the personal dimensions and reflections of public trauma, from the thief twice in her home to the man on her street, whose overcoat hides only the cheapness to which his own humanity and loneliness have been reduced in the context of a world gone awry. The insignificance of the individual, the overwhelming crises in the body politic and in nature, the speaker's recognition of both, and the lover's failure to engage either combine to teach the speaker the hate with which the poem ends. The colloquial insertion of "really" in the straightforward statement of the final lines highlights both the speaker's disgust and her despair.

The juxtaposition of "I could go on"—the ability to keep recounting violations—with "I try to go on"—the attempt to endure—and the gap between them in the text register the difficulties in sustaining even minimal life under conditions where language can represent only multiplied violences. The lover's inability to recognize personal complicity at any level produces the silence that the poet-speaker decries:

If I can't say this
to you, whom I know best
of all, how can I speak
of it, of us, at all?

As a result the speaker feels continuing pressure on all sides to end the relationship. Pressure comes from the "spiral," her geometric representation of the chaos outside of and between the putative lovers, and also from the "spirograph," the machine that in its measurements of respiratory depth and rapidity reflects the poem itself as a precise register of the scope and intensity of fluctuating feelings. Geometric and technological metaphors give way to "spies of my own," a final impetus depicted in terms merging the personal and political concerns that run through the poem.

The italicized word "*separate*" marks the final turn in the poem, as the speaker, who has written throughout in terms of her own victimization and that of others, moves towards a complex refusal to become a victim herself. In addition to its conventional meaning of "divide,"

"separate" carries from its Latin roots the literal meaning of "to make ready by oneself" (*separare: se*, "by oneself, apart," and *parare*, "to make ready, to furnish"). The word thus suggests not merely the negative sundering of the lovers, but the more positive process of making necessary preparations independently. Separation is finally what the poet-speaker must experience in order to prepare to deal with life as it is, a preparation in which "learning / to hate" will play a vital role as a defense against acquiescence and therefore complicity through passivity.

Through natural and human bodies Brogan deftly and boldly depicts the course of love thwarted and the reasons for the failure to make human connections. Chantal Chawaf writes:

Isn't the final goal of writing to articulate the body? . . . Language through writing has moved away from its original sources: the body and the earth. Too often GOD was written instead of LIFE. . . . Linguistic flesh has been puritanically repressed.⁵

This poem resolutely refuses repression, whether puritanical or any other kind. It writes "LIFE" instead of "GOD," for its sole direct invocation of the spiritual is through the ironic deadliness of the "once sacred" tobacco. Only the spirograph remains to reflect the breath of life also once sacred, reduced here to its own measure. Brogan vividly represents the fearful inevitability of hate given the alternatives in the world she depicts.

Emory University
Atlanta

NOTES

¹Hélène Cixous, "Difficult Joys," *The Body and the Text*, ed. Helen Wilcox et al. (New York: St. Martin's, 1990) 19.

²Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 119.

³Ostriker 96-97.

⁴Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," *The Feminist Reader*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Blackwell, 1989) 103.

⁵Chantal Chawaf, from "La chair linguistique," *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1980; rpt. New York: Schocken Books, 1981) 177.