

(O) SHE SHE -
SUSANA GARDNER

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Victorian postmodern (post-Victor?) poet-ess Susana Gardner has created a poetics of fonts and textures, of a woman stitching words into breathtaking techno-spaces. Exaggerating the white between the words then smushing the words together like this, or riffing on sights and sounds (“ASTER ASTIR TATS A NAME SIR,- A MANE STIR, A MEAN / STAR AS” (SCRAWL, 17)), Gardner loves language play, yet also allows or, rather, collects narrative.

Her syntax is re-ordered so that subject verb object appear near each other, interchange, stand apart, collide, and hover. I don’t believe Gardner creates her syntactical structures to specifically or solely replicate how words crash together in a globalized televised mediated world. I do think it is, in part, because the “direct” communication prevalent in the public sphere—the manipulated tag line or ad line or marketer’s politician’s spokesperson’s talking points—has usurped and compromised accountability in utterance. Language that makes specific claims is dubious. I do not state an original concept here, but it is absolutely a current one. [Aside from broader conundrums when considering symbolic representation vis à vis deconstruction.] We need to re-make in order to re-see in order to see at all in a never-ending crawl of contemporary language. Her work, however, is not solely salad for the sake of language play. There is authorial presence—a speaker—if often refracted through (a) third person. An I as she or about her “small her (o).”

From Gardner’s SCRAWL:

is and is so spoken this (o) and what new language spoken or simply netted and
s o

suitied toward her as is and better is so suited toward (her)
while (8)

The rushing stuttering of “is and is so...and so” and “toward her as is and...is...toward (her)” continues the tradition of making new with words in the way the poem rhythmically replicates the birthing process of which she writes. Rather than directed, this language is “netted,” accumulating its visceral impact and semantics as it builds upon each (re)iteration. (In fact, inter-netted, even. Gardner’s online presence and digital capabilities have positioned her among those pushing the Pound dictate through new media).

More singular syntax—from [*lapsed insel weary*]:

yet,- she is just a girl and sing-ing
 strange,—she wants her very
 way of seeing is too
 uneasy yes, wavering she
 will only ever want (32)

A linear version of the sentence might read: “Yet, she is just a girl who sings strangely and wants her very way of seeing.” Well, it falls apart here, doesn’t it? Or is it that “her very way of seeing is too uneasy” is to be read as a separate sentence? That puts the first sentence as “yet,- she is just a girl and singing strange,—she wants.” Each line turns back on itself. Can be read ahead and/or with what comes before. Strange should be an adverb yet as modifier it also operates as, or becomes, noun. The “yes” seems a confirmation, but of what? Of uneasiness. Of wavering. Of not knowing what is wanted, but that a sea-like, undulating desire is present. The passage loses its “sense” when parsed. Of course, this is arguably the *modus operandi* of all poetry. Written another way the poem does not “mean” the same thing. In Gardner’s work particularly, like many “post” poets or “L” language sympathizers, landing the words around each other uses an associative sense-making not found in writing meant to be more directly representational.

However, unlike many avant writers, Gardner takes topics that aren’t typically subject to such language systems. Hence, some sense of the Victorian in her sensibility. Without question, the female figures prominently. To the room. (Woolf meets Woolf). Women & Mothers & Sisters & Childbirth & Writers & Ancestors. Emily Dickinson. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Mina Loy. The infirm woman asserting her voice despite...

Gardner makes an embroidery of erasure, collage, and overwriting. Language is object yet there exists an urgency to communicate toward or through a fluttered utterance. The poem at play and at odds. The inherently lyric and elevated discourse in her work [bound] in blocks of text. Not so round as the bustles or curls of a traditional notion of the Victorian bodyscape. She exhibits a feminine feminism. Or is it a feminist femininity? Yet beyond third wave feminism, Gardner’s work employs, as well as challenges, semantics and rhetoric as much as it does aesthetics as evidenced in her concerns with the ways in which language does and does not make meaning.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Love Sonnets from the Portuguese* becomes Gardner’s EBB PORT rub outs. EBB PORT sounds like a computer plug. An information receptacle or conduit. EBB = a modernized through acronym Elizabeth Barrett Browning. PORT = erasure from the Portuguese. However, these do not feel like destructive cross-outs. Not strictly Derridian. There is something of the created (the feminine?)¹ here. I feel the making. The hatching. The art of her hand apparent in the tiny tears of paper of lines and words from the Browning.

In fact, the handmade often figures prominently in a Gardner project.² Cursive atop the typed. Colored crayon background words float in talking bubbles out of the beaks of birds. Yet always also the elements of the machine ever present. She uses grammatical symbols as full words / signifiers themselves. [[[&&&]]] As a result, attention is called to the tapping tips of fingers on the technology of the keyboard even as it is lusciously over-scored by image of ocean.

From “to stand to stand to sea” —

Constellation: misheard words
muttered from your throat, *Consolation.*

The most perfect night.

No,- *it is not clear*—

Decoration: the buoy tied itself to my
throat moved with the waves tatted
colored glass the shore was to the
right and to the left the sea
the sea unknown weed

tangled in brackish rope my arm
was numb from separation
along my legs oozed light brine of
a salty hue : Inviolable Candescence:

Yet,- no place for 'happily ever after'
no breadth for 'and so they lived'

Or so,- as stirring mates might kin so
kindred so cunning so kind so as ever is
so twain and coupled. Whereas
vigilant stars must mate,- and do. Such
verbiage only wretched waste at your
doorstep your yesteryear your only
ever after—before me. (I)

This is not Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, though one cannot help but think of it. Gardner's particular uttering reinvigorates and reformulates all the women's texts she has surely consumed: "your yesteryear your only / ever after—before me." The author's predecessors and her subjects become assimilated into a slippery time schema.

As mentioned, the brea(d)th of her spacing and repetition is often contained in left and right justified text. A strip block down the page that the words urge within. Again, the contradictions and tensions in Gardner's work. Straight-edged femininity. Words misheard. No. The act of speaking as a necessity and perhaps damaging. The voice is shredded through the machinations of technology, yet a voice, a body, is present ("...my throat...my arm...my legs..."). The lyricism of the rhyme of "constellation" to "consolation" to "decoration" moves within her non-standardized grammatical structures and spacing. Women and decoration? No. The decorated neck is a throttling weight, carrying away.

This is not quaint work, nor victimhood. "Feminine" ways of making are no less urgent or investigative than any other method. Her control over the material through design, through sound and language manipulation, ultimately displays power through voice. Even if that power is problematized by an awareness of linguistic limits. ("...[C]an we ever really know / no misinterpreted translation?" (to stand

to sea, XXVI)) To interrogate is to challenge; Gardner asks: posits: interpolates: the sea the sea is language [such verbiage] an unknown weed? For her, "as extant ontologic investigation", whether or not it achieves its communicative and performative aims (and her(e) it certainly does), poetry is a labor "of rigorous wanting and song." Perhaps beyond the effort, the impetus to utter, "even as", it is—*poetry is*—"a state of being." (*I lapsed insel weary*], 81)

Notes

¹ Eileen Myles to Jennifer Firestone, in *Letters to Poets: "I distrust my own jargon, my abandoning of the feminine for the female."* I, too, distrust (my) jargon. Yet, there is a certain type of making that is considered archetypally feminine. Creation and destruction. Yin and yang. Shakti and Shiva. I use the words as not solely representative of man and woman. As has been pointed out to me in response to this essay, many men hand-make stitched objects and many women don't. Agreed. Nary a man I know of has given birth.

² A major part of the Gardner domain is the successful Dusie project which consists of an international collective of poets connected through the internet. The purpose: to make hand-bound art books to be mailed among the list.

Works Cited

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