

In Conversation

Leslie Scalapino & E. Tracy Grinnell

Originally published in volume #1 of [The Belladonna Elder Series](#) (Belladonna, 2008)*

E. Tracy Grinnell: I want to begin with a question about transliteration. In the case of “A Pear, Actions are Erased,” the Nōh form adds complexity to the meaning of your play in English, dislocated from its original context and tradition. I wonder if your use of Nōh is primarily because the form—the role-types, the use of poem as action/dialogue—works with, elaborates, your ideas, and/or is there an explicit effort on your part to re-form the form, to adapt and re-contextualize it (beyond the fact that this inherently happens?)

Also, I have been thinking about “ecstasy”—*ekstasis*—literally, the state of standing outside oneself, or beside oneself (this is important in “Helen, A Fugue”), which is used to describe a state of extreme passion, grief or rage. In this context, it seems to me, the transliteration of Nōh creates an ecstasy of experience, since rather than an identity the characters are identified by role-*types*, the “Left-side Speaker,” “Right-side Speaker,” and “#3 Outsider-Renegade,” so that when you write: “that is / thought – see / ing itself / by / “rebellng” or “I / – my – / *used* (brain's) two sides / to / *be* / at war / fa cul ty / – *with* me –” the form is literally allowing a conversation within oneself, a self-reflection, while also functioning as the articulation of an external argument, one that is going on (past and present) and that is repeated as a way to take apart that conversation/argument. The man who is racist, at the center of this argument, is then both the object—“And he doesn't remember any of this occurring – ?! / actions are erased”—and a reflection of the subject at that moment, challenging his ahistorical relation to events. The *I* is seeing, again and again—“I saw it / and learned (not to be)”—as the insistence on “seeing that is change” that exists throughout your work.

There is an interesting fluidity allowed by the form—with pronouns, which in Nōh can shift so that someone might begin referring to oneself in the third person, for example—which enacts the idea that one is not *one*. This fluidity challenges, in fact dismantles, the problem you describe: that of seeing only one side of things, so then the other side is dark, in confusion and without understanding or insight.

And then, I am curious about the Pear of the title. In your “instructions” you discuss the importance of “pairs” and “pairing” and the homonymic play is clearly significant. I read the “pear” initially as a form—“sha / dows / that / link up”—the description of the shape of a space—and I also wonder about its potential significance, in relation to Buddhism—“shooting / star / –in night– / –in day / a pear” and at the end “illuminates sky”—coupled with the image of the moon and its reflection, an important metaphor for Buddhism—since you are employing a Buddhist form.

Leslie Scalapino: Your comments here I find to be accurate: the two sides of the brain at war become a form of scrutiny and war in the sense that one cannot be only 'inside one'—one is not one ever. So, there being two sides is a faculty, even by virtue of the fact that both sides are unlike each other, even opposite. Their war is painful. I'm rejecting the conventional perspective that psychological union or harmony is healthy, a union which also negates or reforms intellect as less passionate. There's something of that sense (of occurrence) in your own piece? Ecstasy, moving outside oneself is a part of the intention in mine, as pairs that in space make separate occurrence outside the speakers.

I tend to write by first having a spatial sense. In “A Pear, Actions are Erased,” using pairs as if beside each other (they are seen that way on the page, horizontal, but would be heard as if vertical) the notion is to 'see' 'apprehend' discrete events/actions in horizontal space at once (thus affecting each other) even if unrelated. The action of the man who is racist is repeated, remembered, thus recurs while other lighter elements are less stable. Your note on the significant sentence “And he doesn't remember any of this occurring – ?!” is accurate as being a central point. The speakers are 'trapped' in 'hell' of sorts, in regard to him, because they remember (as if grieving in a fixed grievance). This is the possibility of hopelessness because there can be no change as we conceive of that: being psychological (“communication,” speaking to each other). That man (as a figure of closure) will never change or see outside of his constructed ego frame. But the spatial sense of pairing (even the repeating of the memory of racism) occurs in that horizontal space of many edges touching—discrete actions yet not limited to time or place—so there is seeing spatial, phenomenal change that occurs outside of a prescription of one's sense of social interaction, or that of history. Change, something else than known, is outside one though somehow connected. So, I was trying to bring the small poems/tones into a balance that allows them to uncover that seeing and process.

The question of the moon as a Buddhist image: I was also thinking of Dōgen's realism in the 11th century, his scientific knowledge of the moon as having a dark side, the earth turning.

ETG: Does #3 Outsider-Renegade then represent “change that is something else”? I am particularly interested in the ways that #3 interjects, redirects the flow of exchange, in effect upsets the duality of Left and Right.

And perhaps you could say something here about the role of music, the atonal voices, which are also improvisational: do you consider this to be essentially part of the transliteration—of the Nōh form—or is there an additional way that you see the musical, and also aleatory/improvisational, element functioning in relation to your play?

LS: I was not consciously changing the Nōh form but I didn't concertedly follow it either. #3 may correspond to a figure in Nōh, a spirit outside who is connecting death and the living. My #3 is such a figure, also a rebel who is peaceful like the Amish tradition of women working together quilting, one suddenly choosing to take the role of outsider by departing from the orderly pattern the others are creating: the others then work around her departure incorporating her 'rebellion' as a crucial part in the quilt.

I intended that the performers have a sweet-sounding tone of voice, while creating only atonal correspondences to each other improvisationally. Nōh as a form uses minimal, highly stylized dance gesture (may be similar to Cahun's 'strange'—bald, costumed—self-portraits, or your 'hint' of melodrama in “Helen, A Fugue” as the 'music' of the work), which I would translate in mine as slightly odd physical motions (such as cocking one's head, as silent gesture) 'beside' (counterpoint to) 'off-center' sounds. Nōh's implication as sound is inclusion of 'feeling' equal to all other phenomena as if the form is a comparison in space of *all* occurrences. Such a realistic shape *as* people's sounds (being their social exchange) is contrasted in mine to the man in black robes (a priest) who is racist who won't listen as such dismissing individual occurrence (expression of 'feeling') in favor of tradition which he sees only as authority. As sound, in his dismissing hearing others, he makes a separation between individuals and authority (whereas my sense of Nōh is: bringing everything onto the same illumined

level to be heard).

ETG: Yes, this is crucial, a sense of equilibrium that is multiplicity in the present tense. Your discussion of “pairing” as a way “to see / apprehend discrete / actions in horizontal space at once (thus effecting each other) even if unrelated...” resonates for me with the Helen, where I am attempting to read and write the actions as transhistorical (in horizontal space?)—that may be *over* history/time but also *trans* in the sense of *passage*, a movement within, through, time and narrative. This necessitates a presence outside oneself in order to read, see, and transform and I wanted to combine mythologies as a way of exploring agency, the potential for *acts* that create change.

Part of my interest in Cahun's visual work stems from her identity/gender play, mirroring/masking personae/impersonation. Her self-portrait “Que me veux-tu?” [What do you want from me?] is a double exposure, herself looking back at herself, in effect a visualization of this idea of ecstasy I mentioned—being outside/beside oneself—and though I think this concept is employed in very different manners in each of our pieces, I do see a parallel—a necessity, an urgency even, to being outside/beside one's own self?

LS: My sense is that it is the only means by which one sees. Ecstasy can't be rendered directly (in writing), perhaps. Thus disruption and displacement are elements of your poem. I found your comments to me on “Hélène la rebelle” to be particularly stimulating influencing me by showing your process of seeing, that is in your poem itself:

“The Helen poem is the main text (and is here excerpted)—though I have also included excerpts from a homophonic translation (“Hell and Lower Evil”) of Claude Cahun's fictional monologue “Hélène la rebelle” (from *Heroines*, after Ovid's *Heroides*) where I was interested in Cahun's play on the historical characterization of Helen, as a reclamation—“Helen, A Fugue” is still very new and shifting, but in combining the two pieces I wanted to gesture beyond, create an interjection, a proliferation. The Helen began after I read Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* and became interested in the myth of Helen of Troy and its contemporary resonances—most immediately in relation to the Iraq war, going to war for an illusion. And considering the nexus between Helen—who exists almost entirely as a projection—and Cassandra, speaking the truth as prophesy, and cursed that no one would believe her: speaking in tongues. Both positions are maddening, madness-making. Except for Euripides' Helen, Helen rarely speaks—so this is where I began. I have been playing with the form, experimenting with the architecture of a fugue, variation on a theme, which allows for a plurality of voice/vocal register and then of course, the fugue-state, madness...there is also perhaps a hint of melodrama, which worked its way in in no small part due to the film *Humoresque* ... another Helen, doomed.”

I first read your piece in this version in which you begin with one translation of a Cahun poem and intersperse another one in the midst of your excerpt from “Helen, A Fugue,” the two works disruptive and interactive. The three poems of Cahun's text in relation to your text incorporates into your portrait of Helen the memory of Cahun's photographs and collages, self-portraits that were in their own time radical (still are, and of course were suppressed by the Nazis, who arrested Cahun for resistance activities and destroyed some of her work), hers now compared to Cindy Sherman's self-portraits as dissolution of entity. Cahun described her images of dissolution: “Under this mask another mask. I shall never finish stripping away all these faces. And underneath all these masks, there is no 'real'

identity.” She was accepted by Breton as a surrealist; her images are a process uncovering the unknown: “I want to travel only at the prow of myself”—and “not so much a desire to *be* the other gender but to dissolve the borders.” So, dissolution is physical, literal being/image. Your poem, beside the two homophonic translations from Claude Cahun’s “Hélène la rebelle,” reads as a theater of gestures in the sense suggested by Walter Benjamin and Artaud, motions devoid of or before their meaning, rather than a dramatization of a subject already formed. Your noting Helen as silent in most renditions of her, and in your poem the conception (in “silent part”) of incorporating someone else speaking for her, her seeming to be oneself (the reader), one’s own mouth, speaking *for* (as the servant of) someone else (“My mouth a servant”) gives the sense that any speaking—as also the nature of a person—is translation. “Helen, A Fugue” is theater of gestures in the sense of speaking being all that the poem is, and being such empty, only “enigma-catalyst” in which naming a phantom and being the name of a phantom is the action of the poem. The sound scheme of the poem denotes only movements and shape, even Helen’s humanness temporary (“In all my human dreams”). Her own language is foreign to her, the writing an “afterimage’s horizon of / thought” (the afterimage is also thought, simultaneous). The homophonic translation of Cahun’s rebel-Helen gives the image of Helen as a cipher of patricide, destroying men rather than shaped by them. Family is in “terrible containers,” a “carrion-house.” Thus the absence of fixed identity is not vague, has within it an incredible energy. In your poem, even when resting, she is two: “as in / to rest where I / Resist if I split in two.” I saw the 1980s production in Greek of *The Trojan Women* at La Mama’s in New York: Helen appeared as a silent figure carried on a plank through the midst of the writhing crowd (that was the walking audience and shouting actors mixing together in chaos), Helen with shaved head, naked covered with shit (reminiscent of the punishment, after the liberation of France, meted to women who’d collaborated with the Nazis). Something of the sense of violence of war, of people—us as the crowd perpetrating the acts—is conveyed by you even by—being devoid of people—the complete *solitariness* of Helen in your “Helen, A Fugue.”

ETG: Yes, and to me that solitariness is the other side of illusion, the phantom’s movement, which is real, and the poem is trying to inhabit that, to untangle the *projection* that is the mode of war, of violence—as you say “there’s a pear / the outside being inside”—not to solve but to complicate.