

Drafts: Drafts 39-57, Pledge, with Draft, Unnumbered: Précis

Reviewed by Maria Damon

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Rachel Blau DuPlessis

(Cambridge UK: Salt, 2004)

<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/duplessis>

This volume continues what Ron Silliman has heralded as “one of the major poetic achievements of our time,” an ongoing, open-ended and life-long poetic series, *Drafts*, in the spirit of Robert Duncan’s *H.D. Book, Passages and Structure of Rime*; bpNichol’s *Martyrology*; and Nathaniel Mackey’s fictional *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* as well as his poetic *Songs of the Andoumboulou*. In fact it is hard to find something to say about this powerful serial that hasn’t already been said, and with eloquence worthy of its subject —often by the poet herself both in the poems and in the many poetics statements this most self-reflexively rigorous poet has disseminated in public space. To wit this beautiful fragment, from “Draft 52: Midrash”:

an impossible draft of half-built, half-crumbled
all-suspicious poetry.

It was, in fact, hearing the poet read “Midrash” — a multi-layered response to Theodor Adorno’s observation that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarous (an observation which seems to have shifted in its reception over time from a prohibition to a provocation) — at a bookstore/coffeehouse in State College, Pennsylvania that kindled my enthusiasm for reviewing the book: unusual for me, I wanted to read the volume in its entirety and be forced to interact intellectually + affectively (=aesthetically?) — in the public space of a book review — with its take-no-hostages-i-mean-prisoners engagements with (combined) histories of Western poetry, Jewish experience, feminist culture in the contemporary US, and the tragic debacle that is contemporary US politics. That is, the poem’s fearlessness inspired me. Whether or not a review like this can meet

such a project halfway is dubious, but it is at least worth trying to note some impressions, because this volume as well as the larger oeuvre for which it is currently metonymic is an impressive labor which should not go unremarked upon, though both paraphrase and explication are pathetically beside the point.

A word about structure, though doubtlessly most readers of *How2* are already familiar with DuPlessis's work and this series in particular. The series started in 1986 (Drafts 1-38 have been collected in *Toll* [Wesleyan UP, 2001]). The poems comprising it have come to align themselves in repeating spirals of twenty: for example, a grid in the latest volume (xiii) shows the parallel structure of, for example, Drafts I ("It"), 20 ("Incipit"), and 39 ("Split"); Drafts 3 ("Of"), 22 ("Philadelphia Wireman"), and 41 ("Of This"), and so on. The titles often, but not always, echo each other or embed each others' syllables, just as the poems echo/evoke and/or embed each others' content, obliquely as well as overtly. The extensive endnotes for each Draft refers to its structural ancestors as "donor drafts" to acknowledge their status as source texts thematically, sonically, formally. In counterpart to a Steinian repetition-with-a-difference, one could call this project's partial mission an exploration of difference-with-a-repetition, a changing same that is overtly more changing than same, but contained nonetheless in a loose, formally diaphanous membrane (a "négligée," that is a forgotten garment) that permits and indeed encourages freedom, evolution, even revolution. Structurally, then, the grid in the front matter and the Notes in the back bookend the poems with explanatory material that holds, without fixing-in-place, their motility and internal self-difference within a logically coherent system.

What characterizes *Drafts 39-57* — not distinguishing them from the earlier *Drafts* but rather from the Nichol, Mackey and Duncan series enumerated above — is the specificity of historical/contemporary cultural and political referents, the density of

essayistic allusion and cerebral engagement, and the poems' insistence on displaying the degree to which they are inflected — but not determined — by a range of compelling axes of identifications or “identities” as they are materially experienced: “woman,” “Jew,” “writer,” all of which seem inseparable from each other and from “thinker.” (One could argue that *Passages* engages the same sort of overt political/contemporary issues, particularly in the Viet Nam-era poems; but Duncan's tone is that of the vatic hierophant rather than the probing, tenacious questioner that DuPlessis inhabits in *Drafts*; she is more Dante's pilgrim than Milton's God.)

DuPlessis asks us to take seriously Olson's call for the poetry-page as a wide-open field on which historical, theoretical, social and aesthetic problematics unfurl, twist, evolve and mutate dialectically and/or dialogically, bouncing off each other in collision or play, interlocking in agonistic intensity or affectionate rapprochement. *Drafts* (the series as well as the present volume under review) is one manifestation of that Duncian meadow to which we are permitted to return as often as we can handle the immersion it compels. The easiest way for this reader to orient herself in such a wash of possibilities is through intertexts, and the first is precisely an intertext about disorientation countered by a divinely-appointed guide. Though the poem opens with an explicit citation from Wallace Stevens, it is the first few lines of *Inferno*, in their stark slap-upside-the-head awakening to disorienting, thicketed impenetrability, that are most vividly invoked in the first few lines of “Drafts 39: Split”:

“The confusion and aimlessness
of thoughts”
hurl cross-hatched
dark-wood directions,
diffuse dark
tanglewords
void dreams, dark ticks —of
nah for nicht,
not for note,
selva for selvaggia.

What we are being alerted to, among other things, is that this “selva oscura” is poetry, is thought, is thinking, is language itself — the very tool that we need to use to get out of confusion is metonymic thereof. And of course we’re being forewarned about the dense underbrush of language we are about to enter in *medias res*; the series itself is a tanglewords world of near-misses, redolent with misprisions and other promises of meaning run rampant, fertile and out of control, happy accidents and ominous proximations, and we are entering already at #39, a number that fairly hums with *terza rima* numerological charge (though not identical to the *Commedia*’s 33/33/34 canto structure). The whole project is, however, a purgatorial rather than infernal one; it is an intense and intensely rewarding labor, best undertaken collectively and with a wide but penetrating range of exegetical tools; one feels one is working *toward* something, but not unilinearly; rather in the same spiral that characterizes the mountain climbed or the poem cycle revisited every twenty poems.

This allusion recurs. In “Draft 49: Turns & Turns, an Interpretation,” it is the arthritic figure of Adrienne Rich, political poet and feminist trailblazer who plays Virgil to DuPlessis/persona’s Dante-pilgrim in a seemingly less fraught forest trek:

I was walking through woods spring-strewn green sodden
to follow a spry, disabled woman. It’s clear from the tone
a dream of climbing backward on a trestle over stressed woods.
History and class turn up in films as smudges on, basically, clothing
but gender appears in the tinkle of mannerist sincerity & depression.

In what ensues, the woods becomes a tunnel or a trainride — blending Dantesque, Holocaustic, and childbirth imagery — “deeper and deeper (so long ago) into the neglected train station” — just as Rich had, decades earlier, plunged into the infernal depths of women’s place in Western history in her breakthrough poem/volume *Diving into the Wreck*, a work that revolutionized US women’s poetry and poetic history. Until

then, gender had appeared in women's poetry — Marianne Moore's, Elizabeth Bishop's, even Rich's own — as “the tinkle of mannerist sincerity” and/or the “depression” of the era's famous suicides, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. As a “turn” is a verse as well as a twist in history, DuPlessis is at once historically and poetically self-reflexive, placing her own work in its multiple contexts. “Turns, An Interpretation,” the companion piece to the “Turns” cited above, continues Dante (“Yet never establishing six words of the New Life/ the Volta Nuova”), the commitment to women (“I journey in the company of women”), and to the problematics of writing “political poetry” is a way that is not “too positive, positivist” but rather seeks out “an openly ‘negative’ poem turning on/contradictory feelings, the ungainliness/ of those edgy feelings...”. DuPlessis is after nothing less than a “dolce stil nuovo” for women's poetry — one that is “outside gender” but indebted to the insights of the women's movement in which she participated. A new form. New forms, unpredictable, that inch into being as the poems find their appropriate forms. The echo back to Olson is here, embedded not only in his projective verse but in his travel through Adrienne Rich's “The Will to Change” (“What does not change/ is the will to change” wrote that oracular political poet whose gender politics were nonetheless heinous). Concatenations of intertext, epic seer to epic seer, create the texture for this wild word-sprawl.

“Draft 48: Being Astonished” has also addressed, with different intertext (Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, one of whose “chapters” is captioned “As for we who ‘love to be astonished,’” a clause that has become talismanic for “experimental” women's poetry in the contemporary (US) women's poetry and the feminist movement), but there are many more themes and interlocking concerns in this fertile groundwork. The work engages the onus of trying to write poetry as historiography in a way that is non-linear, not narratively reductive, also not poetically reductive (i.e. overly lyrical or pretty on the one hand, or bombastic and triumphalist on the other). At one point in “Turns, an Interpretation,”

seriality is proposed as an answer; George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* is invoked to suggest serial poetry as a universal heterotopia. This is worth considering, as many poets in DuPlessis's constellation of interlocutors both past and present have come to it as a means of containing an unruly and shape-shifting vision or, if "vision" is too definitive, articulated/inarticulable quest. But is seriality really a formal salvific, a capital A-answer? Better to simply consider it an open possibility. Adorno and his tortured dialectic, especially in the wake of the European Jewish genocide, also become interlocutors as the poet searches for rigorous but supple means of reckoning with history and the wayward intellect. Knots, quipus and other textile figures abound as models for poetry, for language and for thinking; so does terrain, textual or terrestrial, verdant or menacing, florally bucolic ("Draft 40: One Lyric") or gutted by an imperial warfare ("Draft 47: Printed Matter") in which the poet, as US citizen, is implicated. So does everything.

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