

## "Timeturned images"

*from eternity to personal pronoun*

reviewed by Marina Camboni

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Anne Blonstein

Iris Gribble-Neal and Tom Gribble Publishers; Spokane, Washington,  
2005

Just like H. D.'s rose, Anne Blonstein's words, phrases, lines are cut in rock; her poems have the outline and precision that belong to concrete, hard, and perfectly defined objects. Furthermore, her terse, unusual images are the outcome of a specific English language that, mated with other idioms, reflects the transnational world of a nomad.

Blonstein sent me a card a few months ago, written partly in English and partly in German. It was the second I'd received from her. A third, which I found in my mail yesterday, confirmed that the first was not simply the outcome of some momentary enthusiasm, but rather a continuation of that poetic discourse pursued by U.S. and European poets from the 1960s onward: the poem-card. Sent from Avignon and entitled *de se soustraire à tout cadre normative*, Blonstein's first card combined several snapshots of "la cité des Papes" with the fragments of sentences spoken by the museum attendant. The latter create the poem that fills the blank space reserved for the card-writer.

"this was the holy roman empire ·  
that" · the museum attendant gestures beyond  
the Rhône · "was France"...

While these phrases evoke the actual gestures of the attendant pointing to the remains of a once powerful Christian Roman Empire, and to the remains of its French successor, the dots between

them mimic the fragmentary state of the ruins and call attention to the ways this heritage overshadows and diminishes the present. Yet as its title indicates, the poem invites the reader *de se soustraire à tout cadre normatif*, e.g., to not submit to the normative picture. Subsequently, a new vision opens up and “an unimpeachable / blue stretches the place from shadow / to time // dyed each perhaps absorbantly resists translation”. So Blonstein calls attention not so much to the decaying artifacts of western culture and their transformation in time, but rather to the repetitive translation of those artifacts from epoch to epoch, their uniqueness, the different effects they have within each temporal location. For Blonstein, as with G. Stein’s rose, each object is unique, singular, un-repeatable.

The tension of identity measuring itself against historical time is present throughout the poems in Blonstein’s most recent chapbook, *from eternity to personal pronoun* (Iris Gribble-Neal and Tom Gribble Publishers; Spokane, Washington, 2005). However, the device that links the twenty-two poems printed within its beautiful and revealing covers is a quotation from two different German translations of the Torah, with which each poem’s title and first line begins. And Blonstein's decision to root her poetry in a text of specifically Judeo-Christian heritage significantly contrasts the necessity of her move into the present. The first poem, “...*ein Dunst stieg auf von der Erde*” (“a mist rose up from the earth”, Gen. 2:6) opens the sequence on “a morning that wakes to snow”, a newborn day, immaculate like the earth freshly created by God. The mist that rises in Genesis, bringing the humidity God needs to create man out “of the dust of the ground”, evokes re-birth, as if dawn brings the desire for a new beginning, a new self. In the poem, however, a new dawn cannot blot out memories of foregone days. For “episodes in lives. events and / evanescence. exile. exhaustion. expressions.”, like the ruined stones of a former empire revealed by the poem-card, cast their shadows over the present. The lines, facts, emotions, and expressions form a sequence disjoined by full stops that give weight and concreteness to the words and experiences they separate in the space-time of the page. Yet the alliterating vowel 'e' with which the words begin, sews them back together in a play of disarticulation and entanglement.

Words are, for Blonstein, “the pieces from which every biographer and / historian assembles a new pattern”. The poet, a *sui generis* historian, connects the separate pieces and, without deluding herself that she can rebuild the past as it was, affirms her power to re-imagine and nonetheless re-shape it. Physical and metaphysical times, in which both individual lives and human histories are immersed, join forces to fill with their silence the lightly falling snow of the opening line. Just like the alliterating vowel, this complex time becomes the thread the poet uses to stitch “with sentences

quilts of / a past. into which we emerge. on which / we make love. under which we die. and so // on.” The image of the sentence as a piece of cloth, and of the poem itself as a patchwork of discrete parts organized into a pattern, renders Blonstein's conception that of every moment, of every experience in our lives, we are left with only a fragment. The larger whole, of which each fragment was once a part, disappears into the passing of days until it becomes silence or emptiness. But it is exactly this silence, the void that surrounds each fragment, that makes it possible to imagine a new design. The patchwork is so different from reality that it transforms the past into something new, into a picture that is the product of art, rather than of memory. And it is this transformation that gives innocence and promise to each new day, as Blonstein implies in the last two lines of the poem, admitting us into “the new dawn as fragile / as a birth in green.”

The third poem in the collection opens again on snowflakes dissolving like dreams in the morning. However, following its title line, “*Blicke doch himmelan und zähle die Sterne*” (“Look then toward the heavens and count the stars”, Gen. 15:5), a quotation from God’s words to Abraham that anticipates his numerous progeny, the speaker in the poem refuses normative images and patterns and looks instead to the potentiality of language. Infinite in number are the stars, like the snowflakes, and — seems to be the implication — infinite in number are the words a poet, a believer in the power of creation, can find if she only looks beyond present limits. In this way, grapes can become “judgments // of the *starflake* and *snowbeam* at hope’s edge” (emphasis added), where the newly coined words “starflake” and “snowbeam”, by fusing separate realms, open up a different landscape. We can then envision a world where the shafts of light fall from the sky with the feathery lightness of snow, and snow inundates the earth with beams of light.

The narrative thread in the poem gives readers access to a woman’s first morning thoughts. We are admitted to her dreams, we share her frustrations. Most of all, we follow her search for words, her fight with the necessary Angel that is at one and the same time God, the Heideggerian silence out of which words emerge, and Benjamin’s angel building constellations of events and rescuing salvific moments from history. Thus, in the poem beginning “*wie ein Werk aus glänzendem Saphir*“ (“like a work from shining sapphire”, Ex. 24:10), a quotation from God’s instructions about how to build the ark, the poet-speaker says

i join a street where angels hang out  
in black feathers. glitter on their tongues

dusting my septic ears: careful scratches of song  
to twist with threads of sun for green cloth  
to cut this dress of memory.

What is left out of the biblical quotation, and implied by the image of shining sapphire, is a scene where God orders two gold “cherubims” with spread wings to be created. And if in the poem, the whole situation, and particularly the phrase “dress of memory” reminds one of Adrienne Rich’s “Upper Broadway”, it is because both Blonstein's and Rich's poems are animated by analogous wills. But, while the “slipperd crone”, the poet-witch that walks the streets of New York “with her wand of thought” (*The Dream of a Common Language*, New York, New York, 1978, p. 41) in Rich’s poem wants to give birth to a full woman, thus projecting a future, Blonstein’s will — like Benjamin’s angel — looks toward the past. Blonstein expresses a will to remember and, although she knows that the past is but a patterned re-construction, like a dress, it perceives a still unfulfilled time that may slip through the already written cultural text. As a result, the poems in Blonstein’s collection may be considered the poet’s contribution to a potential new addition to the Bible, for “perhaps the bible needs a new book.” A third book composed of new words, new syntax that, like the ark, will contain new commandments. In another poem we read:

..... if i cannot “evaluate the future”  
perhaps I could try to sustain it  
by translating the past with ribosomes  
of a rose-scented metabolism.

(“*wo sich die Wolke niederliess*“, “where the cloud settled“, Num. 9: 17)

Anne Blonstein’s poetic discourse is firmly, and willingly, rooted in her Jewish heritage, as much as in her own immediate biography. Born in England, she earned a Ph.D. in genetics before — after working on plant hormones in Basel, Switzerland, where she now lives — leaving scientific research to concentrate on her writing. Yet while her poems reflect her choice to engage in an experimental poetic tradition and a mind trained for scientific research and precision, Blonstein's work with language is also heavily marked by her historical awareness. Though they never explicitly dwell on it, her poems imply that the Holocaust has created a break, a blank in the continuous flow of history, and made it impossible to continue to use words and syntax as if nothing had happened. Memory, then, is what Blonstein finds integral to selecting still valuable

elements from the past. Memory has the function to recover, through imagination, what time has in store for us.

In “*vier goldene Ringe*” (“four gold rings”, Ex. 25:12), the speaker represents herself with “both tattooed on my right cheek” while “in the other aleph shivers as infinity and zero”. If the letters of the Hebrew alphabet summon the Kabbala, the tattoos evoke the Nazi concentration camps and the numbers cut into the prisoners’ skins that transformed them into nonentities. In this poem “hagar”, the rejected black slave with whom Abraham generated his son Ishmael, is the

princess  
of a bombdazzled city.

Hagar, and the discrimination she and her son suffered, represents that violence that issues from patriarchal, racist and nationalist world-views. Her name evokes scenes of violence, and a reel of images — of Nazi-Fascist crimes, of the mushroom clouds that brought death to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of present-day attacks on New York, Kabul, Baghdad, Madrid, and London — unfolds. I feel “bombdazzled” exactly renders my own and other fellow human beings' shock at being drawn into the scene, at becoming part of that third book of the Bible the poet is writing. It is exactly this violence that shatters hope. Because of this violence, “the unarmed angels” at the end of the poem “curl up in their hospital cots waiting for morphine / and feather transplants”. And it is our shattered time of diminished angels that breeds words which, out of an economic and productive vision of all life, lose touch with human beings — with our reality as much as with our needs.

In “*Die Stimme eines rauschenden Blattes*” (“The voice of a rustling leaf”: Lev. 26:36) the speaker sees a fire in her dream. A fire that recalls God’s fire upon the ark in Numbers 9:17, and God’s menacing orders to Abram, Moses, and the whole of the Hebrew people.

a bright or-burning ribbon flickering  
up the street. inescapable. and I would  
explode because i

had read athenian words  
and swallowed *timeturned images*.  
where personnel have become human resources

work exhausts us. (emphasis added)

Reminding us of Saint John in the Apocalypse, the speaker swallows not words or pages but “time-turned images”, projected by words, which eventually transform the self-image of each human being until s/he actually becomes the economic resource defined by language.

Only in the closing poem “*Und nun*” (“and now”, Deu. 26:10) do we become aware that the God of the Torah, concealed within the quoted lines, represents the cultural imprint of authority and power that has worked itself into the unconscious of the speaker and her society. Submission to his divine voice has become an inescapable necessity, a duty bred by fear. All the themes of *from eternity to personal pronoun* are condensed in the dazzling image-words of this single poem, be they newly coined or transformed by their fresh context. In the first stanza dreams reappear,

banal dreams. not though dreams of being chased  
out of my fears. or dreams where teeth tumble  
from the future. But inverse or antidreams  
compensating absences the daylight mind  
blankets with black lace.

Dreams now have become “antidreams”, linking day and night by enveloping light and darkness in a void that tells of solitude and of a search for meaning. The word-play — clearly detectable in “absences the daylight mind blankets with black lace”, in the alliteration of “**blank(ets)**” and “**black**” — erases color even as it creates it, confounding the habitual opposition of day and night. Here the poet is forced into “an alpha diet for a heart weakened / by the muses. an eye focusing old voices / for new mouths. what is counted may not count. / what counts are // the hands of a weatherpoet / (the flowerless princess) saturating her brush in // the memories of jars.” Taking leave of her readers, the poet again looks to the future, presents herself as “she who writes in order to be /survived.”

## **Anne Blonstein, A Bibliography**

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