



Rachel Blau DuPlessis: Around the Day in 80 Worlds, Days and Works, Graphic Novella

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Rachel Blau DuPlessis: *Around the Day in 80 Worlds*, *Days and Works*, *Graphic Novella*

What are we engaging with when we first pick up these three recent volumes by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, each with its punning title reflecting the literary world back to itself? A few paratextual notes can aid us: *Around the Day in 80 Worlds* is described as a “companion book” to *Days and Works*, and both are part of a new “post-Drafts meta-poem called *Traces*.” *Graphic Novella* belongs to a group of interstitial books that dwell “between words and visuals.” As I have discussed elsewhere, *Drafts*, described as a “small epic,” was “a self-confessed challenge to Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* (a “counter-*Cantos*”), as well as a simultaneous, spectacular refusal of the slim volume and the monumental volume at the same time.”^[1] The serial poem extends to 114 parts published over five main volumes in which individual poems talk back and forth to each other along numerical lines calculated in groups of nineteen (e.g., 1/20/39/58/77/96). The complexity of its folds drew on the Jewish tradition of Midrash involving interpretation, reinterpretation, and speaking back to ancestors.

Encountering this new “meta-poem,” *Traces*, we then wonder where DuPlessis will lead us this time, on what entangled journey between and across the covers of books? The three books considered here demonstrate considerable diversity across and within each volume and, as we might expect, speak to each other, so this review will look at the whole impression as well as the individual volumes. *Around the Day in 80 Worlds* is a sequence of poems infiltrated with found text as a writer’s notebook might be, *Days and Works* is peppered with newspaper clippings pasted onto the pages, and *Graphic Novella* consists of large-format collaged pages of text and image. DuPlessis has grown increasingly interested in collage in the last ten years, and *Graphic Novella* is one of her most sustained pieces of work in that form.

How, then, do we read these volumes together? As tributes to early twentieth-century modernist experimentation? As an act of faith akin to Walter Benjamin’s belief in the “revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’”? Or as the last gasp of the book in the teeth of the World Wide Web? Why, like all DuPlessis’s oeuvre, they are all of this and more, always more—self-questioning and self-defining hybrids, always moving beyond

literary genre. “Is this a scrapbook?” *80 Worlds* asks of itself. *Graphic Novella* wonders whether it is a “dialogical notebook.” In fact, each question could be equally posed about the other text. DuPlessis unpicks strategically and subversively as she sews, writing in acute awareness of “a thing filled with the guilt of its genre.” Indeed, these works are aware of the compromised status, not only of genre, but of all forms of literary classification and periodization—even of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, a period which DuPlessis has specialized in throughout her academic career: “A certain kind of modernism has a lot to answer for,” *Graphic Novella* declares dryly.

Rather than being confined to any one of the inheritances or categorizations mentioned above, all three of these books proliferate and engage with multiple forms of cultural production. These books hope to elude (and of course allude to) the sins of each genre while remaining true to the kind of political and artistic integrity that DuPlessis has admired and brought to critical attention in her work on Objectivism. Most active between the 1930s and 1950s, Objectivist poets attempted to look clearly, often with Jewish and/or Marxist perspectives, at the world of matter, including “historical and contemporary particulars” (Louis Zukofsky), and to find a form to respond to these. DuPlessis writes about George Oppen, a mentor of hers: “Oppen’s art is political in this way: commitment has migrated into form. Oppen exposes and explores the riven and fraught nature of subjectivity in a state of political and existential arousal that cannot (yet) be satisfied.” Though her poetry is not particularly like Oppen’s, DuPlessis’s work is also “uncannily in the open” (the title of her essay on Oppen) and her ambitions are similar. Through her excesses and hybridizations of form, she hopes to say more, always more about how we live now, but also how we feel about our lives in our current political climate. The witty refrain, “WE ARE LIVING IN LATE CATAPULTISM,” which appears as the epigraph to *Days and Works*, acknowledges that we are overturned, overwhelmed, overloaded, disorientated, catapulted, and catapulted at. This phrase, which also appears twice in *Graphic Novella*, is addressed with an answer of sorts:

NOTHING ANSWERS TO THAT
UNCANNINESS EXCEPT
MORE UNCANNI-
NESS

In *Days and Works*, the art of uncanny answering is further glossed by a citation from Christine Froula: “MOVEMENT, ACTION, GESTURE / AND

SOLIDIFIED EPHEMERA.” We can read this quote as a declaration of DuPlessis’s art now, as the rest of this review demonstrates.

The angry and witty resistance of DuPlessis’s earlier poetry has become increasingly infused in *Days and Works* with this sense of uncanniness, as well as by the recurring terms *frantumaglia* and *smarrito*. These words are awkward manifestations, terms that need breaking down. Not just uncanny, for instance, but “uncanni- / ness” as it splits over the line break to further defamiliarize the term’s sense. Similarly, *frantumaglia*, a word requiring translation, was inherited at two stages of removal from the novelist Elena Ferrante via her mother:

She said that inside her she had a *frantumaglia*...It was the word for a disquiet not otherwise definable...The *frantumaglia* is the storehouse of time without the orderliness of a history, a story.

Smarrito carries similar connotations, but with greater potential for joy. DuPlessis describes it as “the Dante-word that means dazed, dazzled, confused, vertiginous, undone, stunned and awe-struck.” This definition is fitting for *Days and Works*, which like its parent text, Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, is a book that engages with universals, the mythic, dreams, and visions, as well as the quotidian. Like Hesiod, DuPlessis opens with speculations on the creation of the universe. Unlike Hesiod, she considers the extraordinary nature of neutrinos. While some dreams and retellings of Hesiodic fables are full of wonder as well as violence, *Days and Works* retains a feeling of anxiety and paranoia within its uncanny catapultism featuring dreams of lost papers, stolen cameras, and hair being chopped off. Our own disorientation as readers is compounded by an uncertainty as to when the text is entering dream narratives.

In keeping with her emphasis on activity, DuPlessis favors Hesiod’s alternative reading of Eris—strife—as driving one on to positive work, and translates it to the work of defamiliarized poetry:

As for me, I’ve made no secret of
it: want deformed words, want bits of alphabet formed into statements
facing a sudden encounter, want to know what is really there, want
chakra phonemes hanging over the page as from a void...

if you want these things then work with work upon work.

The final line is a direct quote from Hesiod. But is there any significance in her reversal of his title for her own book as in *Days and Works* as opposed to *Works and Days*? For the poet perhaps, days spent in the world come first, and require urgent response in works. Thus, the observation that “Every act is an act in the politics of yearning” seemed a fitting epigraph for this review—“yearning” plays tribute to just how long and how passionately DuPlessis has been at this action, these poet-/polit-ical acts.

Days return in another witty *détournement* of a renowned title, *Around the Day in 80 Worlds*, a text that is slightly more restful in its attention to individual days. Here’s a book to be relished by fellow travelers on the road of the difficult, “examined” life of writing, for whom lines such as “So—cope” might bring a wry comfort or necessary stoicism. *Days and Works* has a much longer reach, a sense of years, millennia even, behind each day:

How much is enough, how much is too much. When does one’s anger rise to agency? There is no formula for disclosure. If one hesitates over adequacy, years go by.... It appears this is the 21st century now. About thirty years have passed since X.’s trip.^[2] And it’s exactly one hundred years since the first World War. The Unnecessary One. But there were always murders, infiltrations, betrayals, conflicts, loud claims of multiple vanguards, gurus, dictators, disinformation, bribes, “this war will pay for itself,” losses of nerve, ginning up to fight, declaring an enemy, ultimate opposites, final battles, conflicted conviction, silent or proud dissent, suicides, and normal life—years go by. How quickly useless misery can occur; how woven into the daily; how transforming.

And so *Days and Works* pushes each new page on remorselessly, often over the page, trying to answer its unanswerable questions. *Around the Day in 80 Worlds* sits more lightly, “poetically,” on the page, trying to slow all this down, to look at it all a day at a time.

Day:

Is it possible
To know what happened?

[...]

Wait—. That all occurred too fast.
It got said
Too fast.

Don't erase the terms
Before they are examined.
Don't erase fear, aversion, rage, and grief.

As befits texts belonging to the new *Traces* project, all three of these recent books are engaged with loss. The trace “flirts, / just avoids / (skirts?) its own / disappearances” yet is “...continuous in the metamorphoses / of endless emergences of itself [...] ruptures and recoveries / of one long missing.” The “interstitial” here reminds us of the “gap” poems along the line of five (5/24/43, etc.) in the *Drafts* project, poems that reference past and present wars and the legacy of the Holocaust. In DuPlessis's poem-world the dead and the living have always cohabited and still do:

Investigate, invigilate,

and look into what's buried in the page.

Which is the underside where
the dead and the living can cross into each other's
best intentions.

These new books remain true to the sense of loss that haunted DuPlessis's generation and still haunts us—lost people or “the disappeared” and, increasingly, the lost species climate change brings. These lost worlds all coalesce around the evocative, universally familiar dream of a lost object (a scarf) in *80 Worlds*. In the face of this, *Graphic Novella*'s act of witness to past and present is one of “sey,” a repeated neologism combining saying with sighing, a light breath “still palpable after all these years.” In physical form, the book embraces “SOLIDIFIED EPHEMERA,” yet retains a ghostliness. Its final page incorporates fragments of black-and-white photographs of people, allowing for the gathering up and preservation of debris, of what would otherwise be lost. Throughout *Graphic Novella* the spatial dramatizes the temporal in big “GESTURES” presented on capacious, collaged pages—a partial fulfillment of DuPlessis's long-held desire to *materialize* language. Here she allows the physical body to subvert the mechanical means of production through marks on the page showing the indent of hands “pressured onto the paper.”

The recto pages of this collection present monochrome collages of xeroxed and cut-up text (printed and handwritten, often fringed with black) and images of machines associated with surveillance, war, and contamination past and present—cameras, timepieces, planes, protective gear—juxtaposed

with hands and legs and/or fragments of newspaper articles and handwritten language, including references to PTSD. The scattered-debris effect materializes the sense of loss, the pages referencing material and physical remnants of lost and threatened worlds from body parts to butterflies to text fragments referencing fracking and caring for animals in contaminated zones. Craft elements such as thread, buttons, and fabric appear to reinforce the materiality of the collaging process. Taking a clear step away from lyric beauty, this material is cut out and overlapped, achieving a somewhat surrealist, sometimes cyborgian, and often quite ugly, painfully handmade effect—that “uncanni- / ness” again. “Can I help sort?” asks DuPlessis humbly, humorously, or disingenuously; or more likely all three. Yes, she sorts, but most of the time we are left with many possible ways to read or see this work. Sometimes we can read it relatively simply—the clocks, for instance, suggest time, and by metonymic extension, contribute to our sense of “slo-mo apocalypse” or climate catastrophe. Sometimes we find a pleasurable satisfaction in seeing this stuff all cut up, fantasizing perhaps that power can be cropped, cut down to size. Sometimes we read through juxtaposition for more complex, ambivalent effects. The dynamic relations between facing pages encourage this way of reading, the verso providing a sometimes humorous commentary or meta-discourse on the recto pages. We might see this as a development of the Midrashic aspect of DuPlessis’s *Drafts*. Of course, any rule to read by, even this last, is always subverted by this tricky poet:

I want not to know
which is margin, which is text,
which is writing, which is gloss.
And I won’t.

This informs us how to “read” DuPlessis’s use of the collage form itself, a question she engages with throughout the text. The literal and symbolic hunt that runs through *Graphic Novella* for the correct glue with which to stick the materials provides a clue. There is advice from various named friends, one of whom resists glue entirely:

Liliane said—basically—this an obsolete problem. With Photoshop™ or another program like that, you can move the poems onto the collages without needing to glue them directly, that is, without needing to make paper pages.

In contrast, DuPlessis writes, “we all have to learn adhesion anyway and/or know when to stop.” On the recto facing the page in which glue is discussed in this fashion, DuPlessis presents a dream of a new genre, “of making, of pure poesis,” and beneath it the following quotation: “Twentieth century modernists identified paper scraps as their preferred material.” In doing this, she acknowledges origins, but also affirms “cutting and sticking” as a valid Benjaminian impulse to engage with outmoded forms in order, perversely, to find new creative forms. On a more symbolic political level, all this talk of glue can be read as the need for “social glue.” Intriguingly, this term, which I thought referred to people and social networks, now appears to be used to explore how communication technology can bring people together. The co-option of this term touches on one of our contemporary fears that “communication technology” might replace “real” interaction just as Photoshop or similar software replaces the cutting and sticking, the making element of collage. The draw to recover some form of collective voice in order to “call out the damaging / predations of ‘capital’ ” and related environmental degradation is explored in *Around the Day in 80 Worlds*. Interestingly, young writers and artists are discovering both outmoded forms, embracing artist’s books and zine culture and recognizing the importance of coming together on the streets as well as online to protest in movements such as Extinction Rebellion. In DuPlessis’s world, we can call all such artistic and sociopolitical behaviors forms of “ACTION.” As her bio for *Days and Works* attests:

The operable terms for the long poem are activity (praxis or poesis—the practice or the making) and desire...a passionate activity...entering into a continuing situation of responsiveness... plethora, hyper-stimulation, an overwhelmedness to which one responds.

Just as “retro” as collage is DuPlessis’s persistent use of newspapers in all three of these books, often her local *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Some might now see the newspaper as a precursor to endless rolling news, but DuPlessis insists on the incontrovertible dailiness of the newspaper, the specificity of those works and days. DuPlessis sticks by and on the newspaper, though often in satiric, bitter quotation. Even in reproduction, its very paperiness acts in juxtaposition to the “poetic” text—the violence of snipped out edges and unfinished sentences is a direct embodiment of the violence of the half-told stories we glimpse here, tiny acts of witness to violence, resistance, despair, and hope.

In her referencing Oppen’s “the real that we confront,” is DuPlessis then veering away from poetry/lyric towards prose/story? The title of *Graphic*

Novella implies a hybrid text, a micro (or feminine?) novel with images, but in fact it problematizes storytelling and narrative throughout. This is dramatized by the juxtaposition of a paragraph (about a family returning home after the war to find themselves never invited to neighbors' houses, and the neighbors having stolen their belongings for themselves) with an image of a cassette tape: a recognizable but, again, outmoded means of recording a story. A scrap of paper lies across the tape, partly eliding it and bearing the following tiny script:

“I don't write fiction.”

“You should.”

“Why?”

Who is DuPlessis talking to/about? Herself? So, while there are many stories, a plethora, in all these books, every one is cut up, cut across or just not told quite right. They are fragments of tales, leaving the reader with many questions, such as: Is this family Jewish? A name might have helped confirm this and helped situate and solidify the story, whether as fact or fiction. Leaving the story partial leaves us looking for more before we have a chance to switch off, a common response to stories we do not want to hear and yet need to keep hearing. Yet, there is a powerful Reznikoffian desire to document with feeling (to “sey”). This desire drives the travels in space and time in both *Graphic Novella* and *Days and Works*, from apartheid South Africa in 1976 (*Graphic Novella*) to much more local instances of oppression and racist taunts (*Days and Works*). In the latter, the innumerable half-stories (usually in newspaper cut-ups) of environmental degradation and apocalypse come from myriad places and once again embody loss within the text.

snapping shot after shot of the white-plumaged owl.

"That tells me there are a lot of them around," said James, who has been shooting nature photos since he was a teen. "Which is really cool, but it's also a little scary. You have to wonder why so many of these birds are so far south this year ... why they are not where they are supposed to be."

That is the question that concerns researchers like David Wilcove.

"Snowy owls are a special case, because every few years we do see them migrating further south than

See **OWLS** on B6

“ You have to wonder why so many of these birds are so far south this year ... why they are not where they are supposed to be.

Lon James, avid birder

All poems I write are shadow poems. As in an eclipse, the engulfing reddish pigment of earth's sunsets shadows the orb, displaying it more clearly as a solid, hanging sphere. It is the shock of proof, like mountains on the moon, or the moons of Jupiter. Who traveled from Mt. Olympus to Mt. Oulipos? It wasn't me. Or was it? I was flirty on this question. Did these words come here from the grave vase tube? Or did I write this? Is this female "thing" important? and when? This picking, gleaning, arranging, these tales about the birds and of the snake—what now? For

It's a sad irony that the agricultural advice of the georgic that characterizes Hesiod is replaced in *Days and Works* by cuttings about pollution and decay: cuttings about artificial sweeteners in rivers or about soil pollution and endangered species in the Southern San Joaquin Valley. No wonder farming seems impossibly compromised, even doomed, in this context. At first glance, this might seem to be the meaning of the dream of a burning hayrick in *Days and Works*. Yet, at the same time, as with the word *smarrito*, the image is glossed and transformed into one in which power has also the potential to be nourishing: "someone setting fire to a hayrick. Life as grain and its straw—nourishing, flammable, explosive. Touch where you are, even unto singeing, and make words into talismans, sparks to flame and go to ash within the cool zones of darkness." As always when reading DuPlessis, we should look for "both and and."

This leads me to one last pronominal question to pose here—who is the poetic voice in this new work? In her early work, DuPlessis had an urgent need to recover the "voy-elle," the "she" pronoun for herself and others. This need is still apparent; for instance, in *Graphic Novella* she references the artistic practice of a little-known painter who influenced Pollock, and interjects: "(This person is real. Her name is Janet Sobel)." Here DuPlessis

wants us to know the name and gender, though again the storytelling is fragmentary and cut through with inelegant parentheses. It is introduced by a dry, rather witty fragment: “‘Here I will gesture to the female subject.’ / (He waves his hand).” Thus, DuPlessis makes clear that she is interested in telling stories that recover the female figure from object to subject status, an aim we can also observe in her treatment of Hesiod’s fables. She retells the Pandora story in the first person as the poet’s dream; she then uses the story of the Hawk and the Nightingale to demonstrate an endlessly violent world, particularly against the feminized nightingale, who tries to sing out despite the hawk’s talons on her neck. In the extract above, she wonders about the efficacy and importance of this in the face of all that is going on.

So it is that, in these new books, she tries out the gender-neutral pronouns “it” and “we” and that these are the pronouns that are especially noticeable and vehement in usage. In *Graphic Novella*, opposite an ungainly cyborgian camera on legs with one giant shoe, appear the words

It needs to become “it.”
Implacable. Unbending. But resilient.
It needs to see that quirk, that turn. It needs
to watch.
It needs to try
walking with legs like wings,
flying out and
holding a camera in her gut.
(Stubbornness.)
That’s the need to know, to catalogue, to find.

It seems to me that this “thing” that needs to become the “it,” the object, is both poem and poet united (hence still “her” gut), a strange figure who wants to address “you,” whoever you are, directly: “The poem ‘wants’ to be created as more of itself with you as the medium.” Here then is a desire to be “it” not “I”—to perceive the self/poet and the poem as objects among objects as Olson urged in 1950 and as the object-oriented ontologists and new materialists urge now. Yet there is still always the problem of “I” as articulated concisely in *80 Worlds*:

I made these

from the “it” self

These words and spaces enact a battle for the “‘it’ self” to escape the “Today I” self that engages in its activities in time and space that “I cannot control” and “I really can’t talk about.” When “I” appears, it does in odd, unexpected— even uncanny—ways: “Accept the desire to puncture the page, maybe with the penetrating awl created by a Capital ‘I,’ with its specific pinhole or pinhold of light.” The plosives here are both painfully phallic and illuminating, the ambivalence clear. Yet the epic struggle with her own lyric I continues, though playfully:

My “I” had already fallen off that keyboard, but when I press it hard, it clicks back on. Of off. Of on. On-Off.

When I press it very hard, sometimes it will write iiiiii until I erase what “I’s” I do not need.

“We” could help of course, dear readers. We might well ask, “who are the we?” To which DuPlessis answers, “Who cares—WE are here, WE / have declared ourselves.” Why is “we” important? Because pronouns, those little shifters that change according to who speaks, as Jakobson discovered, are indicators of identity, including gender. They can help us acknowledge responsibility and expand to whom we are speaking though they can also pose the problem of human subjectivity and power: “‘I’ and ‘we’ have made a memorable—if often damaging—mark.” Nonetheless it’s this elusive “we,” the commons of language, that is yearned for in the politics of DuPlessis’s books. For after all:

We live together—different people, a passel of friends. A generation or two, modulation. Time passes. It’s normal. You remember to look around.

It is a landscape of slowly changing shapes. A hill erodes. Or there is an avalanche. Some fracking; that’s different. People are slightly altered. Some “disappear” and we know (we say we know) what this means.

It is “we” who bring about and endure these times. The most recent of these three books, *Around the Day in 80 Worlds*, takes up the story in words that assert poetic and extra-poetic actions necessary to push against the darkness of the centuries and the now:

...how then did we
find these contradictions as
arousing, our rage giving power,
and thereby discover

the fact that a WE
does exist.

I have focused on the politically engaged and materially embodied nature of DuPlessis's recent works here, and how they speak to our "catapulted" contemporary state. I have looked back at how they move on from and connect with her previous serial poems and her deep classical, Jewish, and modernist roots, and considered her restless search for new-old forms that can mirror the complexity of our "Human Universe." Perhaps most remarkable, however, is that somewhere, somehow, in the interstices between the cosmological threads of "scudding sliding planets" and the fragmentary tales of kidney donors and marches, DuPlessis still half-uncovers, half-creates wonder and weirdness in the world and in books.