

## **“Life” “Drafts”: Towards Two Non-Dogmatic Poetic Archives**

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With the very title of his 1915 poem, “Dogmatic Statement on the Game and Play of Chess—Theme for a Series of Pictures,” Ezra Pound confirms the intention of many poets of High Modernism to produce normative discourses, aiming at establishing the new rules of a new poetics, one devised to fit the demands of modern times.

[...]

This board is alive with light

These pieces are living in form,

    Their moves break and reform the pattern:

[...]

Clash, leaping of bands, straight strips of hard colour,

Blocked lights working in, escapes, renewing of contest. (Pound 19)

The criticism of fixed poetic forms or genres, the elaboration of new strategies to approach the world, the insistence on the choice of new “themes” for the poem all coalesce into an aggressive “renewing of contest” whose aim is openly to “reform the pattern,” i.e. to generate a different pattern, different and yet just as coercive as those that preexisted this revolution of the word. The “statement” is willfully “dogmatic,” as it sets the tone and the intent of the poetic enterprise along the lines of the substitution of one theory of the poem for another: to the original definitions of the poem as concise and lyrical, based on self-expression and the construction of a *Weltanschauung*, one is to respond with a different dimension altogether, a long poem, all-encompassing and multi-directional, albeit not formless nor intent-free. The war game of chess symbolizes to this extent the agonistic position of the poet, a “hard” fighter against the presumed softness of past poetry, forcing upon his readers the violent methods to

read and reform a violent world. The context of 1915 cannot of course be entirely discounted in this reading of Pound's poem, which not only wills a poetic dogma into being: it also accounts for the upheaval of a world at war, and at a loss, as it nostalgically seeks the restoration of some order among the chaos of a disaster much further reaching than its geopolitical consequences. War poetry, and postwar poetry encounter obstacles to their persistence, which Theodor Adorno's emblematic statement formulates for poetry after the Holocaust: they possess varying degrees of self-effacement or political withdrawal that have become a defining trait of poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. The tendency remains two-pronged: the dogmatic stance to exorcise disaster becomes more rigid, whereas some anticipate the necessary inscriptions of apocalypse in the subtext of every text.

A glance thus suffices at Marianne Moore's "The Fish," for instance, to ascertain that this "dogmatic statement" is not the only possible response, that it might in fact be a very restrictive, maybe shortsighted reaction to the epistemological consequences of the war. In "The Fish," Marianne Moore, following her own definition of the poet's existential stance as observer and recorder of the world's phenomena as well as her awareness of the polysemy intrinsic to any linguistic manifestation, inscribes the war in what primarily seems to be the minute description of one of her bestiary's animals:

THE FISH

wade

through black jade.

Of the crow-blue mussel-shells, one keeps

adjusting the ash-heaps;

opening and shutting itself like

an

injured fan.

The barnacles which encrust the side  
of the wave cannot hide

there for the submerged shafts of the (Moore 32)

The “shells,” the “ash-heaps,” the “injured [fan],” however outline the subtext of an apocalyptic vision of the trenches: in Marianne Moore’s poem, the radical change of perspective on the world brought about by the ethical debacle of a total war of man on man does not call for a revisionist “dogmatic statement,” but rather for the realization that this disaster was forever present. Only a vision deprived of categorical preconceptions can perceive it, and it is in this reassessment of the conditions of perception that the “reality” of the world can be not accounted for, but taken into account in the writing of the poem. Some may see an almost childish naivety in Moore’s approach to the world, from the zoo to the fun fair, since it advocates observing and recording everything anew, in wonderment. But such a labeling of her poetic experience of the world would fail to see it as a more collective epistemological stance, one that predates the Great War, becomes radicalized in it. This epistemological stance then goes on to inform the partly diverging, partly converging poetics of astonishment worked out by Lyn Hejinian and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, respectively, in *My Life* and *Drafts*, two long or extremely long poems that work out a general approach to life as draft, and to writing as on-going processes of approximation of the ever-elusive reality of existence. In both these cases, two notions are central to understand the cumulative nature of the long poem, and its performative function as active mapping of otherwise massive, astonishing, and irredeemably cryptic material. From the Pound/Moore antagonism stems a commitment to the non-dogmatic, the proteiform, and the provisional, that inscribe themselves in the poem along modes of incremental correction, and reformulation.

### **A poetics of astonishment**

In a recent essay that parallels the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Martin Heidegger's ontology, Jed Deppman underlines the pivotal part played by astonishment as a mode of relating to the world—a mode perhaps able to generate an anti-dogmatic discourse which, in Dickinson's case, becomes expressed in poetry. Running contrary to the dynamics of authorial empowerment and what could be deemed an imperial all-engulfing poetic process aiming at imposing order on the raw matter of experience, astonishment “does not empower the poet but creates and intensifies the experience, sources, moods, troubles, and emotions that call for poetry to be written” (Deppman 230). Deppman is quick to point out that the comparison between Dickinson and Heidegger has its limits in the very fact that Heidegger's final aim converges with “aggressive geopolitical stances” (Deppman 231) that are foreign to Dickinson.

Yet the way Heidegger used philology, history, and philosophy to elucidate “astonishment” and related terms (such as “uncanniness” [*unheimlich*] and anxiety [*Angst*]) do offer valuable perspective on the backgrounds for Dickinson's “terror,” “fear,” “trouble,” “palsy,” and the trauma and disorientation in which her writing originated. Heideggerian astonishment is no *frisson* or passing state but, as Steiner notes, a mood or “disposition” [Stimmung], a “‘tuning,’ in which and for which the Being unfolds” (31). Poetry is the aletheic, disclosive unfolding of Being [...]. (Deppman 231)

This “tuning” which Deppman borrows from Steiner's reading of Heidegger might be seen as the incidental result of the process of astonishment. But it can also be considered as the reason why astonishment could be turned into an epistemological stance, one that foregoes the resort to categories for classifying events, to grids for interpretation or to master narratives to shape both individual and collective history.

Philosophically, wonder is usually understood to be either a preliminary stage of thinking, an open-mindedness ultimately to be controlled by reason, or an innocuous aesthetic category affiliated with beauty or the marvelous. In these terms, wonder can be cast negatively, as pre- or irrational thought, or positively, as uncorrupted apprehension [...]. (Deppman 235)

More than the notion of “uncorrupted apprehension,” which might be one of the modes sought after by the Modernists, but less so by Dickinson in her focus on the tiny details of natural life or on the secret doubts of the Christian soul, it is the idea that astonishment would be a preliminary stage in a process of rationalization and narrativization that here needs questioning. What would be the condition of the poem if astonishment were not this preliminary stage but rather a philosophical position? By positioning herself in the epistemological position of astonishment, the poet relinquishes the reassuring categories and certainties of theoretical knowledge in favor of the doubts and indeterminacies of direct experience. In Dickinson, the many expressions of astonishment, wonder, surprise, bafflement, etc. crystallize into a very uncomfortable but very real way of being to the world, and of confronting one’s mortality. Her “astonishment” is not exactly at the prospect of “going to heaven,” but rather a variant on the curiosity that makes her reject death and hope for more time on earth:

Going to Heaven!

I don’t know when—

Pray do not ask me how!

Indeed I ’m too astonished

To think of answering you!

[...]

I ’m glad I don’t believe it

For it would stop my breath—

And I 'd like to look a little more

At such a curious Earth! (Dickinson 79, 41)

Because the poet is “too astonished,” she cannot lend her thoughts to speculations about theories of the after-life: she is entirely caught up in the surprise that the world elicits in her, and in the hesitations it triggers in her mind. Gertrude Stein underscores this in her ironical rewriting of Dickinson in *Sacred Emily*, when she pays special attention to the modalities of “surprise” in Dickinson as they are grammatically conveyed by a preference of “whether” over “sooner”: the “pause” as the poet opts to sojourn in the limbo of “whether” rather than hurry to conclusions allows for the kinship to be established between the two poets.

What a surprise.

Not sooner whether.

Cordially yours.

Pause. (Stein, *Sacred Emily* 322)

And indeed the paradigm of astonishment is picked up by Stein in the composition of *Tender Buttons*, a series of prose poems based on the defamiliarizing verbalization of everyday objects, events, and places.

Water astonishing and difficult altogether makes a meadow and a stroke. (Stein, “Water Raining,” *Tender Buttons* 322)

The rain that catches the poet by surprise is at the same time “astonishing” and “difficult,” thus inextricably linking the process of being astonished to the process of understanding, making sense of the world and what happens, striving towards some form of logic that would allow to relate “a meadow” and “a stroke.” The work of polysemy in this latter term pulls apart the meaning between the softness of the caressing hand, and the violence of the potentially fatal cerebral attack, with, lost in between, the suddenness of the idea that erupts

into the mind, Stein's so desired "stroke of genius," brought about by a trivial meteorological incident. Being surprised by the rain might be a common fate of the Parisian woman, but in the specific case of the poet in *Tender Buttons*, the "astonishing water" happens to a subject that is not merely occasionally surprised but exists in surprise:

Surprise, the only surprise has no occasion. It is an ingredient and the section the whole section is one season. (Stein, "Rooms," *Tender Buttons* 355)

Living, and writing in surprise, in Dickinson, in Stein, opens onto the possible contemporary radicalization of an astonished mode of being to the world, and to the poem, one exemplified in the poetic practice of Lyn Hejinian and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Both Hejinian and DuPlessis claim this lineage of alternative modes of perception and composition, that entail patterns of repetitiveness, all-inclusiveness, accumulation and combination that are part and parcel of the genesis of long poems<sup>1</sup>.

### **What happens (Lyn Hejinian)**

Ever since Ron Silliman's essay about the New Sentence, Lyn Hejinian has been working along the double line of Benveniste's interrogations about syntactic integration, and of Stein's assertions about the emotionality of the paragraph in "Lecture on Composition." In both cases, what is at stake is the definition of the lowest level of meaning, which would simultaneously produce meaning and preclude meaningfulness, thus confining the reader to the limbo of understanding as a permanent process, forever unable to reach a conclusion, cut off from the stability of final statement, and permanently astonished at the simultaneous formation and dissolution of meaning. In working out non-linear narrative modes, Hejinian "ejects [...] the idea that there is something containable to say: completed saying. So that

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<sup>1</sup> On this see DuPlessis's claim against the "victimization" of women poets, about Dickinson (*Blue Studios*, 228), or about Stein's stance against "forensics" as normative definition (*The Pink Guitar*, 133); also see Hejinian about time, space, and the event as "presence" in Stein's writings (*The Language of Inquiry*, 105sq.)

poetics becomes an activity that is ongoing, that moves in different directions at the same time, and that tries to disrupt or make problematic any formulation that seems too final or preemptively restrictive” (Bernstein 830). In orchestrating, through the pun on “happy” in the long poem *Happily*, an overall reflection on the astonishment brought about by chance, by what “happens,” Hejinian integrates in the very syntax of the poem the provisionality of understanding, its instability, and foregrounds astonishment as an existential condition. Coherence is but temporary and both the cause and the result of astonishment.

To this extent, the three installments of *My Life* illustrate tactics of survival in a paradigmatic succession of events, all perceived as unforeseeable and unrelated but by the accident of concomitance. The sentences that make up the poem do not imitate the historicity of autobiographical account so much as they reenact the astonishment of, and at, the vagaries of living. As is by now familiar to many, the first two installments are based on a relatively simple procedure to generate the text of the poet’s pseudo autobiography. The “new sentence,” with its reluctance to the composition of sentences beyond the level of the single proposition, is the unit that composes the chapters of the text. The fabric of the text constantly questions the relevance of a smooth rational narrative of one’s past, as it is torn by disruptions, non-sequiturs, and lacunae. The text presents the snippets of memories as memory yields them, assembled in what Bernstein calls Hejinian’s “modular style” (Bernstein 832). In each of the first two installments (*My Life* at 37, and *My Life* at 45), the number of chapters corresponds to the poet’s age (respectively 37 and 45), the number of sentences in each chapter takes over this constraint so that each is respectively 37- or 45-sentences long. The second installment, then, does function on the modular principle, since it is a reorganization of the entire biographical account that ensues from the poet’s ageing. The memory of the first year is altered, recombined by the addition of years in the poet’s whole life, in a process which is incremental and discontinuous: the semblance of continuity is



maintained by the typographical regularity of the book, but the disjointedness of sentences all speak of and to the subject's astonished persistence in discontinuity. The chapters fail to cohere much further than the level of the sentence, creating a fascination reflexively defined in the second chapter's title: "As for we who love to be astonished."

You spill the sugar when you lift the spoon. My father had filled an old apothecary jar with what he called "sea glass," bits of old bottles rounded and textured by the sea, so abundant on beaches. There is no solitude. It buries itself in veracity. It is as if one splashed in the water lost by one's tears? My mother had climbed into the garbage can in order to stamp down the accumulated trash, but the can was knocked off balance, and when she fell she broke her arm. She could only give a little shrug. The family had little money but plenty of food. At the circus only the elephants were greater than anything I could have imagined. The egg of Columbus, landscape and grammar. She wanted one where the playground was dirt, grass, shaded by a tree, from which would hang a rubber tire as a swing, and when she found it she sent me. These creatures are compound and nothing they do should surprise us. (Hejinian, *My Life* 10)

The second chapter of the volume is for the poet's second year, a year defined by many as a child's year of the discovery of the world. "Sugar," "elephants," "The egg of Columbus, landscape and grammar," and above all the basic prohibition of surprise: "nothing they do should surprise us." The statement in its dogmatic improbability works in the way of preterition, asserting quite the contrary of its explicit meaning: everything they do should surprise us. In Hejinian's poetic world, events do not follow chronology or causality because "time seems [too] normative" (*My Life* 11). Normativity prevents the effective reconstruction of the past in the present, in the same way as it prevents the very construction of the text: a norm outside the norm is to be found in the invention of procedure to counteract the imposed norms of conventional composition. The text attracts because it astonishes, in a manner that

we can “love,” not quite addressing the complexities of surviving (rather than living) in astonishment, until *My Life in the Nineties*, the post-cancer installment of the poem. The first chapter of *My Life in the Nineties* is thus entitled “I’ve never seen much that was typical” and the first page contains the following sentence:

As for we who love to be astonished, we close our eyes so as to remain for a little while longer within the realm of the imaginary, the mind, so as to avoid having to recognize our utter separateness from each other, a separateness that is instantly recognizable in your familiar face. (Hejinian, *My Life in the Nineties*, 7-8)

With the recognition of the potential deadliness of what happens comes the full awareness that the poem deals only with what remains, something evident from the start in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s *Drafts*.

### **“I was born in the month of Remember” (Rachel Blau DuPlessis)**

A similar diffidence to preconceived structures that cannot but yield preconceived perceptions and thoughts is to be found in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s *Drafts*, despite the notable formal differences between DuPlessis’s poems and Lyn Hejinian’s. Whereas Hejinian works *My Life* into varying versions preventing the petrification of the text into a master text, DuPlessis proceeds through an incremental method that preserves the unfinished quality of the text despite its publication. There is to be a sequel to *Drafts*, once a volume is published, which will induce a re-reading and re-interpreting of the sum of all drafts. One could argue that this process converges with the method of composing *My Life* in so far as *My Life* integrates this very work of recomposition presiding over the narrativization of successive experiences. Where DuPlessis’s poems leave it to the reader to perform the recomposition and “re-narrativization” (Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 74)), thus allowing for a freer exercise of this reader’s reading capabilities, Hejinian’s enact it for the reader to experience

by proxy. One of the things they have in common though is the way they take into account the ideological consequences of the conventional functioning of language. Perhaps following in this Bruce Andrews's very vocal denunciation of the ideological implications of syntax itself, as in the essays collected in *Paradise and Method*, DuPlessis in fact radicalizes it insofar as she casts doubt on the very possibility of generating a "liberated" text:

The desire for a massive critique of gender relations in language, in writing, yet the indication that the character, the propositions, however numbered, of plots, of conventions of recognizable beauty, of rewards systems, of myth, and of memory impede and prevent this critique. / If this is so, better stop writing. (DuPlessis, *Pink Guitar* 52)

Where Hejninian undermines the coercions at work in language by staging them at play in the poem, DuPlessis relentlessly seeks to achieve the state of astonishment that will counteract the dogmatic statements she finds even in the open form of William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* whereby, despite the poet's attempts at inclusion, "text is made, radiance is found, [the woman] can be absorbed and accounted for when she enters (as Sappho does) the propulsive economy of sexual desire" (DuPlessis, *Pink Guitar* 62).

To a large extent, the poem unfolds as the provisional shaping, organizing, classifying of a personal archive made of scraps of paper, old stamps, found quotations, nifty and condensed phrases, so that Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Collage Poems* are, in Jennifer Scapettone's words, "the alphabetic and antialphabetic matrix of *Drafts*" (Back cover), the poet's 114 section-long poem, a six-volume text in the Salt Publishing edition that spans a 25-year writing career. "Born in the month of Remember" (*Collage Poems*, 66) the poem, rather than the poet as a person, outlines the workings of memory once it is understood as the conflation of the personal and the collective in the specificity of a contextualized present. Intertextual and polymorphic in the extreme, the poems are often described as the *loci* where

the poet gathers and assembles the debris of the degraded master texts of the past, where she tentatively and provisionally inscribes what is left of the dogmatic statements of the earlier Modernist era, once unsettled by the onslaught of historical upheavals and catastrophes. In the collages, DuPlessis happens upon pieces of fabric, stamps stuck on envelopes sent from far-away places, newspaper scraps, snippets of texts that cannot be deemed quotations, the trajectory of the individual linking together, by chance, heterogeneous elements that may or may not cohere into a legible statement.

From the title of “Draft CX” (*Drafts Surge* 117), “Primer,” one may infer that the collages that make up this section of the poem, for all their colorfulness and compositional complexity, work as the preparation for the work to come, inscribing the poem in the long-run dimension of an open, ongoing work whose finiteness is to be forever questioned. Even when she declares that, after 25 years in progress, *Drafts* has eventually come to an end, Rachel Blau DuPlessis still does not talk in terms of closure, nor does she evoke the poems as a whole. Rather the poems still pay tribute to the constant reshaping of reality that corresponds to the constant reconfigurations of memory. As the actualization of the past in the present, DuPlessis’s memory functions as a processing mechanism. This mechanism is obstinately trying to make the perturbed causalities that assumedly lead to the present, to its absurdities and random occurrences, coincide with the vital necessities of self-definition and self-stability. “Writing is an aid to memory,” Lyn Hejinian says, to which Rachel Blau DuPlessis seems to respond that writing is an aid to survival, in the projections of memory it allows. These projections constitute so many maps to navigate an astonishing world. As stamped letters sometimes fortunately find their way to their addressees, the poems are “primers” sent out to the world to prepare it for “greater foreignness.”

Describe your artistic achievement to date.

“Baffled, I prepare for even greater foreignness.”

### **The little hunchback and the superstructure**

One of the functions of memory is indeed to prepare the subject, not so much to "greater foreignness," but to more and more customary experience, as the patterns of recognition progressively order the chaotic happenings of daily existence. In her account of Walter Benjamin's life, Hannah Arendt evokes his "bad luck," and the way Benjamin refers to the legend of the little hunchback in his article about Franz Kafka.<sup>1</sup> According to the legend, clumsiness and bad luck are the signs of the failure of attention to the surrounding world, but they are also the consequences of the annoying tricks playing by an invisible, impish little hunchback that according to the poem that so struck Benjamin in his childhood is the unwanted companion of some people.<sup>2</sup> The little hunchback is the engineer of the unexpected events that make one drop something, stumble... or lose all bearings in the world to rush to a tragic and absurd death. "The person," says Benjamin, "that the little hunchback is watching pays attention neither to himself nor to the hunchback. He is standing there in awe in front of a heap of rubble" (Benjamin 2000 650-652). Symptomatically it is retrospection which entails the parallel between legend and personal life: the two narratives merge to inscribe a kind of causality, however irrational and superstitious, that ironically justifies the irrational developments one faces in the present. Thanks to the acknowledgement of the hunchback's so far ignored presence and activities, the present might be revised into a logical moment. Arendt relates this mental process to Benjamin's Marxian, as well as Goethian, interest in what she calls "the superstructure" (Arendt 28): a network of correspondences between apparently unrelated objects, events, individuals, that once explicated reveals the hidden mechanisms of the world and gives reason to the unreasonable.

Thus Benjamin's interest in the very small things of the world, his project to seek the affinities between discrepant artifacts, proceed from a quest, a deadly quest one is tempted to say, for an archetypal phenomenon in which signification (*Bedeutung*) and things would coincide. Paradoxically in Blau DuPlessis's poems, it is the renunciation to, and even the rebellion against such belief in the superstructure that motivates the collecting and collaging that reinvests the Benjaminian project. And it is the impulse to order the debris of perception that generates the grid of *Drafts*, its numerical organization, and orchestrates its finitude. The distrust towards preconceived structures that cannot but yield preconceived perceptions and thoughts is thus to be found in *Drafts* along with the practice of sorting and ordering. Locally she experiments with formal or procedural devices that provide temporary stability to an account of defamiliarization and destabilization.

There is to be a sequel to *Drafts*, once a volume is published, which will induce a re-reading and re-interpreting of the sum of all drafts, in a mode that mirrors the reassessment and revisions performed by memory. The discontinuities in the successive volumes and "chapters" of *Drafts* are the macrostructural signs of discontinuities that penetrate the very matter of the text down to the linear trace of letters on the page. Determinedly open, DuPlessis's poems propose serial narratives that evolve according to the poet's biographical trajectory: in a manner similar to the Benjaminian archive they are traces of a life, as well as of a world. It is then not surprising that "Draft 29" should be subtitled "Intellectual Autobiography" (*Drafts Toll* 179).

### **Midrash**

Among the *Collage Poems*, "Talmudic / Talismanic" (18) inscribes the two words in English as if they were synonymous along the central margins of two facing pages of Hebraic text. To those familiar with the page lay-out of the Talmud, where the Biblical text is at the center and

literally surrounded by commentaries from various famous scholars and rabbis in varying letter sizes according to their author and his importance in the hierarchy of commentators, such inclusion works as an homage to the activity of remembrance, and as a commentary that is typical of the Jewish religious practice, and has been made famous by the increasingly esoteric, clever, and language-conscious modes developed by the kabbalah. Commentaries in the Jewish kabbalah are modes of expansion and digression from original texts or snippets of texts in an attempt to perpetuate a tradition through live reenactments, updates, redirections.

Where the Talmud records in writing many of these commentaries, the Midrash is originally an oral tradition passed on from generation to generation, which fuses together memory and commentary. For DuPlessis, it comes to embody the “overlying stories” (*Drafts Toll* “Draft 6: Midrush ” 37) that make up the evolving history of succeeding generations. “Rash,” and “rush[ed], time alters history by imposing its rewrites and revisions in changing contexts. In a way actually very close to what has been done more recently in the fields of criticism and theory, the Midrashic tradition aims at interpreting texts, appropriating them, recontextualizing them and remotivating them in the present of reading. It also projects the text into the future, inscribing the activities of commenting, in speech or in writing no longer as “aid[s] to memory,” but as modalities of memory itself. Indeed, once this is said, it seems logical to consider that verbalization and memory, as with verbalization and thought, cannot be dissociated: memory does not fully exist without verbal manifestations.

This explains the discussion happening in “Draft 52: Midrash,” around Theodor Adorno’s provocative statement: “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch.” Questioning the translation into English that transforms the German specificity of *Gedicht* (a poem) into the generic “poetry,” DuPlessis amplifies her critique in asking in a deceptively naive manner, but above all very sarcastically, why poetry is targeted, rather than the other literary genres or art media:

“After Auschwitz

to compose music, to write novels, is barbaric.”

Is “poetry” the only affirmative décor in this house?

Kitsch collectible gathering dust on the shelf? Pearly button off a ripped shirt?

Is it the blandishments of poems, their automatic adhesion

to attraction, glades of sparkle, birthday offerings, tears at graves,

female visitants, house finch eating pear blossom,

awe-struck thoughts on planets, stars and moon—

is it the modest size of poems, their nicely tuned endings,

the diction and gestures they normally exclude,

their status as tender, elegant tokens

(concealing ferocious, self-fascinated delight)

that makes of “poem” a particular insult and blight? (*Drafts Pledge*, “Draft 52:

Midrash” 142)

So, if one returns to DuPlessis’s own words, it is only in “anger” (*Drafts Toll* “Draft 2: She” 13), and one wants to add only in witnessing, that she can counter the impositions of (male) mastery, but this cannot indeed be limited to a feminist dynamic: it is a further-ranging quest for a condition “where there is no closure and no authoritative statement but where the production and productivity of meanings is continuous” (Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios* 229), a condition which implies the “invention of a stance capacious, ready, open-throated, alert and altered, serious” (Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios* 229):

Here and there, day and night I walk out into

the least particle of astonishment

in which nourishment collects. (*Drafts Toll*, “Draft 21: Cardinals” 139)



Astonishment and nourishment travel together with collection and recollection in her long poem, as they become the very condition for survival. They provide the foundation of the poet's stance as poet in her ethical reflection on the workings of memory, as she experiences the estrangement to the past brought about by unavoidable forgetting.

To know the astonishing oddity

of the long-gone as if

it could be stored

what use is memory forgetting is overwhelming (*Drafts Toll*, "Draft 32: Renga" 202)

Even as the poem records the struggles of memorializing, it recounts the "*Histories of startling*" (*Drafts* 38 "Georgics and Shadow" 264) and reduces the poet's achievement to an epistemological and ethical condition of non-normative "bafflement" (*Drafts Toll*, "Draft 29: Intellectual Autobiography" 179).

### **The rule of no rule**

To counter the dogmatic statements that impede memory from being freely at play as it performs its ethical imperative of "listen[ing] to shadows" (*Drafts Pledge*, "Draft, unnumbered: Précis" 219), Rachel Blau DuPlessis thus says: "I want to undergeneralize" (*Blue Studios* 124). From the position of a feminist poet, she battles against the hegemonies of masculinity that prevent the poet from opening herself, and her poem to the diversity of experience, the plurality of discourses, and the permanent surprise that block out preconception and prejudice. As a theorist and critic, she opts for the Midrashic comment, unstable, open and creative. In reminding her readers of Ezra Pound's anti-Semitism, as well as of the nonsense of a mode of mourning after the Shoah that would amount to censorship and the suppression of expression, she does not so much make an argument against anti-

Semitism as she questions the very right of one individual to dictate the “do’s and don’t’s” of poetics:

So we can take *Drafts* as a response to a scandalous remark Pound made in “A Visiting Card” in one hyperabsolute, slashing moment. About T.S. Eliot, actually, but of literature in general, he said, “ Not a jot or tittle of the Hebraic alphabet can pass into the text without danger of contaminating it.” Given this, *Drafts* is pleased to be an unclean, female-penned poem filled with jots and tittles and thoroughly contaminated by traces of the Hebraic. *Drafts* is a poem filled with debris, rot, fragment, corners in which collages of trash collect. (Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios* 250)

An archive, an autobiography, an exploratory complex, the poem works like memory itself, documenting and commenting upon the unending struggle of the extraordinary desire to remember with the ordinary limitations of remembrance. Thus DuPlessis protests pre-established structures that rule, once and for all, over the process of composition. Compositional method is to be devised locally, autonomously, incidentally, and this cannot but yield a long poem, vertiginously made of long poems:

No plan, no design, no schemata. Just a few procedures: placing works on the big stage of the page, making each be itself intact and autonomous but connected to each other as they emerged. No continuous narrative. No myth as explanation or evocation. (Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios* 230)

In “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian unfolds the complexities and paradoxes of a poetics that seeks to reconcile the contradictory impulses of fixation and reactivation at the origins of artistic creation (Hejinian 2000 41). She suggests that formalism and “openness,” or the capability to integrate a reality in flux, can produce modes of reflecting the elusive desire for infinity, and the recognition of finitude:

These areas of conflict are not neatly parallel. Form does not necessarily achieve closure, nor does raw materiality provide openness. Indeed, the conjunction of *form* with radical *openness* may be what can offer a version of the “paradise” for which writing often yearns—a flowering focus on a distinct infinity. (Hejinian 2000 42)

A form of resignation and a resolve to live in the precariousness of what happens and of memory is turned into an existential philosophy. The testimony is to the experience of the impossibility of any definitive “statement of facts,” to take up the title of one of Conceptual poet Vanessa Place’s works. If the subject is to survive, the “hazard of happiness” (*My Life in the Nineties* 57), and the “labyrinths / requiring /the rest of your born days / to eviscerate” (*Drafts Toll*, “Draft 16: Title” 106) must be explored over and over again, but they will not be mapped out, just as life will not be planned, nor memory controlled: the poetics and the politics intertwine to reclaim the very locus of existential uncertainty and attempt, over and over again, to provisionally conquer its indeterminacies in acceptance and readiness to the unpredictable constructs of life and reconstructions of memory. We were all “born in the month of Remember and immediately forgot” (*Collage Poems* 66), not as receptacles of a sacrosanct inherited monolith that would be our collective memory, but as agents in the permanent renewal and up-dating of live memories. Lyn Hejinian and Rachel Blau DuPlessis put it in writing, and this writing has the long form of “life” “drafts.”

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See “Franz Kafka” in Benjamin, *Œuvres*, II, 445.

<sup>2</sup> See *Une enfance berlinoise dans les années 1900*.