



Three Unbooks: DuPlessis, Scutenaire, Scappettone

Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Poesis* (Little Red Leaves Textile Editions)

The soft ideology of a prism is that out of a clear unity of emptiness comes all colors. In his preface to *Un Coup de Dés*, Mallarmé considers verse on the page “prismatic subdivisions of the Idea” that appear, then disappear across a surface that is more fundamentally poetic than the words themselves. The page itself is the source and well-spring of *poiesis*, its spacing both a ready-made, and part of the making. The blank of the page is usually more modest—the word itself self-effacing—and one has to have faith that the blank does anything. But here the problem is that it is doing too much, and thus not doing its job, being insufficiently blank. Mallarmé even puts the word “blanc” in quotes, this “so-called” blank—and in French we are reminded that blank is the color (*blanc*), not completely nothing, and in fact an over-fraught something.

And so the translator who—with robot arms composed of costume jewelry—picks up Mallarmé’s “Throw of the Dice,” must broach the question of the blank. The pips are easy—it is in the bone, what’s left of remembrance, the *thing itself* of chance and not the chance that chance avails that is

the encumbrance of this antique speculator. This is, in essence, the meaning of the original “a throw of the dice will never abolish chance” . . . And it’s one of those cases in which, casting aside the meaning of the original we get at the meaning too. Because, were we to rearrange the lettering, or throw in a nymph at a busstop with a handmirror and golfclubs. No matter. Chance is the non-abolished substance, even though any translator’s chance is usually constrained to the already predetermined wording of the original.

It seems appropriate, then, that Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ translation of Mallarmé’s avantguardist chestnut—this chestnut *blancmange*—is not a translation at all. The first author I hear, in fact, is Williams (“a dispersal, a gathering”), a reference to the object-oriented prelude of *Paterson*. What DuPlessis *has* kept is the shape of the blank. Is this an erasure, or is she getting at the true, absolute substance of Mallarmé’s space-out? The cover of this book shows us the poem as if fully redacted by the FBI, black bars telegraphing unintelligibility across a white space. A player piano roll also comes to mind, as does Marcel Broodthaers conceptual translation from 1969. She’s titled the whole thing “Poesis,” as if what we find therein will be an *ars poetica* or other statement on poetic making (while “*poiesis*” is perennially misspelled, is this version intentionally without the “i” of subjectivity?); but in the transmission of Mallarmé’s blank, she may be *making* nothing at all. Mallarmé says of his project that “The paper intervenes each time as an image, of itself, ends or begins once more, accepting a succession of others, and, since, as ever, it does nothing.” Or consider Blanchot on Mallarmé: “We would know nothing if there did not always exist in advance the impersonal memory of the book and, more importantly, the prior inclination to write and read contained in every book and affirming itself only in the book. The absolute of the book, then, is the isolation of a possibility that claims not to have originated in any other anteriority.”

If every book is a performance or reiteration of prior books, Mallarmé is not immune to the ideology of prismism—the idea that his blank contains all, and this is perhaps the fatal flaw that DuPlessis addresses. DuPlessis’ untranslation, then, takes into account the idea that the page itself might be the obstacle to the realization of Mallarmé’s never-attained absolute book. DuPlessis may not be asking us to aestheticize or idealize the blank, but rather to unpage it. What would it mean to unpage rather than aestheticize the blank? To escape the prison of the prism? Mallarmé structured his book around the statement “THE ROLL OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE,” while DuPlessis changes this to “ADDING EDGES TO THE PAGE/RELEASES THE BOOK INTO THE REAL.” By translating the “*coup*” into a kind of “*coupe*”—the cutting (or “die-cutting”) of the page opens up the blank repetition of paging that marks the temporality of the writer’s life—its aging—but it also creates an inside and an outside, something that strict literary materialists might rarely take into account in the appreciation of a lapidary (or prismatic) text. As such, DuPlessis stages a competition between what the book can and cannot do:

EVEN GIVEN MEASURELESS PLETHORA,
THE SHIMMYING OF IMAGE,

PLUS THE SHADOWY FLIRT OF ADEQUATE THOUGHT

ALL ANCILLARY GAMBLER

Why go on paging in the face of plethora, the shimmy and shadow of eidolon and action? There is an ambiguity between the (absent) sufficiency of what the book insufficiently captures and the present insufficiency of the

rank, sensuous
enfolding
THAT
no matter what consequences
ENGAGES
the geometries of connection
the ferocious questions of making and binding
doing and losing

The Real is ancillary Monte Carlo, but the main game is the book. However, in the fabulous details of this new poem, written *in the black* in more ways than one, the writer seems to be asking herself, does she even need to write this book? What compels the page again if unpaging's the intent? What if no one scores? In her translation's final words "All Books Gloss Insatiable Desires for a Further Edge," we seem caught in endless duples of paraphrase and infinity continually changing places.

in the permanent wobble of
which are some of the things motivating
the thing
that wants
to write this

In what new materialists call a "flat ontology," the author-thing is no different from the things that call the author to this further edge, but then again, this edge may only be a spatial illusion, no different from the page itself. Where does blank end and the real pick-up? Is the blank the most universal language? Or rather is what powers this desire-to-know-the-wobble-through-this-fixation-of-the-literary the most universal thing? Is there something of the book that escapes both the page and the writing on it (perchance)? The following contradictions imply that there is an objective reality of the book that is not accessed by the aesthetic play upon it nor even the page itself . . . some quanta of want:

it is not investigation (it is)

it is not procedure (it is)

it is not sonority (it is)

but strokes of

LACK

Does it all just depend on what poiesis is?

While very well published indeed, DuPlessis has throughout her career resisted what Benjamin called the “pretentious, universal gesture of the book” in her *Drafts* project—a “life poem” which, while published piecemeal since 1985, abjures a sense of totality or completion. This translation seems a weird annex to the *Drafts*, but most strange to say, if this text is meant to perform a type of silence beyond the page, it does so eloquently by never having appeared. Although I somehow received not one, but two copies before it was released, the chapbook has never been published. It was supposedly released in 2016, but I have not seen it available on the Textile Series website, nor elsewhere. Maybe the press unfortunately folded before *Poesis* could play its hand, as there has been no activity on their website, another shipwreck in the tsunami of electronic words. I am left, then, with that very rare thing, an unnecessary book (who needs another Mallarmé?), which is at the same time, paradoxically, a stunningly new text that has forthwith been unmoored, abandoned—truly a monument to the vagaries of chance.

Louis Scutenaire, *For Balthazar* (in *Ideas Have No Smell: Three Belgian Surrealist Booklets*, Ugly Duckling Presse)

Louis Scutenaire starts his pamphlet of text-objects—literary “texticules”—with the entry “No matter what, no matter how, no matter where.” While the original French makes it clear that the meaning is simply idiomatic, one tends to read literary minimalism multidimensionally, so that “no matter” can much more literally be read as the lack-of-matter or the *literary immateriality* of the unbook. In fact, this publication comes in the wake of some renewed interest in Belgian surrealist writers—relatively obscure compared to their Parisian counterparts—who intentionally embraced ephemerality, anti-careerism, and the creation of “disruptive objects” rather than books proper. In their monograph *Correspondance: The Birth of Belgian Surrealism*, Jan Baetens and Michael Kasper quote Paul Nougé’s quip to André Breton, “I wish those of us beginning to make a name for themselves would *cut it out*.”

Scutenaire’s *For Balthazar* is a collection of comic aphorisms, part of a continuous work which included 12 other similar volumes of fragments, and a series of works called *My Inscriptions* (five volumes collecting his life’s quips from 1943-1987). Scutenaire could easily be lost in the anonymous netherlands of the unliterary, given his preference for “The pearls, not the necklace; the words, not the language.” His nickname “Scut,” spelled out one letter at a time across the collection, is like the

English word “scud,” evocative of an insubstantial cloud scattered by the wind. It’s also, as Patrice Delbourg notes, reminiscent of “tracing and remotely piloted missiles on institutional targets.”

There is one phrase among the aphorisms in Scutenaire’s *For Balthazar* that strikes me, setting the tone for the pamphlet’s attention to each texticle as it is scudded, while pointing to the limits of what language can do: “Big statue of happy, big flag of sad.” While Chomsky has his headache, we can read this statement as a description of two parallel objects (a statue of happy *and* a flag of sad), but also, more absurdly, as a “big statue” that represents a “happy, big flag of sad.” We usually think of the genitive case as “belonging to” as well as “representing,” as if representation were a literal property of things represented. “The diamonds of Bertha” works just as well as “a statue of Lenin,” and in the latter case, the statue seems to “belong” to Lenin as well as represent him. But a statue can’t easily belong to a flag, and even though statuary many times represents flags and banners, we rarely say “statue of a flag;” we might instead say “there is a flag in the statue.” But when a happy-sad-flag-statue is legible on the page, we realize a hole in the way language accounts for things. It makes us wonder whether a “statue of Lenin” is only a temporary linkage of accidents, encounters of matter like a “book of poems.” Because, of course, we could say that what we are seeing is not a “statue of Lenin” but a “statue of Communist aspirations,” a “statue of the state” or even the “state of the statue.” We could go as far as to say, albeit perversely, but accurately, that the “statue of Lenin” sometimes served as a “statue of Stalin.” But we could not say that a “statue of Lenin” is a “statue of a banana” or even a “statue of a hollow chocolate Lenin” unless we ignore what a statue does and what Lenin does. But language allows for this ignorance, and one of Surrealism’s crowning insights was into the way in which language misses its object: and *that* is its objectivity, the sur-realism of our misguided captioning of dreams, of history, of pipes and of not-pipes.

I say this because Scutenaire, over the years, was faulted, alternately, for his Stalinism, his anarchism, and his tenderness.

So this little verbal hallucination of “Big statue of happy, big flag of sad” prepares you for the unexpected rendezvous with objects—of this book and of the world—to which we may or may not belong. And it’s in a book that’s not quite a book, but rather packed with two other stapled pamphlets in a fragile envelope for English readers for whom Scutenaire has gone missing. Even if his legacy is woven not only with Surrealism, but Oulipo and Situationism (while also providing an important precursor to literary conceptualism, language poetry and mail art), he is largely unread and untranslated here. He may also be relatively obscure in the francophone world, and this is perhaps by design: “I never do a writer’s work but poetically weave anti-literary enterprises, using, for example, collage, plagiarism, against easy invention and bargain-basement inspiration.”

And yet he has also been known to say, “*If one does not read me any more in thousand years, one will be wrong.*”

Jennifer Scappettone, *The Republic of Exit 43: Outtakes and Scores from an Archaeology and Pop-Up Opera of the Corporate Dump* (Atelos)

Sometimes one is defeated by a text, and that defeat is where the sublime enters in, when one might perceive the allure of the textual object, and maybe its terror. I fall asleep with Jennifer Scappettone’s *The Republic of Exit 43: Outtakes & Scores from an Archaeology and Pop-Up Opera of the Corporate Dump*, and at the moment of fatigue settling into unconsciousness, I am reminded what the title itself implies: that the text—now rising and falling on my belly—is elsewhere, that this book of outtakes and scores itself is a kind of detritus twice removed. It is the disenchanted remainder of ephemeral, embodied performances staged in the toxic kingdom of our collective remainders—the landfills, oilspills and other post-arcadian wastelands of Scappettone’s project. And you had to be

there. And yet the archeological details of the dump and the poems created from the language of the dump are exacting, incontrovertible, experienced as if the poet has explored the very limits of where human perception must give way in the face of the immensity of ecological disaster, the not-there of our sensuous predicament.

In this ethnographic, manic, performative activation of the tenuous quilting points between the human world and that which the world would attempt to rid itself, Scappettone activates Claire Colebrook's idea of a "counter-sublime" which "requires a different mode of writing to release the multiplicity of perceptions that in all their small differences make up the expressive (rather than merely intimated) infinite." Scappettone's methodology is also directly related to what she calls the "unruly empiricism" of the master Gothicism John Ruskin; in turning her attention from Venice to Long Island, she uses the limited resources of the individual to take on the vastness of a contaminated commons, a "performative attempt to represent historical knowledge as it is experienced, and even shaped from the point of view of the present." But how use the tools of language to get at those horrors that a single consciousness or book cannot contain? In Scappettone's post-Kantian (and as she says "post-Patersonian") words, the task is "Not to make the invisible visible, but to bruise and multiply the channels of its invisibility."

In this ambient milieu of invisible toxicity that is Scappettone's topos, the book becomes inadequate, but it is an inadequacy among other inadequacies, a cluster of sensate forays that aim for the monstrous object of the landfill. In a more quotidian sense, any landfill is usually kept out of sight in a way that allows us to attend to our more daintily circumscribed objects; but here, even in its sheer presence—Scappettone studying, living with, *standing and dancing on* it—this "heap of broken images . . . balks articulation into the furrows of verse (*balk* originally denoting, in Middle English, 'land left unplowed')." The book, performances, videos, "threaded trash-texts" and other digital detritus derived from legal, ethnographic, and poetic research that Scappettone has generated accumulate to form her conceptual attempt "to score the frustration of one's necessarily digital efforts to apprehend sprawling ecological calamity as archaeology, and simultaneously to disclose the poem's own contradictory status as both a material and a virtual artifact." There is no interpretation, conclusion, or ultimate message of this work, nor is there clear locus of blame, following Jane Bennett's vibrant materialist notion that "autonomy and strong responsibility seem to me to be empirically false." Rather, Scappettone's encounter with the fallout of 150 million tons of trash is a poetic instantiation of Bruno Latour's notion of knowledge as a "tracing" or "lovely translation" of an otherwise unlovely dystopian network; such tracings, according to Latour, are often received by traditional disciplines as "uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly."

If these objects of Scappettone's research proliferate in an undisciplined way, it is because the onus is on the reader herself to "make sense" of this object, even if the "making sense" is an impoverished form of perception in relation to this "unthinkable" object: "the reader is laden with the burden of bridging phrases and deducing the logic or illogic that results." If it is "uncanny," it is because the reader has been invited to sense herself as part of this object; even if this hyperobject has been excluded from consciousness, they are implicit or even *complicit*, an infolding into an anthropophagous assemblage-object. "Unseemly," because even though Scappettone grew up in proximity to superfund sites in a "grim and postindustrial plot of terrain next to the expressway," she resists the shape of memoir or investigative report, something that may have given this real material assemblage a human face, despite the fact that her mother was undergoing chemotherapy as a direct result of the site's toxicity.

"Having deleted all lamentation from Superfund, we found that the Site constituted an indeterminate public health hazard": she nevertheless continues to collage material from what seem like court proceedings and internal EPA documents, but within the impersonal conceptual collage, there is still evidence of this lamentation (as well as the fragile indeterminacy) of the human. If waste doesn't go "away," neither does the human. There is also the spectre of the discarded, deleted literary;

this line about on “lamentation” (which Google searching seems to reveal is a creative transliteration of an OCR misreading of “implementation” in EPA documents, i.e. corporatese for action taken) comes from a section presumably meant to allude to Virgil’s pastoral poetry, severely attenuated throughout the work. There are also trace amounts of William Carlos Williams and Theocritus in the trash heap. Barely recognizable, the call and response of the pastoral is ALSO part of this hyperobjective unbook. Fantasies of the pastoral imbue our ideology of landscape, and thus become important for Scappettone’s thinking about the remediation projects that will serve to further obscure the deep ahistorical layers of landfill forgetfulness. But these ideologies are another layer of the archeology rather than mere phantasmal sprinkle or pollutant seepage. Orpheus’ deleted lamentation for the lost Euridice is an “alas!” that is a layer too, one that accompanies our over-eager desire to *see* what the underworld has denied us.

In one of the many poetic metatexts to this book, “The Poetics of Enormity,” she takes issue with the local attention to lovely particulars that for her characterizes a flaw in William Carlos Williams’ poetics; the page itself is an inadequate locus for perceiving the ambient, inhuman immensity of disasters like the BP Oil Spill.

. . . the “page” [that] is now in everybody’s faces, glassy &
still obedient to a more or less face-sized frame
more or less the size of our provincialism

and the tool of it too.

The quote on quote page promiscuous & pointing ever away from itself
thus

colonizing as never before—in the roving

pocket provincialism of borderlessness:

In other words, pace Mallarmé, everything in the world certainly does not exist in order to end up as a book.