A Long Essay on the Long Poem: Modern and Contemporary Poetics and Practices by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (review)

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Modernism/modernity, Volume 31, Number 1, January 2024, pp. 180-181 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2024.a935454

***A Long Essay on the Long Poem: Modern and Contemporary Poetics and Practices*. By Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2023. Pp. 293 + xi.**

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In this engaging and deeply meditated study, Rachel Blau DuPlessis begins from the premise of the poet's *longing* to compose a long poem. "I wanted to understand the fascination of the very long poem, so challenging to readers, yet so compelling for their authors," she writes (1). As this sentence indicates, DuPlessis, herself the author of a long serial poem, *Drafts*, is fully aware of the divide between readers and writers; nevertheless, her study is boldly focused on poets rather than readers, and (as her subtitle indicates) on poetics rather than poetry itself. Quotation is kept to a minimum, and, as she acknowledges, the book offers little in the way of close reading. Theory might be said to take the place of language in this study. "The long poem," she asserts, "is a kind of research, inhabiting poetry as a mode of inquiry" (224). As a lyric poet of a rather old-fashioned kind, I must say that the conflation of poetry with research makes me nervous—but that should perhaps be taken as the indication of a fundamental disagreement rather than as criticism as such.

In countering Poe's dictum that a long poem is a "contradiction in terms," DuPlessis argues that "[f]or Poe, 'poetry' occurs in an untouchable, sacralized category with a special relationship to 'soul.' . . . Yet once 'soul' and 'beauty' get involved, we are in often unanswerable zones of ineffable specialness: poetry as ideology" (8). Her point is well taken, but Poe's abstractions have a foundation in the materiality of poetic language, and so what is at stake is whether the language of a given poem maintains the intensity sufficient to carry it through to the end. Poe's strictures notwithstanding, the long poems of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton have been and continue to be successful with readers, though it must be said that, in addition to compelling narratives, they all have a strong metrical base. The modernists tended to separate poetry from verse ("To break the pentameter, that was the first heave," wrote Pound in Canto LXXXI), and DuPlessis argues—quite brilliantly—that "*segmentivity* is the central engine of any poetic text—the feature that distinguishes the genre" (9). But "segmentivity" is a capacious notion, and the question remains whether the kinds of segmentivity utilized by poets whose rhythms are indistinguishable from prose can sustain the momentum of a long poem.

On the level of content, as DuPlessis explains, the poet's longing is to be able to put *everything* into the poem, to make it an ongoing site for the registration of all phenomena. DuPlessis traces this tendency to Pound, who in a letter of 1917 to Joyce wrote: "I have begun an endless poem, of no known category [. . .] all about everything" (19). One could also trace it to Whitman, for such a poem would inevitably have to be a "song of myself"—and the fact that Pound makes "a pact" with Whitman in a poem of that title is not insignificant. DuPlessis's discussion of these issues is extremely deft; she notes, for instance, that "[a]ll such poems, barring firm endings, are actually not everything but all 'middles'—absorptive, by assemblage and accumulations, an array caused by the endless accumulation of writing" (20).

In chapter 2, "Deploying Epic," DuPlessis deals, on the one hand, with Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, a poem that follows in the wake of the *Cantos* (for Pound, an epic is a poem that "includes history"), and, on the other, with Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Waldman, and Alice Notley. DuPlessis's focus is largely on the question of whether women can write epic, but, if the term "epic" means something other than "long," this begs the prior question of whether *anyone* can write epic under current cultural conditions. I find *The Maximus Poems* a rather dull assemblage of mainly prosaic materials, and (in the absence of quotation) I am not persuaded that the pretentions to epic of Waldman and Notley amount to much. DuPlessis's discussion of Brooks's *Annie Allen*, however, though it focuses on a poem that is tightly constructed and not at all given over to the longing to be everything, introduced me to a significant work of art. DuPlessis's assertion that Brooks's "restrained and elegant language has initiated the reader into the restrained if judgmental tones of 'anti-racist intransigence'" matches my own reading

experience (69). The problem for me is that the only feature of *Annie Allen* that is connected to epic tradition is the title to one of its sections, "The Anniad." This is clearly intended ironically, however; for in contrast to Aeneas, the founder of Rome, Brooks's protagonist is a young black girl who, though gifted, is not at the center of history but, on the contrary, excluded from it. The poem, in my view, is not epic but elegiac: Brooks's protagonist follows in the wake of the "mute, inglorious Milton" of Gray's *Elegy*.

Chapter 3, "Interpreting Quest and Dante," sees the modern long poem as asking "how to write quest and cosmology from a generally secular worldview . . . when a solidified and socially hegemonic telos (such as Dante's) is suspended, redefined, or uncertain" (88). DuPlessis brilliantly surveys the uses that such poets as H.D., Zukofsky, Ashbery, James Merrill, John Kinsella, and Robin Blaser made of Dante, but, again, in the absence of quotation, it is difficult to gauge (1) how genuinely formative Dante's influence was on these poets (as it certainly was on Pound and Eliot) and (2) whether that influence led to the creation of great poetry. Poetic influence occurs on the material level of poetic language. In the nineteenth century, Shelley, Gautier, and Mallarmé, all of whom were atheists, wrote visionary poems in Dante's terza rima that nevertheless subvert his cosmology. (At the end of Gautier's "Ténèbres," the Church is overthrown.) Even without quotation, DuPlessis persuades me that Dante's *gravitas* was formative in Blaser's long poem, *The Holy Forest*, but in the case of the other poets and poems she examines, the discussion seems overly abstract.

Chapter 4, "Assemblage, Book, Total Artwork," contains a short but lucid and incisive section on Pound's *Cantos*, along with fine discussions of Nathaniel Mackey, M. NourbeSe Philip, and Kamau Brathwaite. The chapter, however, is organized around a discussion of Mallarmé that attempts to bend the French poet to the conception that DuPlessis is pursuing. She makes use of a faulty translation of Mallarmé's famous assertion in "Le Livre, Instrument Spirituel," in which "tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre" is rendered as "everything in the world exists to end up *as* a book" or "*in* a book" (129).[1] The problematic preposition here is "up," however, and the phrase "end up" makes it seem as if the Book that Mallarmé envisioned were a repository for *everything*. On the contrary, the meaning of the poet's apothegm, in the context in which he intended it, is: "everything in the world exists in order to culminate in a book"—that is, to find its end or goal in a book (*aboutir* conveys the sense here of the Greek concept of *telos*). It is quite true, as DuPlessis suggests, that Mallarmé's argument involves the secularization of a spiritual impulse (hence the title of his essay), but the poet's assertion has behind it the mystical New Testament idea that "In the beginning was the word . . ." or that thus and so happened "in order that the Scriptures be fulfilled."

DuPlessis argues, furthermore, that Mallarmé's formal innovations in *Un coup de dés* have the effect of "sweeping aside traditionally elegant but stodgy French prosody" (146-47). This is contrary to what Mallarmé plainly states in his preface to the poem, however, and it does not take into consideration the fact that so many of his poems are Petrarchan sonnets or that he spent virtually his entire career working on a long Racinian poetic project, the ultimately unfinished *Hérodiade* (the theme of which is the transformation of life into beauty). The central motif of *Un coup de dés*, "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance," is merely the obverse of an artistic vision in which the struggle is precisely to abolish chance and contingency.

In Chapter 5, "Meditations on Ending Very Long Poems," DuPlessis manages to bring to completion and a close the paradoxes she has been articulating throughout her essay. She concludes with a brilliant discussion of how Robert Duncan's serial poems *Passages* and *The Structure of Rime* both close and do not close, and of how, for Duncan, as he himself maintains, "'the formlessness of the work . . . is a significant form'" (223). DuPlessis's vision of the modern long poem as a "*life*-poem" and as containing "rough drafts of an ideal or comprehensive statement" (187, 190) is enormously courageous in its acceptance of things as they are and its refusal to "purify the language of the tribe." But it may spell the end of poetry as an art form.

Note

1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945), 378.