

L'inedito

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“Cosmos: a Nocturne”: A Poem By Rachel Blau DuPlessis

“Cosmos: A Nocturne” is marked by the interplay between the singular and the manifold, the minor incident and the massive event, the infra-ordinary and the striking. Readers familiar with DuPlessis’s poetry will recognize this tension: the long-poem *Drafts*, published in several books, started in 1985 and written across thirty years, brings together an inexhaustible drive to question the systems of signification the subject is imbued in (including poetic tradition), the material conditions, accidents and gestures animating one’s life, and the political need to confront major socio-cultural issues, such as global wars and the conundrums of US politics, gender and women’s agency, Jewishness and the dangers of identity, mass destruction and the work of memory. Structured on a rectangular grid numbering 114 poems (with unnumbered poems, collage poems and poems of the interstices to disrupt this apparently fixed architecture), *Drafts*, as the title suggests, is built on “the provisional and the contingent” (Pritchett n. pag.), openly challenging the universalism of Pound’s *Cantos* and sharing H.D.’s palimpsestic strategy, where writing is both rewriting of what was erased and endless glossing at its margins. The status of work-in-progress allows a mode of inquiry which is never oblivious of the historical context of its production and “dare[s] compare the little with the large” (“Draft 72: Nanifesto,” in DuPlessis, *Torques* 97). Full of references, quotations and allusions, not only to literary tradition, but also to newspapers headlines, art exhibitions, scientific research, pop culture, casual conversations, languages such as Esperanto, Latin, Yiddish, German, French, and Italian, DuPlessis’s work cannot be easily reduced to a school or a poetic movement. In fact, her poetic signature signals a daring complexity: mixing the argumentative logic of the essay, the density and the mechanism of poetry, the construction and length one associates to

narrative, her writing insists on saying that poetry matters, right here in the messy and murky world, as an instrument of knowledge and awareness.

Drafis has been a massive accomplishment and an on-going generator of poetry, each poem resonating of another poem, each sequence of poems folding on another sequence, each interstice leaving space for another page. “Cosmos” inherits and mirrors the richness of this writing process, reaching out to the heart of DuPlessis’s poetics, which never loses sight of “the mite, the mote, the mute” (95), striving to give account of what is silenced and unspeakable. As the title suggests the time is the night, with its offer of a deep space and a deep time, a scenery that invites a meditation on individual vulnerability as well as facing the challenge of collective responsibility. In it the subject provides a contemplation of the limitless immanence always on the verge of submerging humanity, not in any transcendental sense but in the shape of litter and poison. The meditative mode soon becomes an interrogation of our position in a world literally overwhelmed by our own waste. DuPlessis’s midrashic writing dwells on every single fissure, every single fragment: nothing is dismissed as an object of investigation, no matter how microscopic or apparently insignificant. Refusing the pastoral device of framing a coherent and inspiring view, a traditional setting for the poetic subject to start interrogating the universe, here the subject is found in a space-time “saturated / with pitiless derangements.” The distance necessary to trigger meditation is not given by Nature (an ideal charged with contradictions), but by the dangerous, noisy, darkened space of conflict and confusion typical of existence in the globalized West, with its empty slogans, its constant state of emergency, its “political failure.” Thus, the poem confronts the material and discursive rubbish produced by flawed politics and rhetoric, the results of “natural” disasters (mostly caused by human neglect), as well as the very human disaster of pretending to cope with the global and the cosmic without awareness of our local, unstable, provisional status. The subject’s exploration of “reality” becomes a questioning of our ethical choices and a way to open poetry to critical thinking: “What is to be done? / What could or should we do?” The concern with the ephemeral we find in Rilke’s “Ninth Elegy” is here alluded to in a recurring list of simple words, “house, bread, pitcher, night, door,” so general and common and yet so charged with one’s own experience and

perceptions, in such a way that they end up asking us whether we can take care of all this, or at least dare to accept it: "it's an unfixed archive, / neither all omnivorous / nor all complete."

DuPlessis's work is an elegy full of hermeneutical tension and a linguistic experiment immersed in historical consciousness. Translating DuPlessis into Italian means facing this complexity, but also coming to terms with the dizzying compounds, the wordplays and the coinages, the fibrillating alliterations and rhymes and all the rich soundbox DuPlessis employs. To do this the translator has tried to dialogue with Italian poetry, the one most in love with an experimental and resonant word, from the late twentieth century to today: Zanzotto, Sanguineti, Caproni, Insana, Lo Russo and Giovenale have left their marks in DuPlessis's Italian version (see DuPlessis, *Dieci bozze*). DuPlessis's language, direct and layered at the same time, colloquial but dense with its unsettling extra-systoles, intertwining the high and the low, mixing academic and informal registers, *diverts* the target language, rerouting and amusing it. The (not too secret) hope of the translator of poetry, after all, is that of challenging linguistic numbness while contributing to the interpretation and the dissemination of her work.

Works cited

DuPlessis, Rachel. *Torques: Draft 58-76*. Cambridge: Salt, 2007.

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