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The Rage for Disorder: Review of *Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* by Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

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whose conversational language and tight, economical style work together like a coiled spring, intensifying the emotional pressure and urgency of her work. Her poems are anchored by precise, disturbing images. Drops of her battered mother's blood "spatter" Laux's own "bassinet to dotted swiss," a welt from her father's belt "blooms" in her sister's temple "like a flower opening frame by frame / in a nature film," and gnats float "in gold follicles of light."

One of the things I like best about the portrait that emerges in this book is Laux's lack of self-pity. Sternly tender, consistently refusing to exploit her explosive material, she has enormous compassion—for instance, when she imagines her mother's orphaned childhood in Maine, or describes two childhood playmates, their "fingers webbed together / like the pink feet of ducks" after their religious-fanatic mother holds them over a floor heater.

Laux's ability to live with ambivalence and uncertainty in the present, and to describe these feelings, helps us see what a strong self she has created. In "Ghosts," the poet sits on her front stoop, smoking and watching a young man across the street paint his kitchen. A woman joins him and "the beginning / of their love, bare and simple / as that wet room," reminds Laux of her age: "I'm getting too old / to sit on the front porch in the rain." She takes us inside with her as she meditates on being "Too old to dance / circles in dirty bars" or experience "foreign tongues / loose in my mouth," and remembers the girl she was, the lives she "could have had." Finally she takes us into the bedroom, where she "nests [her] chest into the back of a man who sleeps in fits / his suits hung stiff in the closet," one who, she knows, "feels someone else" when he rolls his body against hers. "There's no blame," she concludes, only a fiercely realistic support:

And he holds me,
even with all those other fingers wrest-
ling
inside me, even with all those other
shoulders
wedged above his own like wings.
(p.15)

Just as this poem testifies to the transforming powers of love, Laux's work testifies to the transforming powers of language. In her steadfast refusal to look away from her often ugly subjects, her gritty poems embrace life despite everything she can say:

I want to smell this rich soup, the air
around me going dark, as stars press
their simple shapes into the sky.
I want to stay on the back porch
while the world tilts
toward sleep, until what I love
misses me, and calls me in.
(p.43)

MAXINE SCATES WON the prestigious Agnes Starrett Poetry Prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press for *Toluca Street*, a first collection that revolves around memories of growing up in Los Angeles. As poet Garret Hongo notes on the book's back cover, "There is no more fallen a world than the unromanticized working-class neighborhoods of Los Angeles in the forties and fifties." A quiet, meditative poet, Scates evokes this world of stucco housing tracts, jobs with Water and Power and "the awful glow of the city" in great detail and with considerable skill. Her themes—family, alcoholism and domestic violence, growing up female in a patriarchal society, ethnicity, becoming a writer—while common in contemporary women's writing, are treated with particular sensitivity and grace.

Like Laux, Scates attempts to make sense of a chaotic, even dangerous childhood environment and to define her place in that environment. This involves plumbing family secrets, deciphering the differences between life as it seemed to her as a child and life as it really was. Her primarily narrative poems, which frequently blur the boundaries between past and present or memory and dream, are complex vignettes of discovery

where the narrator struggles "like a swimmer / up toward the surface of the light."

The collection opens with "The Teacher," a long poem dedicated to the memory of Scates' mentor, the poet Ann Stanford, whose delicacy and restraint is echoed in some of Scates' own work. This luminous tribute establishes the themes of self-revelation and self-definition which define this collection. Here, the poet describes evolving from a confused girl, at first too shy to read a poem in class, into a young woman who, because Stanford saw her, realized her own life "was a story." She also realizes that Stanford's gift to her

...was the place
where my life bent away from itself
to join something else,
just as when we say
it did not happen to only me
we begin to give up the self,
saying it happens to all of us
and that is when we begin to hear
and to speak and to give up our silence.
(pp.5-6)

From breaking the silence of family secrets—her father's alcoholism, her grandmother's madness—to breaking silences within herself—admitting that what she loved as a child was "happier than the life we were living then"—Scates reconstructs the past, tearing apart received family mythology in the process. No longer the child who "loves looking back / because she cannot imagine the future," she learns, in "Angel's Flight,"

the history of my grandmother,
institutionalized at thirty-two
after giving birth to her seventh child
in fourteen years, of the years after that
when the old man
wouldn't let her come back to the house,
of the bigotry bred
so deeply into our family
that my grandmother,
the daughter of Lila Dolores Orozco,
was lost to us.
(p.10)

There are many moments like this in *Toluca Street*. And while Scates is concerned with bringing her whole family into the light (she writes movingly of conflict between her father and brother, for instance), the most stirring poems are those which portray the women who meant the most to her—her frustrated mother, for example, eager to return to work as a police dispatcher in an era when women were expected to stay home, crocheting a tablecloth she will never use.

Scates herself is usually an unobtrusive presence in this collection, a quiet sense-making voice who transforms violence into art. But there is toughness in these delicate, elegiac poems. Reading *Toluca Street* one smells the odor "of ghost beanfields," sees "Schwinns tangling in the driveway," rides a rickety trolley called Angel's Flight. And in the process, one enters the heart and mind of a woman who can say

Often I dream the plot of earth
in the center of the yard
behind the house where I grew up.
There, I dream a garden. This year,
I think, in this place
where nothing is ever finished,
in this place that I fled
because I did not want them to touch me
and so have wanted no one
to touch me, in this place
I have come back to plant a garden.
(p.80)

The garden fails repeatedly in Scates' recurring dream; she finds herself thinking "things would have been different / if there had been something to tend, / or a sense of a season / in which to tend it." But the poems in *Toluca Street* are a garden in their own right, and a rich harvest.

I would like to thank Marilyn Nelson Wanick for her valuable comments on a draft of this review.

The rage for disorder

by Meryl Altman

The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice, by Rachel Blau DuPlessis. New York: Routledge, 1990, 193 pp., \$35.00 hardcover, \$12.95 paper.

Aesthetics, I say, like philosophy and science, is invented not so much to enable us to get closer to reality as for the purpose of warding it off, of protecting against it.¹

IF THERE IS ANYTHING twentieth-century feminist critics can agree on, it is what Christa Wolf tells us here: that Beauty is the mother of death, not the other way around. That an aesthetic inevitably becomes a master's measuring rod, a stick to beat us with. "She's not good enough/ naive/ sentimental/ whiny/ merely documentary, this is sociology, not literature, This Is Not Art." An over-familiar catalogue. Isn't "feminist aesthetic," then, a contradiction in terms? Why has feminist criticism throughout its brief history searched so diligently for an aesthetic? Indeed, since literary study as an intellectual and institutional practice can't seem to manage without these measuring rods, how can there be a feminist literary criticism at all?

The Pink Guitar, a collection of loosely related essays written between 1978 and 1989, takes up these questions and sheds more light on them than I have seen for some time. The title plays off Wallace Stevens' famous poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Like the painting from Picasso's Blue Period that inspired it, and like so many other famous male high modernist productions, Stevens' poem took the process of Representation as its serious, abstract subject, pointing out that altered forms can alter (perceived) realities: "Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar." But not as changed as they might be. Modernism, DuPlessis argues, changes representation enough to challenge the woman writer, enough to show her certain liberating openings, possibilities, but not enough actually to liberate her or to empower her as a writer. The guitar-players and manifesto-writers are still men; Woman is still an icon; and "the icon does not write herself."

So what can a woman poet who wishes to be a modernist, a woman critic who wishes to take the modernist revolution seriously, do? What instrument can she play? DuPlessis writes:

My pink guitar has gender in its very grain. Its strings are already vibrating with gender representations. That means unpick everything. But how to unpick everything and still "pick up" an instrument one "picks," or plucks. How to unpick everything, and still make it "formal," "lyric," "coherent," "beautiful," "satisfying," when these are some of the things that must be un-

picked... The writing therefore becomes unpalatable, difficult, opaque, shifty, irresponsible, suspect, and subject to many accusations. (p.158)

The task at hand, for her, is to replace Stevens' rage for order (an order which depended on women's marginalization and erasure) with a blessed rage for disorder, sacrificing smoothness and false harmony in favor of a sometimes messy but always productive inclusiveness, complexity.

The book is framed by two overview essays, the already well-known "For the Etruscans" and the final title essay, written especially for this volume. It includes an essay on H.D.'s psychic and sexual development; an investigation of high male modernism called "Pater-Daughter: Male Modernists and Female Readers"; a feminist reading of some works by Marcel Duchamp; "Language Acquisition," which circles around the theories of Julia Kristeva and Nancy Chodorow, testing them against the author's own experience of watching her daughter learn to talk, and also against an investigation of writing and maternity in H.D. and Woolf; two essays on contemporary feminist experimental writing; and "Otherhow," an account of DuPlessis's own development as lyric poet and essayist, her efforts to write "differently" against the background of the "history of poetry."

While DuPlessis is acutely, even sarcastically aware of the political traps and pitfalls any aesthetic can create, all the essays in this collection strain after one that could help the critic account for, contextualize, writing that is gendered female, and also enable women writers to work through and beyond the disabling myths our culture hands them—without itself becoming another dangerous myth.

WHY SHOULDN'T WOMEN (and others) simply write, paint, sing, or whatever, ignoring the father's categories, sailing gaily beyond the horizons of genre and (if they like) of gender? I think DuPlessis would answer: because Representation doesn't work like that. As she explains it, "The page is never blank. It is (even if apparently white) already written with conventions, discourses, prior texts, cultural ideas, reading practices." Or, in a more colorful, more specific context,

Did H.D. find you could not just jump to the side of patriarchal structures of feeling as out of the path of a truck?
That I am inside the truck. I am the highway of my own repression. (p.28)

She quotes Bakhtin: "The word in language is always half somebody else's." Lan-

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guage is never innocent. Or rather, it can only be innocent, transparent, in the mythic space of the Romantic poet's fantasy of total control: a fantasy that has, over the centuries, been more dangerous than enabling for women writers, though it remains seductive. For this reason, DuPlessis continues to search for a feminist aesthetic—though it will be, in her view, a conflicted, disruptive, heterogeneous one, marked by “both/and thinking,” arrived at through collective process, presented as only one of a possible many.

As she notes in her final essay, this view both builds on and represents something of a change from her earlier work. Her *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Indiana University Press, 1985) was equally concerned with the struggle of women writers to “find a voice,” to discover strategies that undercut or override the cultural imperatives toward closure in women's writing and women's lives. As an examination of how “the story shall be changed,” that lucid and sensible book belongs with the critical writing of Nancy Miller, Elaine Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, Rachel Brownstein, among others: the explorations of subverted narrative, re-visionary mythologizing, on which American feminist criticism is founded.

But *The Pink Guitar* moves further. For one thing, since DuPlessis is also a poet, and a student of modernist poetry, narrative is (so to speak) not the whole story for her. In fact, she shows that ways of reading developed with reference to the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel are only partly successful when applied to truly non-narrative forms, such as modernist lyric. And she notes that we cannot expect an equation, a perfect fit, between textual subversion (experiment, play, resistance) and social subversiveness (genuine desire for change) simply because a generation of feminist critics has proved that conservative form can undergird conservative content.

As *The Pink Guitar's* careful and close discussions of Pound, Williams and Eliot demonstrate, high male modernism claimed for itself (and claimed to have invented) every sentence-breaking and sequence-breaking trick in the book: claimed indeed to be leading a complete, world-transforming Oedipal revolt. Yet this revolt failed to dislodge even slightly that myth/muse, Woman the Other, to halt or even slow down what DuPlessis calls “the constant mythologizing of Woman [which] is an erasure of women.” Indeed, the revolutionaries might have needed a stable female icon even more than their fathers did.

Proposition 3. In writings of male modernists, femaleness is as fixed and eternal a category as ever before in Euro-literature. Male modernists do not deeply resist, perhaps cannot make a critique of this place allocated for female figures because their readability depends on such reliable gender narratives. Their radical forms are made relatively accessible—readable—by the familiarity of gender limits, the iconographies they inherit and repropose. (p.42)

Against this ironic, unsimplifiable background, DuPlessis re-poses women artists who have wanted to be modernists or post-modernists—H.D., Woolf, herself, contemporary feminist experimenters Beverly Dahlen and Susan Howe, among others—women writers who have learned that “those from whom you stand to learn the most can also destroy you,” but who also reject naturalized “feminine” identity as less a refuge than a trap.

Her sections on H.D. in particular demonstrate one advantage of reviving the discussion of “aesthetics”: it permits us to deal again with poetry as poetry, not simply as fragments to be joined up into an autobiographical narrative, an erotic or developmental plot written by the critic and sewn

together with connectives such as “Emily must have felt.”

The writer of criticism, too, participates in this revision: “Essays have always offered space,” DuPlessis writes in her preface:

Far from *belles lettres*, I wanted these essays to claim a larger and angrier space while remaining lambent and evocative works of art: taking a position of positive negation, I would rather see them be *lettres laides*.... While content and theme have been sites of cultural change in recent years, where the representations of women are concerned, a naturalized set of language strategies, or nice, normal presentations of material seemed to partake of the same assumptions about gender that they would claim to undermine. (pp.vii-viii)

This revolt breaks down the boundaries between critical writing and other genres: now the critical text itself is a “site of struggle” over representation. This has been done before, of course, but rarely so readably; DuPlessis displays both unusual openness and generosity toward her audience and an ethical, a political desire to hang on to meaning and communicate it, even while exploring the limits of meaning and the dangers of believing in language as transparent. She slips around among a number of voices, all unmistakably her own. One of them she calls “guarded, yet frank autobiography” (it is indeed less self-indulgent or self-aggrandizing than such moments of critical self-scrutiny can sometimes be); another is a more staid “academic” voice, complete with textual analysis, evidence, argument, citations. Then there is her more informal but still intellectual wisecracking voice, like someone leading a seminar while sitting on the table. My favorite parts of the book seem to be moments like these:

Mainly, our culture has, sooner or later, divested itself of the impact of any woman writing or producing art works within it. To say “I hope this has now changed” is to drape a Pollyannaish skirt over a constant struggle within the politics of culture. We can say it if you want. “I hope this has now changed.”

...From this dust you will remake the rose? (Yiddish accent) (pp.52-53)

DuPlessis's own rather symbolist opaque verse provides another voice, one that refuses to be “decorative” or to be explained and dominated by any of the more “logical” voices. Finally, there is a voice that deliberately slips below the level of intelligible “language.” A crucial element in “Language Acquisition” especially is the fragmentary account of how DuPlessis's own daughter “acquired language”—told not as a mother's master narrative of progress toward “mature articulate” but rather through the child's own eruptions onto the page. DuPlessis uses the term “analytic passion” to describe the critical writing she most admires. The term applies to her own work as well, both in its ode-like, life-affirming celebrations of work that moves her, and its rage and frustration when it comes up against the more misogynist aspects of Western culture.

THE STYLE OF *The Pink Guitar* leads on purpose to a certain level of self-contradiction, internal dilemma, ironies which can't (shouldn't) be ironed out. Appropriately, the worries DuPlessis left me with were themselves contradictory. I worried that certain key political questions went unanswered, but that others were resolved too firmly. As an instance of the former, the third essay, “Sub Rosa: Marcel Duchamp and the Female Spectator,” brilliantly reads an extremely disturbing and (I think) misogynistic sculpture/tableau that includes a dismembered and distorted female nude. DuPlessis interprets it from a number of perspectives, including the possibility that the work is intentionally subversive of gender codes. Now, she herself has argued that however porous, open and multiple the feminist aesthetic seeks to be, it is still dedicated to struggle against the dominance of male

representation. I'm still not sure if these two aims are compatible, especially when the critic is reading men's texts.

On the other hand, I sometimes worried that DuPlessis named the core content of the “female aesthetic” too specifically. Her concentration on the mother/child bond in “Language Acquisition” and in the H.D. essay seemed to illuminate some aspects of women's experiences at the price of marginalizing others. In spite of the concreteness with which she always speaks, DuPlessis's reinsertion of women's writing within the (psychoanalytically described) structures of the heterosexual family sometimes seemed dangerously close to invoking Woman with a capital W. Yet DuPlessis herself can be brilliantly witty when describing the traps of essentialism.

Both my objections are quieted, however, by DuPlessis's consistent refusal of the unitary, masterful authorial voice. She situates herself instead as part of a caucus or community of women writing. This is especially evident in the later chapters dealing with Susan Howe and Beverly Dahlen, women who are less familiar to many of us. DuPlessis sees them as imaginative collaborators rather than as objects of dispassionate critical inquiry. In this way she follows through on the methods and principles of “For the Etruscans”: while certain parts of that essay are utterly personal, it was composed partly out of tape-recorded discussions at a conference at Barnard, partly from letters DuPlessis received afterwards. Sometimes it seems like a diary, a notebook, a desk, a “rag-bag”—all forms DuPlessis tries out as candidates for a “feminist aesthetic.”

I found myself wondering whether the affection of some feminist scholars for these collage-like or “palimpsestic” methods (and for H.D.) isn't partly a paradoxical artifact of our own scholarly training and procedure: we can read letters, drafts, diaries, in the basement of the Beinecke Library or wherever—all of them available to us because of the cults that grew up around male mastery—and then elevate these forms as female ones for their evasions of mastery. Similarly, we're likely to be pleased by DuPlessis's argument that commentaries, translations, writing-as-reading, are congenial forms for feminist art—perhaps expressing, in psychoanalytic terms, women's more flexible ego-boundaries?—since this elevates our preferred scholarly activity to the level of an art form. But to say feminist literary practice arises from the conditions of its production (in libraries, in notebooks, wherever) is not to disparage it: it is in fact DuPlessis's point in part.

“For the Etruscans” said straight out and bluntly (in 1979) that women's careful graduate school notebooks also contained laundry lists, interpersonal agendas, our own bad poetry, desires, resistances and fears. It broke silence on the experience of several professional generations, and *The Pink Guitar* as a whole extends that honesty. In fact, in setting out for us the career of her own struggle (to steal her phrase about H.D.), DuPlessis might almost be writing an allegory of American feminist critical practice between 1968 and ten minutes ago. She describes herself as loath to let go of such key early feminist terms as “anger,” “wholeness,” “quest,” “we women,” and so on, even after these terms have been “properly deconstructed.” “‘I' cannot be displaced I cannot I just got here!” Reading this, I'm tempted to paraphrase T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*: “We know so much more, now, than Millett, Showalter, Heilbrun, Moers. Yes, and they are what we know.”

Some poets (and some, though fewer, critics) take our breath away: we admire them from a distance. Others make us want to take out a pencil, make us feel we too could write. With so much turgid anxiety in the air about the value of criticism, surely it's high praise to say that *The Pink Guitar* makes me feel like writing. As DuPlessis writes, “a poetics gives permission to continue.” ♦

¹Christa Wolf, “A Letter,” in *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker (Beacon Press, 1986).

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