

Macro, Micro, Material: Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts* and the Post-Objectivist Serial Poem

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"Enough to look at here / For the rest of a lifetime"—Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Draft 85: Hard Copy"¹

"Objectivist": the best-known and earliest definitions of the term come from Louis Zukofsky's early essays, "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931" and "Sincerity and Objectification," which both appeared in the February 1931 special feature in *Poetry* that Zukofsky guest-edited. Zukofsky stresses "Objectivist" over "Objectivism" (a term he is careful to avoid) since "the interest of the issue was . . . NOT in a movement" but in certain forms and qualities of poetic attention. In his definition, "Objectivist" refers to the "desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars."² Out of this desire, "writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody."³ What is commonly emphasized in this formulation is the first phrase, "the detail, not mirage, of seeing," accurate rendition of the image, but in the interests of my argument here, which requires a capacious definition of the term "things," I'd like to stress equally the second: "thinking with the things as they exist."⁴ These are the features of "sincerity," moving toward—in the best-realized poetic work—what Zukofsky calls the "rested totality" of "objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object," "writing . . . which is an object or affects the mind as such."⁵ Sincerity also involves the art of omission, of the cut or the gap that is central to serial form: "When sincerity in writing is present the insincere may be cut out at will and information, not ignorance, remains."⁶ As a way of seeing and of embodying those perceptions in poetic form, then, Objectivist sincerity moves toward seriality.

In "Recencies" in *Poetry*," the introduction to his 1932 *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, Zukofsky expands upon some of these principles in ways relevant to a major experiment in post-Objectivist serial form, Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts*. More than in his previous essays, Zukofsky emphasizes what he calls "context—The context necessarily dealing with a world outside" of the poem.⁷ The Objectivist poem-as-object is here "an inclusive object," "binding up and bound up with events and contingencies," socially embedded by definition.⁸ George Oppen writes similarly, many years later, that the "act of perception" is "a test of sincerity, a test of conviction" projecting "the sense of the poet's self among things."⁹ This location of the poem in a social world was always implicit in Zukofsky's "historic and contemporary particulars," but it becomes *explicit* in his later formulation in a way important for thinking about DuPlessis' socially saturated work.

In the introduction to their germinal essay collection, *The Objectivist Nexus*, DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain review the basic principles of the poetics in question: "the term 'Objectivist' has come to mean a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics, characterized by a historical, realist, antimythological worldview, one in which 'the detail, not mirage' calls attention to the materiality of both the world and the word."¹⁰ They go on to connect

Objectivist poetics with serial form: “The Objectivists, with their decided sense of the line and their inventive serial organization, use the basic nature of poetry—its ‘segmentivity’—to articulate social meanings.”¹¹ “Seriality is a central strategy of the Objectivist poetry of thought and of its constructivist debate with a poetics of presence and transcendence” in ways that directly impact the *post*-Objectivist: “all writers absorbing the Objectivist example consider the praxis of the poem to be a mode of thought, cognition, investigation—even epistemology.”¹² Beyond the obvious example of her own poetic practice, discussions of seriality or serial form run throughout DuPlessis’ critical work, from essays on Robin Blaser and George Oppen to those on the long poem as a genre and on her own poetics. The following observation on Lorine Niedecker can stand for much of her theorizing specifically of Objectivist seriality:

In its segmentivity and sequencing, its deliberate fragmentation, and intense economy, its building a poem by accumulating moments of sincerity, and its materialist claims, [Niedecker’s] ‘Paean to Place’ is written saturated with objectivist premises and practices. . . . It builds meaning by the cut of the fragments and the blaze of white space between the parts.¹³

“One of the mid-1960’s inventors of seriality along with Oppen and (from another poetics) Jack Spicer,” Niedecker “invented a version of seriality as a mode of reflective moments playing realist images and meditative pensiveness against one another.”¹⁴ At the same time, versions of serial form lie at the Objectivist movement’s very roots: in Oppen’s *Discrete Series* (1934), in Zukofsky’s “Poem Beginning ‘The,’” or in Charles Reznikoff’s nineteen-section *Rhythms* (1918) and his twenty-two-section *Rhythms II* (1919).¹⁵ Serial form is the Objectivist answer to the problem of the long poem—the problem of how it may be possible to write one in the twentieth century, and the question of whether a long Imagist (or Objectivist) poem is possible. “I am often asked whether there can be a long imagiste or vorticist poem,” Ezra Pound wrote in 1914, and his answer, with some qualifications, is that “I see nothing against a long vorticist poem.”¹⁶ Objectivist seriality (in itself diverse and by no means monolithic) came to provide one means by which such a poem might get written.

As an analytical tool, what DuPlessis and Quartermain call the Objectivist nexus is a “three-dimensional model of participation, production and reception over time” that “allows one . . . to attend to rupture as well as continuity, and to dispersion as well as origin.”¹⁷ But it is also a space of ongoing poetic practice, and as such is precisely *post*-Objectivist (or in DuPlessis’ term, “neo-Objectivist”).¹⁸ “The Objectivist nexus” thus provides a framework for thinking about poetry “after” (chronologically, and on the model of) the Objectivists, poetry that is part of the Objectivists’ ongoing reception and legacy. In *Drafts* DuPlessis continues the Poundian and Objectivist notion that technique is the test of a woman’s sincerity, that an ethos and an ethics emerges from the writer’s attitude toward materiality—that of the object world and of language. For DuPlessis, “this makes an ethic of writing emerge simultaneously with the making of language. The basic ‘rule’ of technique is that every single mark, especially the merest jot and tittle, the blindest gap and space, all have meaning.”¹⁹ We might note the materialist language here (mark, jot, tittle, gap, space), the connection of linguistic materiality to ethics, and the location of meaning in the small, even the microscopic. Every material textual detail has meaning in what DuPlessis calls the “through-composed” long poem—“for

me a poetics is expressed philosophically via the detail”—and that constitutes one definition of what it means to associate technique with sincerity.²⁰ In this essay, I want to explore some of the ways in which these post-Objectivist concerns with the material detail and its mystery, and with scale—the relationships among micro, macro, and monumental—play out through her long serial poem *Drafts*.

In her preface to *Surge: Drafts 96-114*, the final volume of *Drafts*, DuPlessis returns us to some of the basic features of the project, “certainly a work saturated in an objectivist ethos.”²¹ This ethos is defined partly by an Oppenesque sense of “the mystery that has always generated the poem. Perhaps the words for this mystery are IT and IS. These poems have, at any rate, returned to those concepts as an insistent continuo—or obbligato.”²² Specifically, Oppen’s “Psalm” offers the canonical Objectivist statement of this ethos: “The small nouns / Crying faith / In this in which the wild deer / Startle, and stare out,” lines preceded by the exclamation “that they are there!” with its awe before the mystery and strangeness of being (Oppen’s deer have “*alien* small teeth” [my emphasis]), its “sense of the poet’s self among things.”²³ To return to DuPlessis: “the poem certainly wants to talk of the mysteries of ‘it.’ And ‘she’ [the title of Draft 2] is faced with that ‘it’ and with all of it.”²⁴ The preoccupation with IT IS, then, is a fundamental part of *Drafts*’ objectivist ethos. In “Draft 33: Deixis,” DuPlessis cites “a statement by Louis Zukofsky [that] offers the poetics of this kind of examination of the smallest words.”²⁵ The key part of Zukofsky’s 1946 statement reads as follows: “a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man [sic] can perhaps resolve. Those who do not believe this are too sure that the little words mean nothing among so many other words.”²⁶ DuPlessis weaves references to the principle of the “little words” throughout *Drafts*, often in ways that call up Oppen or Zukofsky. As one example: “Little words / worming into incipience. / ‘The a.’ / Then, half-contrary, / ‘a the.’”²⁷ “The” (the title of “Draft 8”) and “a” are tied to DuPlessis’ move away from the bounded lyric and to her earliest imaginings of *Drafts*: “(No more poems, no more lyrics. Do I find I cannot sustain the lyric; it is no longer. Propose somehow **a** work, **the** work, **a** work, **the** work, **a** work otherhow of enormous dailiness and crossing . . .) [my emphasis].”²⁸ This chant-like repetition invites a reading of *Drafts* as a kind of “the-work” and “a-work” immersed in the “enormous” (Zukofsky’s “epos and historical destiny”). But again, DuPlessis’ own “little words” are other: “it” and “is.” I’ll focus the next phase of my discussion on the operation of those two words in *Drafts*, following along the line of one that “Draft 1: It” inaugurates.²⁹ Tracing this particular line through *Drafts* will allow me to foreground not just the pervasive presence of the material object, as fact, value, and idea, throughout *Drafts* but also its *foundational* presence at the poem’s beginning and at each re-beginning.

Drafts has two entirely appropriate epigraphs, raising as they do questions of attention to minute detail and of the appropriate form for “ungainliness,” the latter term from Zukofsky’s “*Mantis, ‘An Interpretation’*”: “Feeling this, what should be the form / which the ungainliness already suggested / Should take?” The first epigraph, from Clark Coolidge, reads thus:

The minutest details of
sunlight on a shoe...

had to be scribbled down,
and with *extensions*.³⁰

Consistent with these considerations of “minutest details” and of the form their scribbling down and multiple “extensions” might take, the project begins with non-human subject and object, “Draft 1: It”—both material and grammatical object, and the key Objectivist pronoun. Subsequently, every Draft on the line of one, the beginning of every fold, that is, every re-beginning *in medias res*, uses the phoneme “it” in its title: “Incipit,” “Split,” “In Situ,” “Pitch Content,” “Velocity.” (More generally, the use of “little” words as titles—“It,” “She,” “Of,” “In,” “Me,” “The” in the first eight Drafts alone—establishes early on their importance for the poem.) At the same time, *Drafts* begins with a questioning of Objectivist premises, or at least the desire to extend them: “to reinvent ‘attention’ is narrow tho tempting,” though one “reinvention” that DuPlessis does embrace is that of the page as a visual and performative site for self-reflexive attention to language.³¹ “Draft 1” features multiple iterations of the phrase “it is,” the linguistic, philosophical, and ethical foundation of *Drafts*. One such iteration, “I / is it,” anticipates numerous later variations throughout the poem on Rimbaud’s “je est un autre,” but lays out early DuPlessis’ preoccupation with the self’s relationship to the object world, including the objects that are words.³² Reinvented attention will focus on “putt (pitting) the tiny word / litt / it / on stage in a ‘theatrical’ space / a / space white and open a flat / spot a lite on / it.”³³ Why “pitting,” “litt,” “lite?” To highlight, sonically and visually, the omnipresence of “it.” If one persistent intertext is Robert Creeley’s formulation from *Pieces*, “it -- / -- it,” there’s another reference to Creeley, and to his well-known “As soon as / I speak, I / speaks.”³⁴ For DuPlessis’ “Object (pronoun) / squeaks its little song its bright white / dear dead dark,” but at the same time “CANO”—“I sing”—so that “I” and “it” become equally the subjects or source of the long song that is *Drafts*.³⁵

If “It”—as title and as pronoun—encodes Objectivist materiality, one aspect of that materiality in *Drafts* is its self-reflexiveness, a persistent “spoilage of / presence” (*Toll 3*) in the work that differentiates it from much Objectivist writing.³⁶ From the beginning, *Drafts* is occupied with the material conditions of language and of its own (and any print-based poetry’s) production: “it’s / framed marks that make / meaning is, isn’t / it? Black // coding inside A / white fold open.”³⁷ In “Draft 20,” another beginning—“Incipit”—focuses on “it is” in a way that connects “it” again to the poem’s self-reflexiveness, its “aura of endlessly welling commentary / folding and looping over / Is.”³⁸ The large, upper-case boldface “I” links visually with a similar **T** five lines later to form “IT.” This passage gives us DuPlessis’ commitment to “it is” as a kind of fate: “And that was it / It sentenced me for life.”³⁹ Thus writing from “it is” constitutes a baseline measure of the objectivist ethos of *Drafts*, while linking “it” to and opening “it” into moments of midrashic self-reflexiveness marks an extension of that ethos, as an ongoing theorizing of poetics enters into the poetry itself to a far greater degree than in the original Objectivists’ work.

In “Draft 39: Split,” the beginnings of the third fold, “It’ mark dots / down on the page.”⁴⁰ It does indeed, and those dots, again reminiscent of Creeley’s *Pieces*, help construct the seriality of the form. “It,” like Zukofsky’s “the” and “a,” has a historical destiny (not to mention density): “but speak of how that ‘it’ emerged / it’s ‘there’ it’s ‘where’ it’s never what / you think Might be.”⁴¹ “That ‘it’ emerged,” among other sources, from a literary and

philosophical history that is encoded in the iambic rhythms of these lines, and that includes one especially relevant iambic pentameter couplet, Charles Reznikoff's canonical image of Objectivist it-ness to which DuPlessis refers multiple times in *Drafts*: "Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies / a girder, still itself among the rubbish."⁴² Also hovering here is what DuPlessis calls the "always palpable / stripped intransigence" of George Oppen: "No way seeing is-ness / no way saying it-ness / except resistance," that point where the Objectivists' ethos meets their variously left politics.⁴³ "It" moves as a kind of bass line through Draft 39 via deliberately obtrusive rhyme: "it," "legit," "split," "bit" in one eight-line sequence. As always in *Drafts*, "it" is both material world and text, detail and plenitude, micro and macro, as we move from this comment on Beverly Dahlen's *A Reading*—"Reading "it" / by the endless invention of "it""—into the quintessential encapsulation of what "it" means in and to *Drafts*: "Where 'it' / splits and doubles between the little (unspoken) and the looming // (unspeakable)"—the totality.⁴⁴ "Draft 39" then concludes, in one of the many allusive summaries of the project, in a playful use of Williams's three-step line rendered iambically: "to cast a dot of matter forth / and, farther, farther, troll it out, / through cusps of darkling antecedent sea."⁴⁵ That darkling sea gestures simultaneously toward Arnold's "Dover Beach," towards Homer and the "darker, antecedent sea" that closes "Draft 1," and towards the possibility of the female-authored post-Homeric long poem, called up in "Draft 1"—as tongue-in-cheek imperative? As declarative?—via the use of Homer's famous adjective in "little girls little legs jump the wine dark line."⁴⁶

The self-enfolded serial poem in multiple books has to keep concerning itself with (re)beginning, re-starting every nineteen Drafts at its material base, "It." By "Draft 58: In Situ," her fourth beginning, DuPlessis is acknowledging the challenge of any "simple beginning, in situ, / that is, in the middle," as the poem confronts the impossibility, for her, of certain Objectivist ideals and of practices historically associated with the epic: "I just wanted simplicity, or relief, / wanted to list items."⁴⁷ However, "it lists [i.e., leans], it tilts—the it of all of this: / How account for it; how call it to account?"⁴⁸ Meditations on the traditional epic beginning, *in medias res*, break down in the face of political rage and human loss (a student suicide), as does the Objectivist impulse toward documentation or recording, the all-inclusive ambition to write a tale of the tribe, and the convention of the epic catalogue: "This was to be a straight-line list, / itemizing what was at stake."⁴⁹ Like "In Situ," the next poem in the line of one, "Draft 77: Pitch Content" begins the volume *Pitch: Drafts 77-95* by considering how to begin and by personifying the "it" that drives all of DuPlessis' re-beginning: "*It wants to write. It wants me to write it . . .*," in an epigraph from Hélène Cixous.⁵⁰ After the epigraph, the first line of text has the effect of a Zukofskyan beginning, invoking both his little words and his long poem: "A," that line reads, and it's awfully hard for a reader of the Objectivists not to complete it as "A / Round of fiddles playing Bach."⁵¹ In contrast to that social plenitude, we have "A / first page empty, blank and null"—the blank verso opposite this recto.⁵² For all that, however, sound and music do dominate this Draft that echoes "A," "the It / of impercipient vibrato"—here, "it" is all sound.⁵³ In "Draft 96: Velocity," by contrast, "it" is all speed and motion—verbs like "pulse," "push," "surge," "plunge," and "sweep" dominate the first sentence. Zukofsky may well be present here also at the end of this last beginning, in a closing sentence that "*calls outright to A*," Zukofsky's key little word and the first letter.⁵⁴ The more visibly modernist presence, however, is Williams, not just in DuPlessis' use of his triadic line but in the reference to his great poem of (re)beginning, "By the road to the contagious hospital." In "Draft 96:

Velocity" the figure for "it" is a swallowtail butterfly, "gripping down" like Williams' plants, babies and new American poems: "rooted they / grip down and begin to awaken."⁵⁵

Just as each volume of *Drafts* begins by returning to the ground of "it is," so each one closes with a variation on the ongoingness of poetic labor, of the work with "it is" that will end only with death: hence the doubled invocation in the last two lines of *Drafts 1-38, Toll* to "work until it tolls / *And work until it tolls.*"⁵⁶ *Drafts 39-57* moves toward these lines while linking "workplace" and "nekuia," mundane space of daily labor and necromantic poetic rite: "It is hard to know why / this site is so implacable / but it is, clearly it is."⁵⁷ *Torques: Drafts 58-76* closes with endlessness, with re-beginning, and with the citationality that forms one basis of DuPlessis' poetics. The volume's last page brings the invocation to "Begin! / Here! And Here!" while its last words appropriate the mail artist Ray Johnson on (self-)appropriation: "My works get made and then chopped up, and then reglued and remade, and then chopped up again, the whole thing is really endless"⁵⁸—reasserting, at a point of temporary closure (the end of the book), the open-ended constructivist nature of the work, something close to an infinite series.⁵⁸ Similarly, on the last page of *Pitch: Drafts 77-95*, "it" imposes itself yet again on the reflective poet: "Is this what I wanted to say? / It is said. Is it what I wanted? / It is what came out. / . . . / It chose me." Thus chosen, one can only continue writing beyond the ending, and "Draft 95," via the image of restarting a faulty watch, "ends" by anticipating the work ahead: "I knock it hard to start it up again, / hitting the table where I do my work."⁵⁹ The earliest parts of "Draft 1: It" date from May 1986, when "it? that? // plunges into every object / a word and then some."⁶⁰ One hundred and fifteen *Drafts* later, in 2012, the poem is both concluding and ready to continue beginning with the Objectivist "it":

There are so many tasks. To start.

Up. Again.

Like this. The is. The it.

Id est:

So vector the crossroads once again!

Volta! Volta!⁶¹

Thus, on "it is," the two little words that have driven it, and on another turn (volta), *Drafts* concludes in a (its) beginning, "closes without ending."⁶²

So, little words, big poem, a poem that consciously engages "the whole area of cultural ambition, to open up into the largest kind of space, the challenge of scope itself."⁶³ "It is" turns out to be crucially connected to "the challenge of scope" and of interpretation in this contemporary poetics of Mass Observation: "These are poems challenged by—moved by—the plethora. . . . Here is a typical situation: small to large, tiny to largest. It is about the plethora of stars, that vastness, and the dot or yod, the most minuscule mark. That *it is*. That we can read it."⁶⁴ As a simultaneously formal and social question, that of scale is insistently, though complexly, gendered in *Drafts*. DuPlessis is drawn, as poet and critic, to the creation of "large and encompassing structures *with a female signature*" (my emphasis), following on such female

modernist models of ongoing, large-scale production—of “writing a gigantic oeuvre, a mound of oeuvre”—as Dorothy Richardson and Gertrude Stein.⁶⁵ Early in her critical career, she claims “in [one aspect of] women’s writing . . . there is an encyclopedic impulse, in which the writer invents a new and total culture, symbolized by and announced in a long work, like the modern long poem”—a work motivated, that is, by “the thrilling ambition to write a great, encyclopedic, holistic work, the ambition to get everything in, inclusively, reflexively, monumentally.”⁶⁶ At the same time, however, as a poem in the Objectivist tradition *Drafts* is also committed to a constructivist poetics of close attention to the immediate concrete detail or fragment, refusing any kind of panoptical perspective, a constructivist poetics that is also a *feminist* poetics of writing against the long epistemological, cultural, and literary tradition of coding the detail female. Around the time that DuPlessis was beginning *Drafts*, Naomi Schor offers a “feminist archaeology” of the detail in which she analyzes its “participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women.”⁶⁷ But Schor is equally interested in the redeeming of the detail as a site of value within materialist and realist modernism: “the ongoing valorization of the detail appears to be an essential aspect of that dismantling of Idealist metaphysics which looms so large on the agenda of modernity.”⁶⁸ Thus an Objectivist poetics, in this view, becomes a way to undo the feminization of the “detail”; *Drafts* engages ongoingly with and in this gendered history and modernist degendering of the detail.

A foundational essay on the question of “scale” in women’s long poems remains Susan Stanford Friedman’s 1990 “When a ‘Long’ Poem Is a ‘Big’ Poem,” in which she ventures “some generalizations about women’s status as outsiders in relation to the genre and the self-authorizing strategies in which they have engaged to penetrate and transform its boundaries.”⁶⁹ “In this horizontal-vertical discourse,” Friedman argues, in which the long poem asks “big” or “deep” questions and does so at length, “vast space and cosmic time are the narrative coordinates within which lyric moments occur, the coordinates as well of reality, of history.”⁷⁰ While I’d question whether Friedman’s account of women’s relationship to the genre of the long poem continues to pertain, it remains a compelling historical account: “Rooted in epic tradition, the twentieth-century ‘long poem’ is an overdetermined discourse whose size, scope, and authority to define history, metaphysics, religion and aesthetics still erects a wall to keep women outside.”⁷¹ Without using the term, Friedman refers here to the totalizing impulse; in response to that impulse, DuPlessis uses the serial form of *Drafts* to construct what she calls “an anti-totalizing text in a situation with totalizing temptations.”⁷² In the face of Friedman’s accurate claim that the woman’s long poem is no longer centered on a male hero’s quest, *Drafts* maintains “the general aura of quest just as a baseline,” though that baseline has its limits: “not hero, not polis.”⁷³ But it does so in the interests of “a distinct demasculinization of the genre,” of moving away from the long poem “as a masculine discourse of important quest-ions” while maintaining its scale and ambition.⁷⁴

What are the different *kinds* of scale or ratio about which one could talk in *Drafts*? There is scale at the level of language, where DuPlessis mainly focuses on the micro: the serif, the tiny visual mark, the point (iota, yod). Then language is persistently felt as inadequate to the articulation of the macro, of enormity or plethora (both recurring terms in the poem). There is

scale at the level of perception: what can be seen at the tiniest level as against a cosmic or astronomical scale, the microcosmic or the “micro-moment” and the macrocosmic. By the time DuPlessis invokes Blake’s grain of sand in *Pitch*, the reader has been waiting for it for quite some time, while the term “micro-moment” lets us know there are questions of temporality at work too.⁷⁵ Scale in the area of genre or poetic method would set the monumentality of *Drafts* against the method of constructing this massive non-whole that “closes without ending” out of fragments, debris, “little stuff,” bits and pieces, moments of what once was called “lyric.”⁷⁶ Even the extensive notes to *Drafts* can be seen to participate in this ratio: “The note. The Note! a feminist task of the Scholiast!—the annotation, condensing enormous cultural pressures into a tiny meaningful margin, tracking around the monumental, following traces.”⁷⁷

I want to think about the possibilities of an anti-monumental monumentality as one approach to what is, after all, at 992 pages one of the longest long poems of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—large scale without monumentality as a way to claim, and as an analogy for, poetic authority without hierarchy.⁷⁸ Sheer mass in poetry, DuPlessis suggests, can itself constitute a cultural intervention, an obstacle that requires negotiation: “The modern/contemporary long poem often exists to put an unassimilable mound of writing between yourself and culture as usual; a large realignment of what you know and what you see takes shape in it.”⁷⁹ At the same time, this “mound” is composed of the debris or rubble that forms one central motif in *Drafts*: “Perhaps the experimental long poem of our era smashes the epic into lyric shards as a social critique precisely of the social ethos of the epic,” its totalizing tendencies.⁸⁰ *Drafts* is both the practice of and “also a theory of debris,” “*theory of the shard*.”⁸¹ We can map macro, micro, and questions of gender onto DuPlessis’ concerns with monumentality and its shattering into rubble, a recurring term that will actually end up returning us to DuPlessis’ Objectivist roots. I have written elsewhere on DuPlessis’ complex relationship to Poundian monumentality, itself reduced to rubble: “my errors and wrecks lie about me. / And I am not a demigod, I cannot make it cohere.”⁸² In particular, “Draft 15: Little” contemplates the project and method of this millennial and monumental non-epic: “Not hero, not polis, not story, but it. / It multiplied. / It engulfing. / It excessive,” “the little / stuff agglutinating in time, debris.”⁸³ The seemingly throwaway term “little” is here a poetic or formal and ideological commitment, with its own lineage running, as I have been arguing, through the Objectivists and—in the recurring image of “debris”—through Walter Benjamin. And here that “little” term “it” is linked simultaneously to the macrocosmic—“it” is what is multiplied, engulfing, excessive—and to the counter-epical agglutination of *Drafts* (including the accumulating moments of sincerity that cumulatively establish the Objectivist ethos).

The dialectical relationship between macro and micro is fundamental to DuPlessis’ project: “This conflict or incommensurability of little and large and its unstable resolution . . . might be what incites anyone to write a long poem in the first place.”⁸⁴ And the “conflict or incommensurability” finds its appropriate form in post-Objectivist seriality. “Draft 49: Turns & Turns, an Interpretation” is a poem formally and conceptually in dialogue with Louis Zukofsky’s two-part “Mantis” and “*Mantis, an Interpretation*” (the source of her epigraph on “ungainliness” seeking appropriate form, as it does throughout *Drafts*). The lineated essay “Turns, an Interpretation” poses this question-and-answer: “what is the form for motion, what is the form for dialectical shim, / for self-quarreling and readjustment—serious, humorous? / It’s

seriality: / its quick shifts and sectors, / its questions at each moment of articulation” Importantly for DuPlessis, the nature of seriality refuses resolution: “What single message from [Oppen’s] ‘Of Being Numerous’?”⁸⁵

Via the trope of debris, let me return to Charles Reznikoff’s couplet from *Jerusalem the Golden* (1934):

Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies
a girder, still itself among the rubbish.

In ways centrally relevant to *Drafts*, this is partly a poem about the interconnectivity of singleness and plurality, “a girder” and “heaps of brick and plaster.” More precisely, it is also about *distinctive* singleness, what one might call “it-self-ness,” and its relationship to a *muddying* plurality, the indistinct “heaps” and “rubbish.” Oppen repeatedly invoked this poem as an iconic, almost foundational or originary moment in Objectivist poetics—hence its notoriety—and always misquoted it, substituting “rubble” for “rubbish.” In turn, DuPlessis consciously adopts this misquotation, returning to “rubble” as a persistent motif throughout *Drafts*: rubble as the shattered fragments of a broken whole, but rather more poignant, even elegiac a term than the more judgmental “rubbish.” In one formulation we find “the girder amid, between, among, above, / the rubble under, on, from, next to, within”—little words making up what DuPlessis calls “prepositional debris” elsewhere in the poem.⁸⁶

Monuments and their breakage recur throughout *Drafts* as a figure for the work’s form, method, ethos, and cultural politics. Given “the monsters to whom / Monuments are built,” it’s no surprise to encounter the following faux cross-reference: “As for monuments— / see ambivalence.”⁸⁷ But these monuments don’t survive intact; what survives is the trace, at least tentatively, somewhere, sometimes, even as it “makes no claims / that it will survive.”⁸⁸ As well as the erosion of male power by time, the statue of Ozymandias to which DuPlessis alludes in ‘Draft 87’ represents, as it did for Shelley, “monumentality / broken and scattered” into “trace elements,” “which implies / not that trace / is outside of structure, but that it is / the shattered bits of former structure.”⁸⁹ “Improbable Babel left in rubble, / This poem almost became its own erasure. / Almost blanked itself out,” but was able to “let in fissure, fracture, broken shard.”⁹⁰ This is the way, returning to the image of *Drafts*’ opening page, where handwritten capital Ns take the form of mountains, to “make the book an imitation mountain but with real hard strata. Data”: the poem made up of the shards of its own always already shattered monumentality, on the *scale* of a monument but with none of its features.⁹¹

¹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Pitch: Drafts 77-95* (London: Salt, 2010), 42.

² Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 214, 189.

³ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 194.

⁴ For DuPlessis on the “thing,” see her essay “The Topos of the ‘Thing’: Some Thoughts on ‘Objectivist’ Poetics,” in *The Idea and the Thing in Modernist American Poetry*, ed. Cristina Giorcelli (Palermo, Italy: ILA Palma, 2001), 31-51.

⁵ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 194.

⁶ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 201.

⁷ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 207.

⁸ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 207, 208.

⁹ George Oppen, *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 31-32.

¹⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, "Introduction," *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, ed. DuPlessis and Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 3.

¹¹ DuPlessis and Quartermain, "Introduction," 4.

¹² DuPlessis and Quartermain, "Introduction," 7, 3. Cf. DuPlessis' recent and even stronger claim that "perhaps the most distinctive contribution of objectivist poetics is the mid-length to very long serial poem," in her essay "Objectivist Poetry and Poetics," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*, ed. Walter Kalaidjian (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 95.

¹³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker's 'Paeon to Place' and its Reflective Fusions," in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. Elizabeth Willis (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 162.

¹⁴ DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker," 163.

¹⁵ Charles Bernstein writes of Reznikoff that "With his first book, he introduced cubo-seriality into American poetry: serial poems that have a modular, rather than a sequential, relation to one another." Bernstein, "Brooklyn Boy Makes Good: Charles Reznikoff, the Poet of New York," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 5, 2006, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/03/books/brooklyn-boy-makes-good-charles-reznikoff-the-poet-of-new-york> One would also want to take into account DuPlessis' offhand but historically persuasive reference to "the invention of the serial poem in early modernism (possibly by Loy)" in her *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55. Mina Loy's "Songs to Joannes" was first published as "Love Songs I-IV" in the experimental little magazine *Others* 1.1 (July 1915), 6-8, and the revised "Songs to Joannes," now in thirty-four sections, was published in *Others* 3.6 (April 1917): 3-20, taking up the whole issue.

¹⁶ Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 94.

¹⁷ DuPlessis and Quartermain, "Introduction," 22.

¹⁸ DuPlessis, "Objectivist Poetry," 99.

¹⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and its Cultural Work* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 210. DuPlessis' frequent use of the phrase "jot and tittle" may well have encoded into it her awareness of Pound's anti-Semitism. She quotes, for instance, his assertion that "not a jot or tittle of the hebraic alphabet can pass into the text without danger of contaminating it" (*Blue Studios* 250).

²⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Surge: Drafts 96-114* (Cromer, UK: Salt, 2013), 11.

²¹ DuPlessis, *Surge*, 13.

²² DuPlessis, *Surge*, 3.

²³ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2008), 99; Oppen, *Selected Prose*, 32.

²⁴ DuPlessis, *Surge*, 12. DuPlessis seems to be invoking two relevant intertexts here, from Whitman's "Song of Myself" (another candidate for the first serial poem)—"I and this mystery here we stand" (Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon [New York: W. W. Norton, 2002], 28); and from Oppen—"The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on" (Oppen, *New Collected*, 159).

²⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Drafts 1-38, Toll* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 225.

²⁶ DuPlessis quotes Zukofsky's words in *Toll*, 225-26.

²⁷ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 180. The letter "a" recurs as beginning, invitation, or "incipience": "Ask the letter A / and it may tell you // to continue," for instance, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Collage Poems of Drafts* (London: Salt, 2011), 6.

²⁸ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 147.

²⁹ For a valuable prior analysis of the "little words," including "it," in *Drafts 1-38, Toll*, see Libbie Rifkin, "Little Words and Redemptive Criticism: Some Points on *Drafts*," *HOW2* 1.8 (2002), https://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_8_2002/current/forum/rifkin.htm. Regarding "the line of one," and the related terms "fold" and "grid," for readers unfamiliar with the structure of *Drafts*: between the writing of "Draft 19" and "Draft 20," DuPlessis writes, "I decided to repeat some version of

these themes or materials in the same general order every nineteen poems, folding one group over another, making new works but works evoking motifs and themes in the former one—and also . . . generating new images, materials and themes as I went” in “a recurrent but free structure,” a procedure but not a plan (*Surge*, 7). Thus, with a “fold” every nineteen poems, the “line of one” would include Drafts 1, 20, 39, 58, 77, and 96, all in some degree of conversation with each other; the “line of two” would include Drafts 2, 21, 40, 59, 78, and 97; and so on. Starting with *Drafts 39-57, Pledge, with Draft, Unnumbered: Précis* (Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2004), DuPlessis has included a diagrammatic “grid” laying out the structure of the lines and folds as it expands with every volume.

³⁰ The epigraphs appear in Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Drafts* (Elmwood, Ct.: Potes & Poets Press, 1991), which includes Drafts 3-14 in the first booklength gathering of the project. When DuPlessis reprints these poems as part of *Drafts 1-38*, she replaces the Coolidge epigraph with one from Keats.

³¹ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 4.

³² DuPlessis, *Toll*, 4.

³³ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 5.

³⁴ Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley 1945-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 391, 294. A variation entirely apposite for *Drafts* would be “as soon as / I speak, it / speaks,” and indeed we find something close to that in “Draft 76: Work Table with Scale Models”: “It / (still / speaking) / is still, speaking.” Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Torques: Drafts 58-76* (Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2007), 132.

³⁵ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 5, 4. DuPlessis’ use of “cano”/“I sing” invokes a canonical epic beginning, that of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, as she notes in *Blue Studios*, 234.

³⁶ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 3.

³⁷ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 2. A different sort of essay from this one would discuss how the material page in *Drafts* is not just thematized but insistently foregrounded through drawings, handwriting, double columns, typographic marks, bold face and italics, shifts in font size, capitals, obtrusive typos, blacked-out text, mail art, visual collage, and generous use of interlineal and intralineal white space, both an acknowledgment and an extension of the materiality of prior Objectivist texts.

³⁸ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 131.

³⁹ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 131.

⁴⁰ DuPlessis, *Pledge*, 2.

⁴¹ DuPlessis, *Pledge*, 2.

⁴² Charles Reznikoff, *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff 1918-1975*, ed. Seamus Cooney (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005), 107.

⁴³ DuPlessis, *Pledge*, 197, 3.

⁴⁴ DuPlessis, *Pledge*, 11.

⁴⁵ DuPlessis, *Pledge*, 12.

⁴⁶ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 9. For the “darker, antecedent sea,” see *Toll*, 10.

⁴⁷ DuPlessis, *Torques*, 3.

⁴⁸ DuPlessis, *Torques*, 5.

⁴⁹ DuPlessis, *Torques*, 1.

⁵⁰ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 1.

⁵¹ Louis Zukofsky, “A” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1.

⁵² DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 1.

⁵³ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 4.

⁵⁴ DuPlessis, *Surge*, 26.

⁵⁵ William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 13.

⁵⁶ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 267. Note the foregrounding of “work” in the title of poems on the line of nineteen, the last numbered poem in each volume: “Draft 19: Working Conditions,” “Draft 38: Georgics & Shadow,” “Draft 57: Workplace, Nekuia,” “Draft 76: Work Table with Scale Models,” “Draft 95: Erg.”

⁵⁷ DuPlessis, *Pledge*, 221-22.

⁵⁸ DuPlessis, *Torques*, 136.

⁵⁹ Quotations in this and the previous sentence come from DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 172. It is notable that DuPlessis turns to a perfectly regular iambic pentameter to “start it up again,” as if the continuing work depends both on a

repeated return to the history of Anglophone poetry (encoded in the iambic metre) and on doing that history just enough violence to jog it into renewed life but not destroy it (“I knock it hard”).

⁶⁰ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 1.

⁶¹ DuPlessis, *Surge*, 160.

⁶² DuPlessis, *Surge*, 1.

⁶³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “An Interview with Rachel Blau DuPlessis,” with Jeanne Heuving, *Contemporary Literature* 45.3 (fall 2004), 403.

⁶⁴ DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, 214.

⁶⁵ DuPlessis, “Interview,” 404.

⁶⁶ DuPlessis, *Pink Guitar*, 17, 9.

⁶⁷ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen: 1987), 4.

⁶⁸ Schor, *Reading*, 3-4. In the Preface to *Surge*, 9, DuPlessis writes “I don’t want to say too much about scale and gender, because any stereotypical observation—however situationally true—risks restating (re-instantiating) patterns we want to reject.” One can assent without finding the comment disabling for considerations of scale and gender, especially when she moves immediately into a long paragraph on the history of female authorship.

⁶⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, “When a ‘Long’ Poem Is a ‘Big’ Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women’s Twentieth-Century ‘Long Poems,” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 721. The definitive book-length study of the female-authored long poem remains Lynn Keller, *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), which contains one of the earliest sustained discussions of *Drafts* as a “feminist serial long poem” (276).

⁷⁰ Friedman, “‘Long’ Poem,” 722.

⁷¹ Friedman, “‘Long’ Poem,” 723.

⁷² DuPlessis, “Preface to *Surge*,” 2.

⁷³ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 9.

⁷⁴ Friedman, “‘Long’ Poem,” 724, 733.

⁷⁵ “Not so much the world in a grain of sand / but the grain of sand in the world / defines trace”: DuPlessis, *Pitch*,

91. “Micro-moment”: DuPlessis, *Toll*, 115.

⁷⁶ Daniel Bouchard has captured the macro-micro dynamic of *Drafts* nicely in his essay “A Little Yod and a Rocking Enormity: Reading *Drafts*,” *Jacket2* (Dec. 2011), <http://jacket2.org/article/little-yod-and-rocking-enormity>, where he lists images of smallness and uses of the word “enormous” (and its variants) side by side.

⁷⁷ DuPlessis, *Pink Guitar*, 130.

⁷⁸ Cf. Patrick Pritchett’s comment that “the scale of *Drafts* is monumental; its focus anti-monumental,” in his review, “*Drafts 1-38, Toll*, by Rachel Blau DuPlessis,” *Jacket2* (May 2003), <http://jacketmagazine.com/22/prit-dupless.html>, and DuPlessis’ own description of *Drafts* as “a monumental task suspicious of the monumental” (*Blue Studios*, 241).

⁷⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Lyric and Experimental Long Poems: Intersections,” *Time in Time: Short Poems, Long Poems, and the Rhetoric of North American Avant-Gardism, 1963-2008*, ed. J. Mark Smith (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 37. DuPlessis’ comment on “how to indicate one’s volume without squatting hibernations of mass” (*Pink Guitar*, 133) may seem contradictory until we recall that—despite the implications of the “mound” metaphor—“mass” for her must also be mobile, labile, porous, and hardly a matter of “squatting hibernations.”

⁸⁰ DuPlessis, “Lyric and Experimental,” 39.

⁸¹ DuPlessis, *Torques*, 133, *Toll*, 180.

⁸² Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 796; on DuPlessis and Pound, see Alan Golding, “*Drafts* and Fragments: Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ (Counter)-Poundian Project,” *Jacket 2* (Dec. 2011), <https://jacket2.org/article/drafts-and-fragments>, and Bob Perelman, “*Drafts* and the Epic Moment,” *Jacket2* (Dec. 2011), <http://jacket2.org/article/drafts-and-epic-moment>.

⁸³ DuPlessis, *Toll*, 102.

⁸⁴ DuPlessis, “Lyric and Experimental,” 50.

⁸⁵ Both this and the previous quotation come from DuPlessis, *Pledge*, 121. For Zukofsky, the form for “thoughts’ torsion,” for “the actual twisting / of many and diverse thoughts” “is really a sestina,” that strange combination of

elegance and baroque ungainliness—but the sestina considered and used “as a force,” not merely “as an experiment” in seeing if one can write a sestina. Louis Zukofsky, *ALL: The Collected Short Poems 1923-1964* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 75-77.

⁸⁶ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 82, 20. Elsewhere in *Pitch*, in a self-lacerating definition of poetry and a theoretical reflection on Objectivist poetics, words are “a fetish substitute for the directness / of rubble” (49).

⁸⁷ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 56, 44.

⁸⁸ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 105.

⁸⁹ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 92.

⁹⁰ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 129.

⁹¹ DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 134. With these opening Ns, I suspect an allusion not just to Wallace Stevens’ “Poem in the Shape of a Mountain” but to Basil Bunting’s observation on Pound’s *Cantos*: “There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?” (Bunting, *Collected Poems* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977], 110) The first Draft and page of *Pitch* returns to this image in citing a phrase from Gershom Scholem, “letters took on / . . . the shape of great mountains” (DuPlessis, *Pitch*, 1).