

IV

Precious Little Argument

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(IV): "Disputations with Paul B. Preciado"*

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1. Suckling at another's breast

This is the fourth instalment of a chapter-by-chapter reading of *Después de lo trans* (*After Trans*, 2021), the book in which the Spanish writer Elizabeth Duval argues about the foundations of the trans category instead of fortifying them. Thus far I have disputed nearly everything she says. In this chapter I shall not: I am going to latch on to Duval's argument without the least embarrassment, because her target is Paul B. Preciado, and between the two of them there is no contest.

Preciado, born in Burgos and settled in Paris, author of the *Countersexual Manifesto*, *Testo Junkie* and *An Apartment on Uranus*, is the most visible figure in Spanish-language queer theory. Duval acquired her reputation as a heretic by remarking in an interview that talk of "the emancipatory potential of the anus" sounded thrillingly revolutionary but furnished no political alternative whatever, and that Preciado belonged to the *gauche caviar*: someone who writes about the Barcelona riots over oysters in Paris.[1] She was right, and then some. Preciado is Che Guevara in a Cartier watch. The *Manifesto* proposes the *in vitro* production of a "cyber-clitoris" for implantation in various parts of the body,[2] recommends philosophising "not with a hammer but with a dildo",[3] and its author ends up proclaiming a "revolution of desire" in an advertisement for Gucci.[4] His actual contribution to the lives of gay and trans people has roughly the impact of installing a tampon dispenser in the men's lavatory and declaring trans men thereby made visible: it makes a noise, it provokes outrage, it gets into the magazines, and the world remains precisely as it was. With an irony Preciado fails to notice: a tampon in the men's lavatory is proof of a body that no amount of disidentification can declare out of existence. An open arse has yet to bring down capitalism, however much French bibliography one arranges around it.

Duval puts it better, in a footnote on the slogan "Open your arse and your mind will follow": that something has been repressed does not make it revolutionary.[5] What follows concedes her demolition in full. And then, when Duval has finished and put down the hammer, it asks why the ruins of Preciado look so much like certain rooms in her own house.

2. The demolition

Duval's arguments against Preciado are good ones, and worth keeping in view. The *Countersexual Manifesto* proposes to replace the order of Nature with a contract in which bodies recognise one another not as men or women but as "speaking bodies", with access to every position history has marked as masculine, feminine or perverse. Duval replies that it is a utopia without a map. The performative word does not build the reality it utters, there is no tool for stepping outside the language of gender, and a subject able to occupy every position at once would no longer be a subject to anyone.[6] Against *Testo Junkie*, which defines subjects by the substance that rules their metabolism, Duval offers a *reductio*: when oestrogen patches ran short in the pharmacies, post-operative trans women were left with no hormones at all, and remained exactly who they were. The substance is a patch.[7] Against Preciado's address to the Lacanian psychoanalysts, in which he announces that sexual difference will give way to something else "probably within the next ten or twenty years", Duval replies that this is faith in the inevitable fall of gender, like faith in the revolution: "Preciado is a theologian."[8]

And her finest thesis: Preciado's transition "is not an exit from the system of sexual difference but precisely a movement within the linguistic codes of gender".[9] Preciado has not escaped gender; he has crossed to the other bank. Which is why Duval can tell him, her own theory in hand, that he is now read as a man and that this has consequences. She quotes Virginie Despentes's preface to *An Apartment on Uranus*: since the transition, women in the street adore him and lavish small attentions on him, and when he protests that she exaggerates, Despentes writes, "that makes me laugh".[10] Duval's verdict: "Preciado, you have a passport now."[11] In the emails she publishes as an appendix, she puts it to him directly: "If I saw you at night with a group of men, do you really think I wouldn't consider crossing the road?" And when Preciado protests that his is not a patriarchal body, she answers that this "does not mean it does not take part in, or benefit from, patriarchal dynamics and structures".[12]

All conceded. Preciado cannot abolish the social effects of sex by declaring himself a speaking body. He cannot leave gender by an act of disidentification. Testosterone does not manufacture masculinity. Transgression is not a politics merely by virtue of transgressing. Duval is right from first to last, and the interesting part begins there, because she is right for reasons her own theory cannot afford.

3. What the gaze hands out

The argument against Preciado applies the thesis of Duval's previous chapter: the gaze constitutes gender, and Preciado is seen as a man. But the argument proves something more modest than she supposes, and it bears recalling before going further. To say that Preciado receives male privilege, it is not enough to show that he receives a certain treatment; one must know why the treatment is called male. And there returns the story Duval herself told in her second chapter, of a division of labour founded on a difference between the sexes, from which flow the position of men, their privileges, and the features by which we recognise those we take to be men. The gaze hands out the social consequences of sex; it does not decide to whom they belong. This was argued in the previous instalment of this reading, and it holds here too. What is new in this chapter lies elsewhere: in Preciado's past, which Duval declares invisible and cannot stop mentioning.

4. Constitutive in the essay, irrelevant in the email

Preciado says he lives "as-if-he-were-a-man" rather than "being-a-man". Duval asks what the difference rests on, and answers that it rests only on "memory and recollection, or trauma" of a different past. And she disposes of it with a single sentence: "In the street there is no recollection."[13] Preciado's body is perceived in a "radical present" that takes him for a man and forgets any prior existence.

Very well. But a couple of pages later Duval herself writes that Preciado treasures the memory of the lesbophobia and misogyny he suffered, and that "all of that has made Preciado, and all of it is constitutive".[14] The past is constitutive. Yet in the emails, when Preciado invokes it in his own defence, Duval tells him: "Past or everyday struggle is not necessarily of use in analysing how the system currently works with respect to the position you occupy."[15] In the essay, memory constitutes Preciado; in the email, it tells us nothing about his position. It depends which corner of the ring Duval happens to be standing in when she writes.

"In the street there is no recollection" is true in a very limited sense: the stranger on the Métro does not know the history of the person opposite. It does not follow that the history forms no part of that person's social reality. The man who passes me in the street has no idea what I do for a living, where I grew up or what happened to me at fifteen, and none of it ceases to exist until somebody finds out. A person who began transitioning at forty-four does not possess the social biography of a man read as a man from the cradle, even if he now receives some of the same treatment. To confuse what the observer knows with what the observed is amounts, once again, to confusing knowledge with being, the error this reading has been pointing out to Duval since its first instalment.

5. Braille on the skin

What is most remarkable is that Duval knows exactly where that past is kept. In the very paragraph explaining that the street forgets, she writes that the past of an individual or a body is known "in intimate relationships", "in sex, in touch, in reading, in the braille we find on another's skin".[16] History is written on the body, and read with the hands.

That sentence does more work than entire chapters of the book. Duval does not say the past vanishes; she says a stranger's gaze cannot reach it, and touch can. What the street fails to see, the bed finds out. It is exactly what happened in her second chapter to the lesbian who discovered a penis where the schema had supposed a vulva: information about the body reorganised what perception had taken for granted. In an image of real beauty, Duval grants the body the memory her theory denies it. The body is not a surface each new gaze rewrites from scratch. It is a text in relief, with a history legible to anyone who comes close enough.

6. The prosecutor's amnesia

And there is something more acid still. Duval reproaches Preciado for clinging to his past. In her first chapter, when it fell to her to speak of her own, she wrote that she could not recount her childhood because she had "forgotten everything that made up my socialisation into gender".[17] The author who erases her own past is the one who demands that Preciado stop remembering his. For him, the radical present; for her, amnesia. Preciado wishes to keep his body of origin as a memory and a trench; Duval wishes to dissolve it, his in the gaze of strangers and hers in oblivion. Both stumble at the same spot, and the stumble takes the same shape: treating the body of origin as something to be managed by narrative, preserved or erased as the occasion requires.

7. "Unless they know"

The best objection to Duval is supplied by Preciado himself, quite unintentionally, in the emails. "It's true that men in the street no longer bother me," he writes, "unless they know I'm trans."[18] The second half of that sentence is worth its weight in gold. There are two scenes. In the first, a man looks at Preciado, believes he sees another man, and leaves him alone. In the second, the same man learns that Preciado has transitioned, and the treatment changes. The visible body is the same in both. What has changed is the information about that body's history.

The radical present does not suffice, then, even in the street. The gaze works with hypotheses about the body and its history, and those hypotheses are revised when new information arrives. What Preciado suffers when they know is what Duval, in her second chapter, called corrective violence, the kind that punishes those who stray from the script. Her own taxonomy describes what happens to Preciado, and that violence needs, in order to be triggered, a fact about the body of origin. The gaze alone is not enough even for the violence Duval herself classified.

8. As vulnerable as anyone

In his first email Preciado writes: "I will always be trans. I will always have the trans body I have, and that makes me as vulnerable as any trans person."[19] After Duval's previous chapter, that sentence ought to have lasted about a second. Duval had shown that trans people do not form a coherent sociological group, and had dismantled the figure then circulating in Spain according to which 80 per cent of trans people were condemned to unemployment, a figure derived from a sample of thirty-three women. "As vulnerable as any trans person" is first cousin to that figure. Cristina Ortiz, La Veneno, who ended up in prostitution and was raped in prison, Duval in her Paris flat, Preciado with his Gucci contract, a non-binary teenager and a trans man whom nobody could tell from any other man do not share a vulnerability because they share a word. Both sentences turn a heterogeneous coalition into a homogeneous class whenever it is convenient.

Duval does not let it pass entirely. In one email she reminds him that their experiences of violence cannot be equated, nor his with those of "a trans woman who transitioned later and ended up in sex work", and Preciado retreats at once: "I am not equating forms of violence. That would be absurd."[20] But Duval's main argument runs elsewhere. What separates her from Preciado, she says, is that the oppression of trans women does not come "exclusively from being a vulnerable body as a trans body" but from "misogyny".[21] To strike at Preciado, Duval sets the trans category aside and reaches for the division between men and women. When she has to explain who oppresses whom, the boundary that serves her purpose is the boundary of sex.

9. The ruins next door

The demolition of Preciado lays bare what this reading has been gathering from the start. In the first instalment, Duval showed that nobody chooses their identity, but not that identifying with a category suffices for belonging to it. In the second, she explained how the gaze distributes social treatment, but mistook being recognised for belonging. In the third, she showed that trans has no theoretical coherence, having previously explained its proliferation as if it were a single phenomenon. In this one, she is right against Preciado: nobody leaves the body by way of a discourse. And if will does not decide gender, if identification does not decide the category, if the gaze does not decide belonging, if the pharmacy does not decide sex and disidentification takes no one out of it, then the body is doing more and more of the work in the book while Duval goes on refusing it the standing that work demands.

Duval shows Preciado that he cannot erase with words the body others see. What she will not admit is that the body others do not see cannot be erased by forgetting either: the one read in braille, the one that surfaces when they know, the one she herself calls constitutive when it suits her. Preciado

keeps it as a relic and Duval throws it in the river, and both discover that it comes back. That is why the ruins of Preciado look so much like the rooms of Duval's house: she brought down her neighbour's with a tool that was also aimed at her own foundations.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), ch. 5, "Nadie sabe lo que puede un ano emancipador: disputaciones con Paul B. Preciado", which reproduces her interview with Víctor Lenore in *Vozpópuli*. The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (2000), trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018; quoted in Duval, ch. 5, "Manifiesto contra el *Manifiesto contrasexual*".
3. Ibid.
4. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
5. Duval, note [p] to ch. 5.
6. Duval, ch. 5, "Manifiesto contra el *Manifiesto contrasexual*".
7. Duval, ch. 5, "Clínica de desintoxicación testosterónica", on Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson, New York, Feminist Press, 2013.
8. Duval, ch. 5, "Diálogo entre monstruos parlantes", on Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, trans. Frank Wynne, London, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021.
9. Ibid.
10. Virginie Despentes, preface to Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, South Pasadena, Semiotext(e), 2020; quoted in Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
11. Ibid.
12. Duval, ch. 5, "Correos con Paul B. Preciado", Duval's emails of 10 November 2019 (02:39 and 02:55).
13. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
14. Ibid.
15. Duval, ch. 5, "Correos con Paul B. Preciado", Duval's email of 10 November 2019 (03:12).
16. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
17. Duval, ch. 1, "Breve historia de lo trans".
18. Duval, ch. 5, "Correos con Paul B. Preciado", Preciado's email of 10 November 2019 (02:50).
19. Ibid., Preciado's email (02:29).
20. Ibid., emails from Duval (02:41) and Preciado (02:55).
21. Ibid., Duval's email (02:39).