

Reviews

Residual Synonyms for the Name of God

Lewis Freedman

Ugly Duckling Presse, 2016
Review by Abraham Adams

It begins transparently, this book of opacity, a book that people will call difficult by virtue of the difficulty they themselves will experience when trying to think and speak about it in words other than its own. The transparent beginning (following a slipperier preface, attributed to an L. Freedman and dated to the week after the Nuremberg Trials) is a quotation from the German-born Israeli philosopher Gershom Scholem, at the heart of which is the sentence:

The meaninglessness of the name of God indicates its situation in the very central point of revelation, at the basis of which it lies.

This statement of poetics identifies the book as synonyms of something meaningless, which in Scholem's theological context is itself rendered through a group of synonyms: incantatory vehicles for the possibility of witnessing that for which meaning is a tautology, an obstacle, and a separation.

"The name has a name!" Levinas remarks enthusiastically in one lecture. If in Jewish prayer the revelation is affected among the incantation of formal synonyms of the Tetragrammaton, in Freedman's book, incantation is itself the "synonym," passages instead of proper names, "residua" of a process. The process is a performance of writing, and in this work, Freedman has not prioritized what poets normally do with that performance, that is, efface it through the *ex post facto* shaping and reduction of isolated gestures, the various techniques of which constitute what is normally considered poetic craft. It is instead witness to the movement of incantatory language, and it

tends to ramble, unlineated, through given moments that could in themselves be seen as modest, or bland:

(18) Damn

The oft-repeated sin... stratum of excessive fatigue copying again in thought from the thought of fallen asleep within the overripe dream. Or a ring of half-anthropomorphic outsiders painting the backdrop of what proves to be approaching... distance within the wire garnished with pictures of between telephone poles silhouetted as meaning.

For those who listen for it, Freedman's theonymic residua are variations in opacity, conductors of the sensorial variations of the reader's own attempt to read. Even if troubled by a growing sense that something is hidden (that this is actually a "poetry/essay," as Ugly Duckling [where I used to be an editor] has categorized it), the reader recognizes how the phases' manifest tendency toward being meaningless reflects and amplifies the various forays of the reading self's "failed" attempts to compose meaning in its encounters.

Reading opacity, I think: the quotidian range of movement in meaning is like the quotidian range of movement of the body, the spark of a sudden exception as sensorially recognizable as the activation of an obscure atrophied muscle, a sprain, vertigo, a sudden blow; beheld now in a disarticulated manifold.

(4) Speaking Ersatz

A known punishment is the loss of your soul... but did you know... like the national scene resists the foreign language speaker... great wealth passively corrects its crime by making pubic hair iridescently visible... through cloth... as a metaphor for... the negation of the said?

Here I am moved forward so that I do not await meaning, expecting to unlock reserves

of it. Where would it be, anyway? I see its passing atoms fragment my gradual sense an essay is becoming encrypted beneath my reading. Perhaps I hesitated at the title's threshold, or, for instance, the phrase "through cloth" reverberated with my recollection of the Photo-Secessionists, who photographed through gauze... but in the manifest arbitrariness of these instantaneously enfolded speculations, the atoms seem as if on their way somewhere, or genuflecting, turning toward something like leaves of "one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind" (Anne Carson).

This book is undoubtedly framed by a discourse, and its particular references to the time of the Holocaust (not to mention formal resemblance to Blanchot's fragmentary Holocaust book), its invocation of the beginning of modern Israeli philosophy, and a feeling of the presence of Levinas, as one looks less into the meanings of passages themselves as outward toward the manifold of language at large... all this suggests there is much left to consider about this book beyond this initial encounter. Not the least of which is why opacity in general tends to arise in political repression and exile—Édouard Glissant from Martinique, Tomaž Šalamun from Yugoslavia, Wendy Lotterman perhaps from the Internet—and especially Paul Celan from Germany. One might easily rush to say that repression prompts artists to hide (to encrypt) meaning, and yet for an artist such as Celan, whom literal hiding failed in the sense that he could not hide his parents from the Nazis who kidnapped and killed them, perhaps (as "The Meridian" in fact suggests) the opacity of a singular place, a singular thought stands against language's ability to encrypt any horror.

Abraham Adams is an artist based in New England.

Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to Be Born

Anne Waldman

Coffee House Press, 2016
Review by Alex Braslavsky

Among the much that is striking in Anne Waldman's *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to Be Born*, published this year by Coffee House Press, is the cutting imagery throughout, so close in its alignment with the female form that it is almost too proximal. Yet a solace also comes with the prospect of cutting (i.e. of the umbilical cord) as an act that occasions birth.

Each section of the poem is inaugurated by a photographic shot of a woman who has been carved out by another woman, sculptor Kiki Smith, and whose image is the direct result of having been chiseled. Waldman's poem thus explores both the acute danger and the creative potential of directed and applied force upon an object.

Blake's presence is potently drawn upon, as Waldman traces the behaviors of his unborn figure Thel. As an allegorical figure, Thel is expected to stand the test of time. She is subjected to eternity. But in *Voice's Daughter*, Thel is "ignited by impermanence" and wields an exacting control over time's outcome, by "cut[ting] obstacles before they arise" (13). Waldman also evokes the triumvirate of Mary figures, of which "the temptress Magdalene / [is] like a razor of circumstance" (20, emphasis mine). Again, we see how a timeless figure like one biblical Mary carves out her own 'circumstance.'

In an awed moment, the speaker also tells us she