

Diane Di Prima Reads at Bard College, October 11, 1973

Notes on the Poems

Introduction to the reading

Di Prima begins by giving a description of how she plans to structure the reading. She explains that the reading will center around *Loba*, which she has been writing since January of 1972. Before getting to *Loba*, she explains that she will read from her earlier work since most of the audience members “don’t know [her] work very much.” She also warns the reader that *Loba* is long, and in sections, so those who “need to go” or are “flaking out” can leave during the breaks.

Introduction to The New Handbook of Heaven poems

Di Prima makes reference to two others in the audience, Kathy and Richard, and says that they were all talking about the “early times” in New York City. She decides to read from an early book called *The New Handbook of Heaven* from “around ‘61.” She calls the collection “love poems, in one sort or another.”

“The Beach”

“The Beach” is a poem that shifts between two images: a railroad station and the beach. The final image is of a “monster lobster” escaping from a picnic basket and presumably walking “home” to the ocean. This image is contrasted with a scene at a railroad station, where it seems two lovers are parting. The diction in the first part of the poem reveals a melancholic scene with phrases like: “washing dead flowers,” “the chill of the railroad station,” “the suitcases broken,” and “almost empty.” The poem seems to be about loss on some level, but how that loss is complicated by a sense of freedom, illustrated by the returning home of the lobster.

“Lord Jim”

Like her reading of “The Beach,” “Lord Jim” is also accurate when compared to the text version of the poem. In “Lord Jim,” the speaker of the poem is attracted to something “very beautiful” that he/she is determined to be closer to. The repetition of the phrase “I shall walk toward it” acts as a refrain throughout the poem. This is contrasted with the speaker’s fear: “I am not afraid. That is a lie.” The poem concludes with two images. The first is the union of the speaker to his/her attraction: “the hissing steam / rising at once from both of us.” The

second image concludes the poem in an empty lot in summer “the flickering / backs of beetles.”

Missing Book

Di Prima begins to talk about living in the country. She seems to want to read from poems inspired by the country, but realizes that she forgot the book that contained the poems. She apologizes and skips to the next part of the reading.

Introduction to “The Joyous”

Di Prima moves from poetry to prose as she introduces “The Calculus of Variation,” a book of prose/poetry based on the eight trigrams of the I-Ching. Each section of her book, she explains, is titled for each of the trigrams: the Creative, the Receptive, the Arousing, the Abysmal, Keeping Still, the Gentle, the Changing, and the Joyous. She describes her project as “not talking” about the trigrams, but rather, getting a “feeling of the characteristics.”

Excerpt from “The Joyous”

“The Joyous” is the final section of the book. Di Prima reads from the beginning of this section, skips the middle, and reads the final three pages. Again, her voice remains balanced between dramatic and monotonous and she doesn’t diverge from the text, when compared with the book version.

The opening of “The Joyous” describes a morning scene and uses images and language of praise: “LET ME PRAISE LIGHT THAT FALLS ON YOUR MORNING HAIR,” and “The children are waking up. What joy we have here/howls.” These are contrasted by opposing images like “A slime like blood falls over everything. Red runs the river, the East River, red” and “the shit rubbed in the hair.”

Di Prima skips over the middle section of the piece, and then continues with the last three pages. Here, she explains that the prose has “turned” to poem. The contrasting images of praise and pain are apparent in birth: “let the pure pain tear your throat till you spit blood / cry out! rejoice!” The poem ends with images of circularity, which is a direct link to the message of the I-Ching: “the ferriswheel has started up again.”

Next, Di Prima reads a series of Ekphrastic poems that she wrote “as I wandered around the exhibit that day”, referring to a Willem De Kooning exhibit at the L.A. Museum of Art in 1968. Each of the poems is titled after

individual paintings. De Kooning paintings from which Di Prima drew her inspiration can be found in the abstract expressionism section of the [Art History Archive](#).

“Elegy 1939”

In “Elegy 1939”, Di Prima writes specifically about the forms and colors in the painting with no particular variations in voice, which remains consistent throughout this portion of the reading.

“Pink Angels, circa 1945”

Again, this poem appears to be a direct observation, citing colors and medium used (in this case charcoal) along with her own interpretation, where she sees both a “dance of angels” and a “dance of destruction.”

“Women, Wind, and Window 1950”

Di Prima again speaks of the medium and the forms she sees, yet this time moves into a memory evoked by the painting. This memory is of a painting that would hang in her own home a few years later. She becomes momentarily lost in her memories until she turns to another painting, possibly “Pink Angels”, which seems to engage her in quite another manner. She links art with one's own personal experiences, a theme which presents itself repeatedly in the following poem.

“Excavation 1950”

Di Prima is moving through time with the poem, as the painting again evokes memories of people and events in her life that seem to be moments from a life different from the one she now finds herself living. She uses a great deal of imagery to paint a scene long since ended, yet one that is being tied into her present life due to De Kooning's “Excavation”. At the end of the poem she briefly mentions that “The L.A. Museum is built over a tar pit”, an image which she uses at the end of “Excavation”.

“Woman I 1950-1952”

While Di Prima is in part describing what she sees in the painting, she also elaborates on her own interpretation of the woman presented before her, privileging her interpretation over De Kooning's intent. Her choice of words are very evocative, and quite strong, with a tendency toward heavy imagery that, although not physically descriptive, still evokes the sentiments expressed in the painting.

“Door to the River 1960”

Di Prima's poem appears to have been written in the same abstract manner as the painting. They both are far more conceptual and less “story-driven” than the previous poems read. The poem itself is written in stream-of-consciousness and is therefore less direct than her other poems; it seems more impressionistic than descriptive.

“Revolutionary Letter #49”

This poem shows Di Prima taking ideas and concepts from a variety of traditions – political, musical, philosophical, poetic – and reworking them into a radical and transcendent piece of living poetry; it is an invocation to free a variety of figures, all of whom she identifies as “political prisoners.” In her introduction to the poem, Di Prima mentions that it was inspired by protest rallies common in those days: the repetitive chants and the call and response with the audience: people shouting free so-and-so - an endless stream of people who needed to be freed. But the poet then transcends the form, a list of demands, and expands on the ideas beyond the political into the historical, ecological, personal and metaphysical. She also infuses the poem with a syncopated rhythm common in Beat poetry, inspired by bebop in a rhythmic tradition that can be traced back to Africa.

She attacks not just the artificial relationships and constructs of law, class, race, gender and government but everything and anything that constrains or restricts or separates, anything that isn't natural. All of the individuals Di Prima mentions in the opening chant were contemporary and historical figures who fought against the status quo, from revolutionaries like Angela Davis, Native Americans leaders, labor leaders like Big Bill Hayward to religious, philosophical, scientific visionaries like Jesus, Socrates and Galileo. By populating her poem with lists of people and categories of people, by bringing them into the architecture of her art, Di Prima is also firmly rooting her poetry in the American tradition of that great American poet and iconoclast, Walt Whitman.

Missing Poems & Introduction to “Ave”

After some fumbling, Di Prima states that she is missing some poems which she intended to bring; these were poems she had been reading in her travels to schools around the country. Finally she decides upon “Ave”, which she notes ends with a “mantra”, not gibberish.

“Ave”

This poem is the first in *Loba*, and as such, both in the text and in Di Prima’s reading, functions as an invocation of sorts. It is replete with feminine imagery, including woman’s hair, gloves, hat, fur, rags and beads. Di Prima addresses the women of New York City, asking them repeatedly, “Do you wander?” She envisions the woman in just about every physical state possible: praying, cursing, shrieking, singing, pregnant, barefooted, battered. The word “hungry” is repeated three times, which emphasizes desperation and a cry for help. However, Di Prima also emphasizes women’s strength, durability and adaptability. “Ave” ends with a mantra, which could be a personal message from the poet to the women in the poem, in language that speaks to their sisterhood and tightly knit bond.

Interlude: Introduction to “Loba (She-Wolf)”

After a break, Di Prima situates herself in relation to the microphone, then begins to introduce *Loba* by relating a series of experiences she has had – specifically, dreams – involving a goddess, a she-wolf, who was her inspiration for the poem. She reads two quotes which serve as epigraphs to the poem: “It would be very pleasant to die with a wolf woman./It would be very pleasant.” and “A clever man builds a city/A clever woman lays one low.”

“Loba (She-Wolf)”

“*Loba*” is Diane Di Prima’s best known and most ambitious work, which she worked on for most of her writing career. This reading, as she mentions at the beginning, is centered around “*Loba*”. Part One, which she reads here, was published in 1973. The figure of *Loba* can be read as a she-wolf goddess, which Di Prima uses as an archetype for her feminism.

In “*Loba*,” the figure of a powerful woman is introduced. She exerts her authority forcefully in the poem, particularly over a male figure. This woman takes on the form of an animal – a she-wolf – with human characteristics. Di Prima emphasizes the animality of the woman/wolf, citing her bestial characteristics as evidence of her power and strength. In the poem, she is portrayed as preying upon the male’s weaknesses and vulnerability. Themes of immortality, relating back to the goddess figure that Di Prima references as inspirational, run throughout the poem. Di Prima concentrates on the woman/wolf’s body, imagining it in a

variety of fantastical situations, all of which serve to display the loba's strength and dominion. It is also interesting to note Di Prima's treatment of black women, whom she characterizes as sexually potent, and thus powerful in that regard. Though the loba is undeniably savage, and linked, too, to images of brutality, sexuality, and death, she is also idealized in the sense that she embodies a particular kind of wild and feminine strength. In way, the loba is a fantasy of feminism for Di Prima, as she subverts nearly every role or stereotype traditionally assigned to women, and violently lays claim to an entirely new kind of femininity.

Works Cited

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Notes created by students from LI 526 Poetic Voices, Summer 2009: Helene-Stril Rever, Mia Starmer, Jacob Gamage, Hlinna Maza-Hilway, Lindsey Lee, Kevin Factor, Yelena Elkind, Julia Demakis, Peter Barnes