

QUEEN

Elizabeth Duval

(selected excerpts)

Translated from the Spanish by Charlotte Coombe

1

They call it ennui: I walk alone, I wander around the city centre, I order coffees at pavement cafes at the edge of the Latin quarter. Paris is not yet Paris, only a memory, an image of itself: the colour of the Haussmann style rooftop-façade bleeds outside of the postcards; the anhedonia spread among the countless matching buildings is identical. But it is not my intention to write about Paris: a writer must refrain from turning her text, if it is genuine, into a plaything for the reader. Let us just say that there are streets in Paris and that describing them is as pointless as attributing human qualities to them. Of all the things Balzac said, and Balzac said it all, I choose to appropriate this: in Paris I complain about everything, I console myself for everything, I make fun of everything, I forget everything, I want everything, I sample everything, I take everything with passion and abandon everything without concern carelessly. Let's leave the rest aside.

It's not my aim to turn my life into travel writing; even less so to transcribe an intimist journal. In moving to Paris and starting my first year of a Philosophy and Modern Literature degree between two universities —Paris I and Paris III—, what I'm trying to do is to wrap absolutely everything in words, to reduce each and every one of the components of its existence to its position in the essential dialectics between subject and predicate: a very pretentious endeavour, difficult to proclaim without getting tongue-tied. Yes, maybe 'experiencing things' does become 'preparing things for narration'. Of course I've set out on a fictional portrayal of life. Like anyone who deems themselves to have the right to narrate something. This doesn't mean —or doesn't it?— that I'll pursue the idea of love through Aurore, that I'll endorse some word on the eternal feminine; that the train means something other than a train, or that it means absolutely nothing; that things will matter to me differently. But I'm definitely split in two.

I live far from the city centre, in La Queue-en-Brie, an insignificant town with a ridiculous name. People who are from here are called *caudaciens*: it's awful, that their demonym should be the most beautiful thing about a population. Perhaps I'm being unfair: I come from the centre of Madrid, I'm not used to trees or bugs or huge green spaces, I flee from the locals and look down on all *caudaciens*. I know I'm going to start resenting this town: for condemning me to write on one-and-a-half-hour-long journeys, for forcing me to live on the periphery, and most importantly, for forcing me to write a different life to the one lived.

2

I can only write in the present: 'I write'; even 'I was writing' refers to a past present tense which here we transcend, 'I will write' is a transitory future moment. However many possible conceptions of truth there are (*lanthánō*, a lexeme in the Ancient Greek word *aletheia*: truth or disclosure, and the verb for that which escapes notice, that which is done without being perceived; including the action of forgetting), I write my life in the present (and this isn't the same as living it). I want to live my life in the present. If something didn't happen, it somehow becomes an experience once written. If it was really experienced, it was also simultaneously written: actions and words as a unit of meaning. Paris is not a catalogue of imagined, invented, constructed, premeditated emotions: all of Paris —yesterday, today, tomorrow— is written —is inscribed— in the present of whoever lives it, much the same way I begin to live it in early September.

5

@lysduval

Bought three baguettes at LIDL, put the dishwasher on, put the washing machine on, drunk Chablis alone and stayed at home watching Netflix and Fame Academy. Your 40s creep up so fast! Perhaps they'll make a series about me called Sex and the Cité.

I finished off the bottle of wine —white, a cheap Gewürztraminer that I opened the day before yesterday, very sweet, an okay flavour— and here comes the bovarysme. It's really hard to develop a taste for wine without being either bourgeois or more or less upper-middle-class; what I'm doing is a micro-act of micro-politics, of class treason: if Édouard Louis realises, reading Didier Eribon, that tears are politically charged, then so is this wine from LIDL. Paris I has a wine society that I'll never join. Bearing in mind the existence of a pavement café on Rue de Faubourg Saint-Denis that serves the worst two-euro vinegar-Merlot you can imagine, wine itself is a bourgeois extravagance. *Encore triste. This is so sad; Alexa, play Despacito.*

María and I drink a couple of beers before catching the last train to Paris. Rania and her friends are waiting for us near Bir Hakeim, so that we can make our way to a party on a boat on the banks of the Seine. We all succeed —at midnight, once it is free for us: happy, beautifully and aesthetically exploited women-objects— in getting in. The party has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, but the mass of drunk and rhythmless people stinking up the place, makes it way less classy. The only solution is for me to become a drunk, rhythmless person too.

The night is dull. María spends the whole time on her phone, in a corner, talking to Marieta.

I throw myself into dancing with Rania: we yell the names of Flamenco singers at each other and tap our heels to make fun of the lame French music they're playing. We find out there's a room playing Latin rhythms and slow reggaeton; we practically sprint there. When she pulls, and starts making out with one, then two, three guys, I get so bored that I almost do the same; I grind my hips against other hips until someone kisses me on the neck: their saliva is the anaesthetic that prepares me for the operation, then I think what the hell, and respond a little —not a lot— when he slips his tongue in my mouth. My mouth is dry, I'm royally bored and I'm starting to feel tired: I say *avec plaisir, ciao* and go up on deck, to the prow of the boat.

It's impossible to smoke in peace here, alone. Every time I go outside, a different man comes over to talk to me, chewing my ear off about how *bellissima* I am, inviting me to do this or that, maybe we can go out for dinner, or to whatever club I want, he'll reserve a table and I wouldn't have to do anything apart from spend the night dancing and drinking. I swerve them all, being very polite about it. They interrogate me if I go back inside too, but it's even more pathetic down there. While I smoke, I find time to think about the sex of angels, about *Being and Nothingness*, about Husserl, about Merleau-Ponty and how he projects himself onto Cézanne, about speculative realism, about *Glas* by Derrida, and his reading of Hegel blended with a problematisation of autobiography. Today Rania asked me if I'm bi or lesbian. I said I was bi without much conviction. Queer phenomenology: I lack a feeling of orientation, as Sara Ahmed would say.

I don't know how many more hours the boat will be open. Confession: I've been with very few men in my life; when I have, it has been despite the fact that they were men, and not because I was attracted to them or their masculine qualities —what are masculine qualities? And new masculinities?— and the only ones I've considered genuinely attractive have been those who held positions of power or were unattainable. I don't see sexuality as a closed question. Sexual orientation is a roundabout. I think I missed the exit for bisexuality.

I wait half an hour at Passy for the first train, along with one of Rania's hook-ups. She and her friend are going in a car with two Latino boys we met during the *soirée*: seeing the two of them in that car —in any car, with any group of strange men— gives me shivers, makes my body tense up, and worse still, I don't know where María is; I try to leave it until I have battery and can call someone: I've got enough to deal with, without worrying what might happen to the others. But I won't be able to help it, and even with my phone dead, I'll want to send a message to check they've got home safe: it's the same bleak pact that is reified whenever a friend is asked to send a message to confirm they arrived safely; whenever a girl walks home alone —or accompanied—; whenever it is night time.

Paris is freezing in early autumn: I look the same way —with some disdain— at all the people travelling on the first trains of the day. The city is permeating me. I meet María in Champigny station: I breathe slightly easier, as I smoke my last cigarette. We don't say a word to

one another.

7

I make an effort with the lie of writing Paris in the present, but this city is a perpetual simple past. Like Madrid? No, they are two very different nostalgias. Madrid is written in the past because it is incapable of remembering itself, because it forgets, it is forgotten, because it is built on forgetfulness and amnesia. Paris is written in the present because it is always grasping at an ancient ideal, so far from what it really is or could ever be; it is built like a city at war with itself, with its possibility, with its imagined past. *Mais ici, la vanité résume toutes les passions.*

10

From a very young age, I got used to my words being constructed in opposition to what I was saying. I quickly learned how the masses react to interviews. My first appearance on *El Intermedio*, at only fourteen, was censored: after its broadcast, the programme received a call threatening legal action and they immediately took down the clip from their website. What I'd said was that, an appointment at the Gender Identity Unit at Hospital Ramón y Cajal—which at that time was still known as the UTIG, or Gender Identity Disorder Unit—, the sociologist working as the patient manager cordially informed me that, if at any point I regretted my hasty decision—read between the lines: *passing fancy*—to undertake the glorious, Apolline path of the transsexual, then “my only way out would be to throw myself off a bridge” (and she was even kind enough to give an example: “like the Puente Matilla in Paseo de la Castellana, just down the street”). The censored portion was, of course, the headline of the interview (which is still up on YouTube).

From then on, an entire career built on fashioning myself into more of a spokesperson for a community, than an individual. Interviews on various media sources discussing my personal experience and my vision of the community. I made the cover of *Tentaciones* at sixteen, an honour shared that year with C. Tangana and Lana del Rey. I wasn't interesting, evidently, as an autonomous person: I was interesting because I served as an example of transsexuality that was fairly consistent with the canons of beauty and class. I was a *comfortable* version of what it meant to be trans. I took advantage of it. Lots of opportunities came about. But I quickly lost interest. What did I stand to gain from being a cliché? What was left over for me if I became *the prominent trans public figure belonging to a particular generation?*

What ultimately remained of me in all that; in the attention I got from the media, people, special interests? Paris is, in this sense, a way of distancing myself from that existence as a public

figure. I haven't yet had any conversations here in which I've come out of the closet, and I hope not to. I haven't had to live *like a trans person*, and the reason I haven't had to live like one is because of all the privileges I enjoy. I don't feel the need to narrate me to myself or to produce a narrative in which being trans takes centre stage.

The call reminds me, however, that I cannot completely escape from the external interest in me being trans. I suppose that part of my repudiation stems from that. I, in an individualistic, privileged and self-interested decision, proclaim the following: I'm trying to forget myself, thank you very much.

18

At 2 am we make an unhealthy amount of chocolate biscuit cake. We spill a load of milk—I admit that we are maybe not at our best in terms of coordination—and set about cleaning it up. Mixing the chocolate with the milk, butter and sugar becomes as sensorially satisfying as those ASMR videos on Instagram of someone cutting bars of soap into tiny little cubes or mixing different coloured pastes together. After a few minutes, Tamara tells us she's freaking out, that she's going to lie down for a bit, and we should wake her up later. María, Marieta, Pablo and I sit round the table drinking rum, smoking more, catching up. Tamara sleeps peacefully.

I pretend that I'm pissed off with Pablo because I miss being pissed off with Pablo. We decide the best thing, to put an end to the bickering, is a family therapy session. It takes us a while to get going, but in the end we say everything we needed to say to one another: that Pablo is short-sighted, practically blind to long distances, because he only thinks about what comes immediately next, because he messes up, because he treads carefree, treacherously from mistake to mistake, but he is so good, his heart is so golden, and when he loves, he devotes himself to the objects of his love; that Marieta, so closed-off sometimes, so distant, so aloof, so *repli sur soi* and obstinate in her solipsism, is also the feeling of being where you want or should be, and nobody else can achieve that feeling, nobody else; that María should love herself, should value herself, because she is wonderful beyond her sacrifices for others, beyond taking on so many burdens, because behind the indifference there's infinite tenderness, and I wish she wouldn't close herself off, she shouldn't close herself off; that I, “behind the narcissistic façade, behind the megalomania and the self-centeredness and all my flaws and deadly sins, I can also love and I do love and I love passionately and deeply the people that I love”; and because we say all this to each other, because we love each other, because we are our home, we cry.

Night has already fallen the next day by the time head into Paris.

Architecture, grand narratives, description of the contemporary. Théo thinks that it is really hard to find beauty in technology (*technology* in a concrete, particular sense, *specialized* like everything under post-Fordist capitalism; that is, mobile phones and apps and databases and the cloud and hard discs). Apolline and Blanche are in disagreement, and we argue about it on campus at Censier. We wonder what might be written about our time; what the future will retain of what is written today.

“The 20th century has exhausted the possibilities of formal renewal: we are condemned to stagnation.” It is impossible to describe the beauty of our campus without resorting to metaphor, says Théo, and metaphor is too easy a trope. How can one describe the concrete? And the sound of the trains? How can one *show* the scene of lots of people, in the same place, looking at their phones? And would that not in itself just be a repetition —with other things, other objects— of situations that have been narrated better, that *were* better, that were more beautiful. Apolline says that something new will come along, something we won’t be able to see coming, or classify because that’s how the history of literature works. Like that old dogma of the most structuralist Marxism: ‘wait for the material conditions necessary for revolution’; or maybe we have to catalyse them ourselves, I mutter. Théo has less faith than me, but he smiles when I say it. I share a cigarette with him, and then we go to buy food at the Franprix across the street.

He is disappointed with the level of the conversation. He did a year of sixth-form college in Montpellier. So did Zoé; Zoé is his ex, they recently broke up. I don’t offer my condolences because he is still smiling.

I talk to Théo about Aurore and the situation. I tell him the story. I read him our conversations on Instagram. There’s a *souterrain*, he says. We talk about his concept of underground relationships. “Among all these people there are a countless number of connections, things we don’t know, conversations that’ve been had that we haven’t witnessed, land that seems unblemished, and yet it is crisscrossed, delimited by an infinite number of routes. The underground is all of these connections, like a metro map, like every one of the lines that connect us to one another, lines we can never know about.” We talk about his concept of centres of gravity. “Every person has several centres of gravity in their life that exert a simultaneous pull, without which they would fall into the void. Some days, they are closer to the edge than other days. It is when they start to fail —to fall apart, to lose their pull, their magnetism—that we come to realise the weight of existence.” Aurore seems to be a centre of gravity for you, he says. More like a narrative arc, I reply.

We spend evening after evening drinking three-euro pints.

(...)

The yellow vests movement contains a very interesting allegory: the entire history of humanity summarised via one *people*; a working class, peripheral, subordinate people: a people who perform their holy ritual on Saturdays: Saturdays as an expression of anger, abandonment, revolt. If all of this had happened in the 18th century, would it not hold almost mythical status now? Massive congregations, Saturday after Saturday, constant protests for a life worth living, a tireless struggle that renews itself every week, becomes multi-faceted.

At first, nobody really knows what to think; further down the line, nobody really knows that to think. Saying “I am a *gilet jaune*” is almost like saying “I am working class”, is almost like saying “I am a proletarian”, is almost like saying, “I too physically suffer the consequences of a system that means I have nothing else, no other value than my productivity, my capacity for work, my hands: that I’ve got nothing to lose.” Can I say that I’m a yellow vest from my seat in a lecture hall at the Sorbonne, from this university that has selected me on the strength of my portfolio, from this university that has excluded so many young people from working class areas who went to working class schools for working class people and therefore obtained excellent grades that are worth less than the mediocre grades of their posh neighbours in the capital? Can I complain about not being accepted to the Louis-le-Grand or Henri VI with a 19.56/20 because I didn’t go to a French lycée, because my education system was Spanish, because I’m not *French* —not a *certain type* of French— because I cannot even dream of that illusive social mobility? As someone who can, with my parents’ money, pay for fairly spacious accommodation on the outskirts of Paris, and who has enough money in my account to drink regularly and eat three meals a day —easier said than done, in times like these— without a part-time job, can I too call myself poor, a *gilet jaune*, just because I’ve seen my mother working as a chambermaid and sweeping cemeteries to help me get ahead, because one day we had our electricity cut off, because both my parents have been unemployed at the same time, because we went through a really shitty time during the crisis? Doesn’t my current situation invalidate all this if I am *not at all affected by these things* if I am *not at all affected* by each and every one of the gaping wounds incurred by the *gilets jaunes*?

Supposing it doesn’t ease the pain of distance; assuming that me walking side by side with the yellow vests, that doesn’t mean that I’m going to throw one on any day soon. But it is one of the few *moral* options that I have left. How much truth is there in the statement *étudiants, gilets jaunes, même Macron, même combat*? If only it was complete truth. The reality is that there is *some, perhaps*. That doesn’t stop me from feeling that the revolt —*their* revolt— also belongs in some way to me, belongs to *everyone in some way*: a very broad *everyone*, an *everyone* that becomes *us*. And the first-person plural is incredibly powerful.

It is possible, even desirable, to grow up lesbian and trans and believe yourself a legitimate contender to the universal throne. There's no reason why 'aspiring to the throne' should be understood exclusively as a man's ambition.

An Apartment on Uranus is an incredibly interesting text. Paul B. Preciado has the grandiloquence of a man. It is not my aim to amend all of his words, to deny the right to self-determination that he engages when he declares, "I am not a man. I am not a woman. I am not heterosexual. I am not homosexual. I am not bisexual. I am a dissident of the gender-sex binary system. I am the multiplicity of the cosmos trapped in a binary political and epistemological system, shouting in front of you. I am a uranist confined inside the limits of technoscientific capitalism."¹ But it is a priest's sermon. There are no nuns offering Mass. However radical he might be in his dissidence, in the street, Preciado is now seen *as a man*, and I am now catcalled from passing cars, propositioned, followed along the street at night, overwhelmed with attempts to hook up with me. Dissecting part by part the sacred words: "I am not a man" carries a completely different political weight as a statement, than "I am not a woman". "I am not a man", interpreted as an affirmation based on Preciado's body, is a confirmation of otherness, yes, but it is also the denial of the privilege granted to it. You can choose not to be a man. No problem. But now the streets after dark are yours, *as they are for a man*; now, *like a man*, you don't have to cross over to the other pavement when you see a group of five guys approaching; now, *unlike women*, you are not the consumer object that gets free entry into nightclubs; now, *like men*, you have a platform and you write for *Libération* and you are the most interesting trans person of your time, *the way men are always the most interesting of their time, the way men always aspire to the throne*: according to Article 57.1 of the Spanish Constitution, succession to the Crown will follow the standard order of birth right with regards to representation and primogeniture, where the earlier lineage is preferred over later lineages; and following this reasoning, the closest degree will be preferred over the most distant; the male will be preferred above the female, and where there are children of the same sex, the older will be preferred above the younger.

Reading Preciado is always fascinating. *Testo Junkie* is an amazing text which lurches between rich sources of profound and relevant theory and inappropriate outbursts of rampant misogyny. As much as I admire your theoretical approach, what gives you the right, Preciado, to believe you're in a position to proclaim "the legendary lack of courage"² of Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Angela Davis, or Judith Butler? Do you think, Preciado, that your body is

¹ *An Apartment on Uranus*, Paul B. Preciado (trans. Charlotte Mandell), MIT Press, 2020, p. 29.

² *An Apartment on Uranus*, Paul B. Preciado (trans. Charlotte Mandell), MIT Press, 2020, p. 99

fragile? I am not questioning whether you have been before. I am not questioning what you have been before, I am not questioning your cross-border existence. But now, you have a passport.

In the last section of *An Apartment on Uranus*, which was published as an extract in early 2018 in *Libération*, Preciado says, “I am not speaking here as a man who belongs to the dominant class, to whom the masculine gender was assigned at birth, and who was brought up as a member of the governing class, of those to whom the right is granted or rather from whom it is demanded [...] that they exercise masculine sovereignty.”³

Paul B. Preciado has the grandiloquence of a man. His articles are the alternative-postmodern-radical equivalent of King Felipe’s Christmas Eve address. As a woman, I’d have to take a much humbler position: that of the later lineage, the more distant relation, the female, and the younger in age.

Despentes writes to Preciado in the foreword. Reading it is, at times, almost too intimate; like private correspondence you shouldn’t be reading. “Today no one on the Street would think of correcting themselves with ‘excuse me, madam’ after calling you ‘sir’ and then getting confused, not really understanding how to proceed. Today you are trans and when we’re together on the street it’s not that men speak to you better, it’s that women don’t behave in the same way anymore. They adore you. It used to be that straight girls didn’t really know what to make of this [...] now they adore you, whether they’re walking their dogs in the street or selling cheese or are waitresses in a restaurant — women think you’re their type and they let you know as all women do...”⁴

Paul B. Preciado is loved as a self-help book that is infinitely more complex, and helps us to feel better about ourselves. The reader loves Paul B. Preciado because, heterosexual or not, they think he’s their type, this is made known with small details, because that queer-insurrectionist-borderline posturing is, as Despentes says, so sexy, because that pride is *so sexy*.

My pride will never be sexy. Nor do I aspire to wear the alternative-postmodern-radical crown. It will be clear for all to see, when I am queen, that I have become that *in spite of everything*: in spite of Article 57.1 of the Spanish Constitution, despite being a woman, despite men, despite the pharmaco-pornographic regime, in spite of not even having an Airbnb on Uranus for three days. My conquest will therefore be much more powerful symbolically. In the long line leading to Paul B. Preciado—for the umpteenth time, the alternative-postmodern-radical king—, including Felipe VI—the groomed-article 155-Bourbon king—, perhaps it was the offspring of my namesake who could best foresee the emblem of my illegitimate conquest, my usurpation: *non sufficit orbis*. The world is not enough.

Paul B. Preciado has the grandiloquence of someone who has been accepted as a man. I

³ *An Apartment on Uranus*, Paul B. Preciado (trans. Charlotte Mandell), MIT Press, 2020, p. 259

⁴ *An Apartment on Uranus*, Paul B. Preciado, Foreword by Virginie Despentes (trans. Charlotte Mandell), MIT Press, 2020, p. 15

have the very different grandiloquence of someone who society has accepted as a woman: mine is born out of a violence that continues here, that remains alive, that will not heal. Let him have the border: my territory is the sea; my legitimate legacy is that “legendary lack of courage⁵”. I will be queen, so that there are no more kings in the world. Because I too, Preciado, perhaps even more so than you, can say that I am, in the present, in the singular, a lover with chest wide open. I am not going to insinuate that every breath I take is a revolutionary act. I am not going to drag humanity with me into a new world, nor am I going to proclaim myself ahead of my time, a visionary, a prophet. No: I, a daughter of my century, a girl of the year two thousand, aware that I’ll never be able to give birth to that “strange land, in which children who bear the bullet are welcome”⁶, ask only to reign over it. I will live to have a bullet in my chest.

73

In an early version of this text, every reference to the reader (*el lector*) was in the masculine. Even though we call it the generic masculine, the universal, inclusive masculine, even though it supposedly includes or *by rule includes* every person. In writing it I’ve become aware of the contradiction of talking about you, dear *lectora*, as a *lector*. Because my relationship with you, — the author’s relationship with whoever reads her— is always one of love and desire, with everything that implies: there’s no other possible explanation. And my desire is articulated in the feminine.

You’ll forgive the inaccuracy, but anything else, absolutely anything else, would be to hide behind words. And I want to stop hiding behind words. Hear me out.

75

The truth is that I am unable to put a face to you. I don’t know how you’re going to take this book. No, it’s not just because I know that all my life experiences are potential subjects of my routine chronicles to being routinely chronicled, of being written down: it’s because I understand it, because I can grasp it. Everything is a performance. People don’t change their behaviour greatly when I tell them that. They can’t keep in mind all the time that any interaction with me could end up as a narrative. How would they act if it remained that way? It doesn’t matter. We will not understand one another. You will construct a biased interpretation of this. And that’s fine. I can’t hold anything against you. I couldn’t ask you for anything. I couldn’t ask any more of you. You play your part. That’s all there is to it.

⁵ *An Apartment on Uranus*, Paul B. Preciado (trans. Charlotte Mandell), MIT Press, 2020, p. 99

⁶ *An Apartment on Uranus*, Paul B. Preciado (trans. Charlotte Mandell), MIT Press, 2020, p. 70