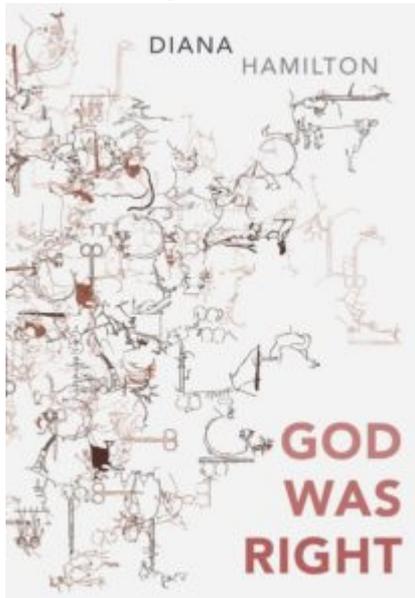


An Education: Diana Hamilton's God Was Right

written by Diana Arterian | September 9, 2019



God Was Right by Diana Hamilton
[Ugly Duckling Press](#), November 2018
144 pages / [Amazon](#)

In her collection *God Was Right*, Diana Hamilton engages with an array of topics—sexual consent, “bad writing,” non-human animals (cats and goats in particular). Despite the variety of subjects in the book, Hamilton is largely focused on introspection and ethics, and what we can learn there—and, she notes, in reinvestigating her own ideas and experiences: “This is one reason I’m writing a book of essays structured around repudiations of prior opinions: rereading myself, I reject what I’ve read before, write again, reread, write again, reread, eventually let an editor become a reader.”

The use of “rereading myself” versus, say, “rereading my writing” is a telling and specific choice, considering the content of *God Was Right*. Hamilton is able to employ what initially seems to be meditations on her interiority (like Barthes and Montaigne, both of whom she references), but maps those thoughts out onto the larger world. In one piece, she considers how she attempts to write about goats, about donkeys, shifting soon to how humans interact with non-human animals—how we write about them, think about them, eat them or not. At one point she describes her failed seduction of a man who, instead of having sex, begins to observe a variety of characteristics of her body, the pentagram shape on her lingerie: “I completely fell apart in the face of what followed, more noticing of my body without desire as a response to noticing, / —we can do this to animals.” Hamilton then describes her own objectifying move when trying to write about “the love of animals,” the feeling when seeing a human ear grafted onto a

mouse's back:

I thought the uselessness of this ear,
which is just a burdensome, flightless wing,
said something Important about people and/or listening.

But it is not a poem about the mouse.

Hamilton has the ability to see herself and the mouse in the same position, and wanting to avoid putting anything into a position of object at all costs. The issue being “–The mouse was asked to go to work to teach us about a non-mouse purpose, which is not like a love letter at all.” And indeed much of this book circles around or provides different kinds of instruction or education. Hamilton supplies us a list of questions for us to proffer when engaging with work to avoid the good/bad dichotomy, which ranges from “what formal strategies is the writer using?” to “if this poem hurts people, are they the people I want to hurt, too?”

Hamilton's own formal strategies vary from brief lineated pieces to straightforward prose, yet most often lingers in-between with long essay-ish pieces that employ line breaks within sentences for emphasis, em-dashes, indentation, frequently embracing the power of space between lines to allow for beats, inviting the reader to pause and absorb the statement more deeply prior to moving on. Though labeled “poetry,” the majority of the pages-long pieces bear titles that point to prose: “Persuasive Essay for Sexual Education,” “Autobiography of Fatness,” “Five-Paragraph Essay on Third Heartbreak.” This includes lineated epistolary, and series of tercets falling under “¶ 1.” and “¶ 2.,” to follow the five-paragraph form while also breaking it apart. “Academia fucked up my style,” she writes at one point. It seems, however, Hamilton is more than willing to clap back through her forms. Academia clearly has impacted her citations, which vary from Jane Austen to Neel Ahuja to Franz Fanon to Miguel de Cervantes. Then, too, are the more contemporary references from within the relatively confined literary world such as *HTMLGIANT*, the editors of Commune Editions, and the poem “Rape Joke.”

While there are pieces in *God Was Right* that operate in first-, second-, and third-person, because some of the starkest images in one recur later, the book reads as carefully and revealingly personal. The shift between these points of view certainly changes the reader's relationship to the information they receive when they resurface. From when a character, having sex, “realizes how bad her yeast infection is, hides the pain, // ...her whole vagina feels like it's on fire, / she rolls onto her stomach so he can't see her cry” to

When I

was seventeen, I went to a gynecologist for a recurring yeast infection that turned out (after six months of incredible pain) to have been transmitted by the then-boyfriend.

The initial image so evocative and memorable the reader will remember, realizing the “she” in the prior piece was likely not a fictionalized experiment for the author, but rather the author herself. And then one comes to realize this is likely the case on the other third-person pieces, too.

That said, Hamilton largely operates in first-person, focusing in on others’ objectifying of a subject. In one piece, she meditates of notions of bodyweight, disappointing theoretical approaches to the topic, and her own experience. She writes, “nothing about my size is interesting / except its changes,” proceeding to describe a notable weight loss due to terrible anxiety that manifested in fainting and irritable bowel syndrome. The response from friends: “What is your secret? You look amazing.” This is educational, too: you must suffer, be barely functional, and you will receive praise—possibly even jealousy.

In these moments, I thought, what a way to die, the body deciding not to turn food into self, the self becoming “beautiful” for there being less of her, to be prettier every day until one day, so pretty, the great relief of collapse, not the whiteout of a panic attack, but the permanent one, where you never have to go to a party again

This is closely followed by her description of her mother’s weight loss when Hamilton was younger, also because of health complications (albeit far more severe—cancer and a hysterectomy). When going shopping for swimsuits together, Hamilton felt “sad [my mom] took a smaller size than I did”—and not because it pointed to her mother’s frailty and illness. “[O]ur souls are eaten away so early that we are jealous of our mom’s / weight loss due to cancer in the swimsuit aisle.”

Hamilton maintains an intimacy even when considering potentially impersonal topics such as phenomena in the writing world, the value of “bad writing” as a mode for men to take up in order to make themselves as vulnerable as women writers—destabilizing the status quo. This is largely because she sustains the outlook, as she writes, “that writing is inextricably tied to subjectivity, and to the body.” The most activating portions of the text are often those that seem to focus on these ideas most explicitly. A piece on high school sexual education that moves between interestingly forward-thinking (the teacher at one point “is talking / about ways to eat out a menstruating woman”) to horrifying for its lack of insight (as when the teacher states, “Ideally, you shouldn’t sleep with anyone / you have to persuade to do so”) to breath-stealing for its depressing complexity (as when this same teacher states:

regret and rape are different

And even certain kinds of regret
will mess up later sex that you otherwise might have liked,

and you want to look out for that future self, to give her
the chance to enjoy being pushed against the wall

of a shower without having to map that wall onto
other walls she was pushed against.

The impact of this variety of information, its variety of potential damage upon a high schooler attempting to enjoy sexual encounters, is put into relief in the piece that follows: "Essay on Bad Writing." Evoking, particularly, [Sarah Vap's *The End of the Sentimental Journey*](#), Hamilton considers the gendered nature of "bad" writing, what gestures men can employ while women must avoid them to survive. For example: "when a straight man takes a luxurious bath in his poem, it's a signifier for a more interesting relationship to gender" and for a woman? "it's a suicide note." This fact becomes particularly disturbing when Hamilton is solicited to write a "negative review" of [Patricia Lockwood's "Rape Joke"](#)—"the (male) editors of the magazine wanted to criticize Lockwood's much-circulated and much-loved poem," Hamilton writes, "but felt that they needed a woman to do it." These editors ultimately pen a scree of their own that engages in multiple levels of bigotry regarding Lockwood and others. Yet the trouble lies, for Hamilton, in how many respond to the critique—in giving attention to its being poor quality, its being "bad writing." Hamilton, prior to landing on an explicit riposte to this response ("Fuck you if you think bad writing is more offensive than rape"), also ponders her initial response to the solicitation ("I found it / confusing, but relatively innocuous") and, at first, that the editors' rant was an example of bad writing over an example of chauvinism. Her willingness to put herself under scrutiny for these responses, owning that trouble, is the heart of this book's politics. Beyond this, however, how what we have been fed in education, what we have seen and done, can impact our initial impulses, is the most insidious presence of all in our lives.

Lately, everything

I write refutes something

I wrote earlier...

This makes my logic so circular, so directed at myself
that it's hard to know where to begin

Near the end of the book Hamilton writes, "we are told... 'Don't think about it too much.' /...Why does God tempt us to think about it too much if he doesn't want us to? // Because he wants us to suffer." And while an anxious mind can certainly be its own undoing if allowed "To this about it took much" (whatever "it" is), Hamilton illustrates time and again in this collection the value and power of meditation on the internal and external worlds, to reread the self again and again, not fearing the contradictions that may

surface—all despite the suffering that may come along with it. As she states, “Poetry makes arguments, I mean: / That’s this book’s argument.”