

PETER QUARTERMAIN / Disturbing Poetry: Robert Duncan's Early Work¹

I want to compose a poetry with the meaning entirely occult, that is—with the meaning contained not as a jewel is contained in a box but as the inside of a box is contained in a box.

—Robert Duncan²

At birth, Duncan was named Edward Howard Duncan after his father, but his adoptive parents renamed him Robert Edward Symmes when they took him into their care;³ Duncan kept that name until, as he recorded in a notebook in 1941, “I have changed my name and disowned my family completely. Now, Robert Duncan” (Notebook 4, CU-BANC). Yet it would be more than twenty-five years before he legally changed it, on 16 February 1967, to Robert Edward Duncan. The circumstances of his birth and adoption appear more than once in his writing, and questions of identity, self, and the person permeate his notebooks, his reading, and his work. On 23 April 1967 he wrote to Robin Blaser of “the contrast between the authentic in poetry (you) and the derivative (me)” (“Returning” 60).

His mother, Marguerite “Daisy” (Carpenter) Duncan, died within hours of his birth on 7 January 1919 in Oakland, California, and his father, a day-labourer, soon put him up for adoption. On 1 August (Lammas-day) Fayette Harris Philip (who would become his Aunt Faye) told her sister about him, and on 4 August he was taken into the care of Edwin Joseph Symmes (an architect) and Minnehaha Harris Symmes. In their quest for a child the Symmes, both theosophical Hermeticists, had sought the guidance of astrological charts provided by the Oakland Hermetic Brotherhood, and they returned to that guidance in 1920 when they adopted another child, who

1 This essay is a preliminary version of the “Introduction” to *The Collected Early Poetry and Plays of Robert Duncan*, edited by Peter Quartermain, to be published by the University of California Press, probably in 2011.

2 From a letter to James Broughton, recorded in Notebook 5 (CU-BANC). Duncan gave this notebook to Robin Blaser as a 1952 birthday gift.

3 For much of the biographical information on Duncan's early years I am deeply indebted to Lisa Jarnot, whose *Ambassador from Venus: Robert Duncan*, is indispensable. I also draw on Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as a Homosexual in Society*, to whose data Jarnot frequently supplies correction.

they named Barbara Eleanor Symmes. "I was adopted by astrology and as an infant I understood I was of the last generation of Atlantis," Duncan said in 1982 ("Wind and Sea" 67). Household talk would at times turn on such questions as whether or not there had been aeroplanes in Atlantis, or the date and nature of the impending destruction of the New Atlantis which they believed America to be. Duncan's childhood, even before he could read, was filled with story, not only of Atlantis but of demonic possession and darkness as well as benign inspiration and light: "Greek, Hebrew and Germanic myth, along with family lore of early pioneer days in the West" (TLM 2). Along with Andrew Lang's "coloured" Fairy Books, Frank L. Baum's Oz books became lifelong companions, and the world of the Symmes, conventional in most respects, was a world suffused with hidden meanings, ancient lore, signs and wonders, matters occulted from ordinary view. In such a world, books like George MacDonald's *Lilith* and *Phantastes* were to be read as coded truths from the world of the eternal, stories written not for children but for the child-like: "What can it matter that neither you nor your child should know what it means?" MacDonald asked in *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Stories*: "It is there not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning." Such stories, "speaking," as Duncan later put it, "from the realm of lost or hidden truth" (TLM 8), were a source for recurrent discussion and analysis in family conversations, a practice echoed in Duncan's own poetics: "I study what I write as I study out any mystery. A poem, mine or anothers, is an occult document, a body awaiting vivisection, analysis, X-ray," he wrote in 1953 ("Pages" [2]), and from 1947 and even earlier his notebooks began intermittently but persistently to devote much space to exercises in phonetics and extensive reading in linguistics, to close phonological analysis of poems. "I've got to have the roots of words," he told Denise Levertov in 1958, "the way the language works, at my fingertips" (Duncan/Levertov 120).

The practice of poetry, both writing and reading it (for Duncan the distinction was largely artificial), was a natural extension of his family's occult interests and practice; his own childhood experience vividly fed his insistence, in the first place that much of the world is in fact hidden and calls out to be discerned—"things and events strive to speak" he would say in 1961, writing *The H.D. Book*—and in the second that the child's vision is free of the impediments of adult habits—"Can a child," he scornfully asked, "be a banker?" ("Pages" [3]). His deep distrust of such "adultery," as he sometimes called it, informs his later political interests and activity—his

passionate opposition not only to the Korean War, for example, in *Faust Foutu* (1953), but his outraged offence at “the Roosevelt panacea for the ills of the profit system, the Permanent War Economy” (“Introduction,” *The Years As Catches*). His own inner conflict, which saw the power of the State as related to his own power as poet, “but turned to purposes of domination, exploitation and destruction,” is part and parcel of his necessity to find disturbance at the heart of the poem. All this inflects his attitude toward childhood, which cannot be seen simply as an instance of Duncan as a Late Romantic (which in most respects he is), nor can it be construed simply as a matter of taking all experience, including reading and writing, as a great adventure (which Duncan did). It is also a perceptual habit, almost perhaps a family trait, somewhat forcefully reinforced by a childhood accident. In 1922 at Yosemite, where the family sporadically but constantly lived (Edwin Symmes had a long-term contract there), the three-year old Robert fell, running across the snow, the sun-glasses he was obliged to wear (because he was snow-blind) broke, and—as he says in “A Sequence of Poems for H.D.’s Birthday” (collected in *Roots and Branches*)—“that explains how I was blinded and came to be cross-eyed....the vertical and horizontal displacement in vision that later became separated....One image to the right and above the other.” Occasionally, in later years in public readings or classes one eye would be fixed on the page, the other disconcertingly roaming. Such an overlay of images deeply inflected his poetry. In later poetry (most obviously in *Bending the Bow*) the poem began to be split, caesuras dividing the line left and right. But more importantly, that “double reminder always” in his vision peopled his daily world with presences, the child having to learn how to “point to the one that is really there.” At the same time, what with the household myths that were always before him in family conversation, the child had to learn also to heed those superimpositions, recognise those visible “signs and wonders, felt presences or nearnesses of meaning, where we must follow in trust” (*TLM* 2). So, inevitably, when in 1953 he heard Helen Adam reading Blake, he would instantly recognise a kindred childlike spirit in both.

By the time the Symmes family, following horoscopic advice, moved to Bakersfield in 1927 when Duncan was 8, he had started writing poems; by the time he left Emerson Junior High School in 1932, when he was 13, he had learned to fit in, joining the Dramatic Club and thereby acting in plays written by his class, writing for the school’s monthly magazine *The Emersonian* and becoming its Chief Editor, and officiating at what Ekbert Faas calls “most leading functions” (35) at the school—but none

of them athletic. At the very much larger Kern County Union High School (1932-1936) he once again took part in the Dramatic Club's productions, and contributed to the school newspaper *Blue and White* and its literary magazine *The Target*. But, as Duncan reports in *The H.D. Book*, the family, respectable in the closed community of Bakersfield, kept a low profile, quiet about its Hermeticism, its conversations about Atlantis, its discussions of the Kabbala. At school, it was no secret that he was gay though he never declared it,⁴ but despite the wide range of his activities and his mild popularity, he was more the outsider than he had been at Emerson; as he said in an interview in 1980 "It was clear even in high school, that I wouldn't have a second profession, and that I would be just a poet" (Cohn/O'Donnell 520). Such nonconformist ambition found encouragement in Edna Keogh, whose English classes in his final year of high school, 1935-1936, became (as he put it in *The H.D. Book*) "a realm of expectancy for me" as she pushed a select group, "set apart from the mass of those attending high school," into "our own explorations." Under her tutelage the sixteen-year-old Duncan read a range of modernist avant-garde work emphatically outside "the matter of a prescribed course," including Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* and Woolf's *The Waves*, poems by Ezra Pound and H.D. His homosexuality, of course, set him further apart. On one occasion in the fall of 1935—after his father's death from heart attack that September—a young man attacked him (perhaps after their sexual intercourse, the details are obscure) and beat him so badly about the head that he briefly ended up in hospital, the police quizzing him about his assailant. It would not be until Duncan entered the University of California as a freshman in 1936 that he could, clear of his mother's watchful eye and her skeptical opposition to his determination to be a poet, enter homosexual relationships more securely.

Duncan's at times intense engagement with politics, which started almost as soon as he arrived at Berkeley, would mesh nicely with his writerly ambitions. Joining the staff of *The Occident*, run by the English Club at Berkeley, he joined too the American Student Union (more radical than the Young Communist League), became editor of its news-sheet *Campus Review*, and with Trotskyist Viriginia Admiral started a little magazine, *Epitaph*, which only lasted one issue. In the process he discovered how to join as well as tap networks of little magazines, and how not only to publish his work but to maintain *complete* control over its publication—a principle he could not stead-

4 I owe this and related information to Ken Hooper, who as archivist at Bakersfield High School has examined pertinent papers and also spoken with some of Duncan's classmates.

fastly follow until after the publication of *Bending the Bow* in 1968, when he began to publish his own work privately. At Berkeley he read the work of T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound—*The Cantos* enthralled him—and he was active in literary as well as student political life both on and off campus. But in December 1938 he left Berkeley for Philadelphia to join his lover Ned Fahs, who had got a job teaching at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, thus beginning a somewhat peripatetic existence which began with a Christmas visit, along with Ned, to James and Blanche Cooney at The Phoenix Community and Phoenix Press on Maverick Road in Woodstock, N.Y.—where he met Anaïs Nin. He would spend the summer at Phoenix after he broke with Fahs in April or May 1940, but also spend much time in Manhattan, part of Nin's circle along with Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen, George Barker, Edgar Varèse. Over the next few years his itinerant existence included three months in the army (at Fort Knox) which ended with a dishonorable discharge on 25 June 1941 as a "sexual psychopath." Working as a typist was his fall-back position, but he also worked as a dishwasher in Provincetown, as well as on a farm run by the Cooneys in Ashfield, Massachusetts, worked as a stockman in shipyards back in California and as a travelling salesman for Dell Books in Boston. Knocking about is perhaps the best way to summarise a life marked not only by a brief army career but by an almost equally brief marriage to Marjorie McKee in 1943—he called it "my graduating degree in psychoanalysis" (letter to Robin Blaser, 14 November 1955 CU-BANC), and recorded something of its flavour in his short story "Love." In those years he enthusiastically developed his interest in the world of painting—here he was helped both by Nin and her circle and by Virginia Admiral—but devoted most of his energies to his writing, working on his novel *The Shaman* as well as many poems. In 1942, with a covering letter by Nin, he submitted two poems to *Poetry*—his first publication in a widely circulated magazine—following this up with a review of Patchen in *Accent* (Autumn 1942) and, in 1944, with his controversial essay "The Homosexual in Society" in Dwight Macdonald's *Politics* (August 1944). That essay, which he later characterised as an attempt to "insist...upon concern for the virtues of a homosexual relationship" (67), in its insistence that the necessity to conceal a homosexual life both dishonours Love and betrays public trust, so disturbed John Crowe Ransom that after he had accepted "An African Elegy" for publication in the influential *Kenyon Review* he refused to print it.

In New York, and then in Berkeley, Duncan increasingly came to see that the poem should be a direct record of the actual process of writing it—he later referred to it as “testimony,” like William Carlos Williams perhaps, or like the Pound of the *Pisan Cantos*, refusing to separate the poem from the life, the poet from the man. In the long term this would lead him initially to reject his inclusion in both the now-famous “San Francisco Scene” issue of *Evergreen Review* (1.2 [February 1957]) and Donald M. Allen’s pioneering and highly influential anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, angrily expostulating that both ventures did nothing more than pander to a destructive careerism: “I want to write as the universe sings,” he wrote to Robin Blaser in exasperation after he had agreed to take part, “not for appreciation, but in appreciation; not in order to be admired, but to admire; to love, to celebrate” (30 April 1957 CU-BANC). As he somewhat ruefully admitted to Blaser almost a year later, when Allen was putting the finishing touches on the anthology, “I have myself an ambitious shade that can disturb the roots of creative spirit” (2 September 1958 CU-BANC). His literary activities and interests, his struggles with his own ambitions as a poet and his struggles to clarify his own poetics, meshed nicely with his growing political awareness, his renewed attraction to Anarchism. Meeting André Breton in New York refreshed his interest in a by-no-means-apolitical Surrealism, if indeed it had waned, and with Jackson Mac Low and Paul Goodman he more-or-less regularly attended Anarchist “discussion meetings,” a practice he would continue after he returned to California in September 1945 to lodge with his old Anarchist friends Mary and Hamilton Tyler, who farmed chickens in Guerneville, Sonoma County, at Pond Farm. When the Tylers moved to the 80-acre farm Treesbank in Healdsburg, Sonoma County, in January 1946 Duncan went with them, writing the “Treesbank” sequence of poems (in *Heavenly City, Earthly City*) while there.

The Tylers shared many of Duncan’s literary views, encouraged Duncan’s writing, and were active in literary as well as Anarchist circles; both Pond Farm and Treesbank were a frequent meeting-place for writers and Anarchists. Regular visitors included Kenneth Rexroth and Philip Lamantia among others; William Everson (“Brother Anoninus”) came to Treesbank on release from his internment in Waldport, Oregon, as a conscientious objector—he was an Anarchist and pacifist. In this environment Duncan wrote the first of the poems he would print in *Heavenly City, Earthly City*. In the summer of 1946, he moved back to the city (Mary Tyler gave birth to her first child, Brenda—for whom Duncan initially wrote *The Cat And The Blackbird*—in

July), working as a typist at the University of California, meeting Jack Spicer at an Anarchist meeting and through him Robin Blaser, and setting himself up as a kind of poetry entrepreneur by organising a series of poetry readings, discussions and informal lectures at a somewhat tumbledown boarding house on Telegraph Avenue. The lectures, when not given by Duncan, were by friends like Kenneth Rexroth or sympathetic faculty like Thomas Parkinson, on *Finnegans Wake*, Lorca, *Paterson*, Gertrude Stein, Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Between them Spicer, Duncan and Blaser talked of themselves as starting a "Berkeley Renaissance" (which later became a foundation for the San Francisco Renaissance of the 1950s), and discussed the writing of poetry in terms of magic and magical practice. "We called ourselves the Berkeley Renaissance," Duncan said much later; "we meant that our poetry was really a Renaissance poetry: that Ficino would come into it; that questions of Dante and Petrarch would underlie it" (quoted Ellingham/Killian 79).

The intense literary conversation and activity of this period scarcely diminished when, in January 1948, Duncan joined Spicer and Blaser as a student in the "Civilization of the Middle Ages" programme in order to study with Ernst Kantorowicz (Spicer had enrolled in the Fall of 1947). The aristocratic and muscular dandy Kantorowicz, the great scholar of what he would call "medieval political theology," had been a member of Stefan George's largely homosexual inner circle, the *Georgekreis*, consisting of aesthetes devoted to preserving the highest essence of traditional art and beauty, and which saw Beauty (Poetry) in more or less theological terms as an Office to and for which the Artist (Poet) was responsible. His influence on the three poets was lasting, and profound: in the words of Michael Davidson, they "extended the lore of medieval and renaissance culture into their own lives, creating a spiritual and artistic brotherhood out of shared homosexual experience, occultism, and the reading of modern literature" (40). Kantorowicz's notions of the Office and Person of the King (which he later elaborated in *The King's Two Bodies*, 1957), and of a society ruled by a hierarchical spiritual aristocracy, especially fed Duncan's notion of himself as "a coterie poet not a regional one" (letter to Blaser, 18 June 1957 CU-BANC).

By the end of 1948 Duncan had been corresponding with Ezra Pound for two years, Louis Zukofsky for eighteen months, and William Carlos Williams for just about a year, had been visited by Charles Olson in April 1947 and had visited Pound at St Elizabeths in Washington D.C. that summer. It can be no surprise that Duncan viewed the English department with impatient suspicion, in an undated manuscript

probably from 1948 calling it “this Forest Lawn of the intellect” (“Berkeley Miscellany—A Venomous Note” NBUU). By the end of 1948 he had also published his first book. *Heavenly City, Earthly City* signalled that his poetic apprenticeship was drawing to a close: he would not print or reprint any of his earlier work, written between 1933 and 1946, until he published *The Years As Catches: First Poems* (1939-1946) almost twenty years later. In shaping *Heavenly City, Earthly City* by carefully selecting the poems from a larger body of work but preserving their chronological order of composition, Duncan adopted a pattern which two years later informed *Poems* 1948-49. In his unpublished “Introduction” to that book (CU-BANC) he described it as “a year’s work and a year’s record,” but the record is selective, not complete. All of Duncan’s subsequent books consistently maintain this pattern, some with but minor variations in the chronological order: they are all, that is to say, carefully shaped.

The intense reading, learning, conversation, and indefatigable writing, combined with a turbulent and frequently anguished love-life, made Berkeley, especially in 1947-1948, a vigorous forcing ground for Duncan’s poetry. Three works in particular reveal his growing confidence in his developing technical skills and in the serviceability of experimentation and exploration; they clearly mark the opening stage of Duncan’s mature writing life: “Medieval Scenes,” written in February 1947 but not published until 1950; “The Venice Poem,” written over several months in 1948 and published in 1949; and “The Effort,” begun in October 1948 and completed some time in the Spring of 1949 when it was accepted for publication; it would not be published until 1989. In a 1977 draft of the “Preface” to the 1978 reprint of *Medieval Scenes* Duncan called it “the first poem in which I knew what I had to do from the dictates of the work itself and where I sat down to follow its course” (NBUU). Other than knowing that he would sit down and write a poem and then read it to his companions on ten successive evenings, Duncan did not know ahead of time what the poem would do; it thus took on the qualities of a dictated poem, and at the time he wrote it, February 1947, Duncan likened its writing process to a séance in which nothing was known ahead but at the end of which everything would—by virtue of being in the poem in the first place—be connected: a paratactic sequence over the meaning of which the poet had relinquished control. “The actual is riddled thru with rimes,” he would say in about 1958 (*As Testimony* 14). *Medieval Scenes* was significant in Spicer’s eyes as a preliminary form of the serial poem which became, as Michael Davidson put it (141), “a dominant compositional mode” for Spicer and Blaser. Duncan would later (from

the late 1950s on), in *Passages* and *The Structure of Rime*, himself take up and develop much of the practice he worked out in writing *Medieval Scenes*: “Writing is first,” he would say in “The Structure of Rime 1” (written in 1955), “a search in obedience.” Long before publication, *Medieval Scenes* rapidly became much talked of —Duncan gave public readings in 1947 and 1948—and perhaps because of its general unavailability (it was published by James Broughton’s Centaur Press in an edition of only 250 copies) it acquired a somewhat legendary status in its way comparable to that accorded William Carlos Williams’s sequence *Spring and All*, which after its 1923 publication was because of its equal scarcity talked of but seldom read.⁵

In 1975 Robin Blaser described the serial poem as “like a series of rooms where the lights go on and off. It is also a sequence of energies which may burn out, and it may, by the path it takes, include the constellated” (*The Fire* 119). That “constellated” neatly points to the non-hierarchical and multiple nature of the series’ meanings. Joseph Conte characterises it as “more atomistic or molecular than plantlike.... The discontinuity of elements in the series... disrupts any internal development or progression of its materials.... There is no initiation, climax or terminus precisely because there can be no development” (*Unending Design* 22-23). The poem becomes a containment, and a release, of energy. Yet Duncan nevertheless insisted on the essential contribution of any part to the whole, telling Blaser in a letter dated 18 Aug 1957 (CU-BANC) that

In an articulated poem... every part must contribute to the movement. The only reason for greater articulation is to set words, phrases, breath groups, lines into a more complex movement. To provide gasps, sighs, periods of the meaning of the poem.... Each line is a proposition of the total structure.

Articulated: distinct words, intelligibly sequenced. But jointed or joined, as a skeleton might be.

Throughout his mature writing life Duncan insisted that his principal concerns as a poet are formal, at Black Mountain College in 1956 outlining his course as working towards “above all our own concern with this thing calld FORM” (Notebook 19, 4 April 1956 NBVV). His notebooks and letters repeatedly come back to the question, on 2 July 1959 somewhat ruefully telling Blaser that “I am all but back where I was (1950) or so: isolated by my demands for ‘form’ from the fashions of the day”

⁵ The complete text of *Spring and All*, initially published in Paris in an edition of about 300 copies, was not reprinted until Harvey Brown’s Frontier press issued about 500 copies in paperback as *Spring & All* in 1970.

(CU-BANC). When in 1948 he was writing "The Venice Poem," he noted in a review of Stravinsky's *The Poetics of Music* that "Poetics is the contemplation of the meaning of form" ("Poetics Of Music" 53); "The Venice Poem" explores the formal potentialities of symphonic structure to handle thematic complexities. Duncan adopted themes, materials and strategies ahead of time in this long meditation and exploration of contrasts and personal conflicts arising from the jealous rage and shock of a lover's betrayal. It draws on Williams's *Paterson*, Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, and H.D.'s *Trilogy* to weave a complex structure—what in an unpublished "Introduction" to *Poems 1948-49* he called "development by variations and counterpoint (an idea tone coming in counterpoint to the lingering tone previously introduced...)" (CU-BANC). Structured overall after Stravinsky's "Symphony in Three Movements" (with an added coda), the poem contrasts the contemporary world of his own experience (Berkeley, failed love affair and so forth) with worlds of which he has only indirect experience: lantern slides of Venice, a photograph of the Venus of Lespuges, historical and art-historical accounts of Byzantium, Shakespeare's *Othello*, and so on. Perhaps the poem was written toward what he did not know.

Duncan's assessment of *Medieval Scenes*, in 1978, is helpful here, and is equally applicable to "The Venice Poem": "curious, not learned; written in a certain glow of imagining the world of the poem untainted by such knowledge as might have raised any questions of belief or disbelief" ("Preface," *MS78*). The matter of "belief or disbelief" is significant, for in these (and other) poems of these years he was struggling to formulate his ideas about the truth-value of poetry, recognising—as he reiterated throughout his writing life—that the Poet is Maker: the poet makes up the poem, and in making up the poem makes up the world. Hence he would play, especially after writing *Letters*, with etymologies (whether false or true) of *make-up* (cosmetics), *glamour*, *gramary* (witch-craft, magic) and *grammar*. In a similar vein, he somewhat impatiently protested in a 1958 workshop against those who claimed to see "no meaning where I myself saw meaning" in two poems, by Harold Dull and Joanne Kyger:

I have my obsessions; and where my spirit feeds, where there is that other mystery of orders that I find in poetry, I am a fanatic not an aesthete. I can no more adjust myself to *like* or *dislike* here than I can *appreciate* the universe. I am in-bound to the event and suffer with the event in its disregard. I cannot get the perspective where there are levels shifting that these are effects or devices only;

for effect and device where various meanings begin their dance become The Effect, The Device, whose creature I am. (*As Testimony* 7)

"We must," says a line in "The Venice Poem" quoting Ezra Pound, "understand what is happening"—not, that is, judge and find unworthy.

The third crucial poem of 1948-49, "The Effort," both explicitly theorizes his own poetics of process as discovered and refined in his reading of Pound, Edith Sitwell, Williams, and Zukofsky, to whose work—none of it at that time at all generally read or "respectable"—the form of the poem pays homage; and at the same time explicitly identifies an artistic and musical avant-garde with which Duncan identifies. The inclusion of painters like Bonnard and Renoir suggests something of the importance Duncan attaches to the shifting ephemeral qualities of light; the inclusion of a composer like Satie along with Bunting, Sitwell and Whitman suggests something of the importance Duncan attaches to the fleeting impermanence of sound. Following Pound's advice (which he quoted in "The Venice Poem") to "be vitally aware of the duration of syllables, of melodic coherence, and of the tone leading of vowels," in 1948 he published "A Note on Tone in Poetry" in order "to indicate how in the trained ear variations will be played upon a vowel sound which introduces the poem"; with detailed examples he proposed that "An initial tone once sounded carries over in the mind as a bass tone thruout the time of the poem. Much of the pleasure of the poem lies in the echoes and reiterations of this sound" (14); in *The Truth and Life of Myth* some years later he spoke of vowels as "soundings of spirit upon which the form of the poem depends" and commented that "they are the least lasting sounds in our language; even in my lifetime, the sound of my vowels alters." In "Towards An Open Universe" (1964), looking back on the breakthrough poems of 1948-1949, he said "I began to be aware of the possibility that the locus of form might be in the immediate minim of the work, and that one might concentrate upon the sound and meaning present where one was, and derive melody and story from impulse and not from plan" (87)—a principle already apparent in these lines from "The Effort":

the language resisting
one's imperfect counsels but
having within it an endless
perfectability of forms (265)

These three poems, two of them the longest Duncan had written to date, mark a shift in his work. They announce what is clearly the first period of his mature work,

a period which, with the writing (1953-1956) of the poems in *Letters* (1958), segued into Duncan's great middle period, which saw *The Opening of the Field* (written 1956-1959, published in 1960), *Roots and Branches* (written 1959-1963, published 1964), and *Bending the Bow* (written 1963-1967, published 1968). In April 1960, with a grant of \$1,000, Norman Holmes Pearson commissioned Duncan to write an extended essay on H.D.; he had already started in 1959. This became *The H.D. Book*, an enormous project on which he consistently worked for nearly five years—until the pressures of *Bending the Bow* came to possess his imagination—at his death in 1988 it remained unfinished. *The H.D. Book* is a major summation of Duncan's poetics as well as of the origins and course of early modernist poetry; as an intense gathering of energies it deeply informs the poems and plays of Duncan's middle period, and is deeply informed by them.

There can be little doubt that the mature and assured exploration, experiment and accomplishment of Duncan's work after 1950 owes much to Duncan's initial meeting with Jess (who had attended a reading of "The Venice Poem" in 1949). In January 1951, the two exchanged marriage vows, and their shared enthusiasms propelled them over the following decades into a remarkable range and variety of collaborative work, from the production of *Boob and Fragments of a Disorderd Devotion* in 1952 through *Caesar's Gate* (1955), which they produced together during a year (1955-1956) in Mallorca, *A Book of Resemblances* (1966), *Names of People* (1968), and beyond. All five of these publications, along with *Writing Writing* (1964) come from Duncan's extremely prolific years, 1950-1956. In 1952 through 1954 he was (while doing other work too) especially engaged in a long series of Stein imitations. These constitute a major breakthrough in Duncan's work, and *Writing Writing*, which he finished putting together in 1955, played as significant a role in Duncan's writing life as *Kora In Hell* did in William Carlos Williams's. In imitating Stein Duncan found a means to put away his accustomed notion of *intent*, to relinquish authorial control—as Lyn Hejinian observes, "sometimes it is art's task not only to query the picture but to queer it."⁶ In the "Preface" to *Letters Duncan* put it in the form of a question: "to work with a constant excitement at play? this is when compositions appear as possibilities of movement. So I pursue a process of re-vision and disorganization to keep creation of the poem and consciousness of the poem in interplay." Throughout his writing life, almost from the beginning, Duncan sought disturbance at the heart of the poem, and wrote to Levertov of the excitement

6 Lyn Hejinian, "The Femme Fatale and the Schoolyard" (*The Grand Piano* 8 [2009]), 11.

of deciding, “on the instant,” between “the word that is surrounded by possible meanings, and the word that limits direction” (Duncan/Leverlov 120). The Stein imitations loosened his imagination; by installing disturbance at the heart of the writing process they freed his syntax from habitual constraints, opened up language as *source*—not, then, as medium of expression, but as agency. “If I can see where it’s going,” he told Cohn and O’Donnell, “so can the readers, so we won’t go there” (*Credences* 109). Thus, tensions between networks of possible meanings, between readers’ expectations and textual actuality, energize Duncan’s subsequent work: fields of possibilities resistant to conclusion, resistant to closure—the poem as open form.

Duncan’s correspondence with Creeley (begun in 1952), and his and Jess’s close company with him in Mallorca, contributed to Duncan’s increasing practice of poetry as discovery—“How will I know what I think till I think it?” was a favourite Creeley question; “How will I know what I write till I write it?”—the poem, then, as a *means* of thinking. Some years later, in *The Truth and Life of Myth*, Duncan would elaborate: “I evolve the form of a poem by an insistent attention to what happens in inattentions, a care for inaccuracies; for I strive in the poem not to make some imitation of a model experience but to go deeper and deeper into the experience of the process of the poem itself” (34), to embrace error and “be true” to it (48), for “a mistake is a mutation altering the life of the spirit” (34). What Duncan thus learned from his Stein imitations was crucial in his rejection, in those years, of his early work—he would not reprint or publish any of the work written before *Heavenly City, Earthly City* until 1966. He discusses his retrieval of that work in the “Introduction” to the republication, *The Years As Catches*. He turned his back on it because, as he wrote in his notebook in 1954, “My concept of a fruitful life is to be possessd rather than to be self-possessd” (Notebook 14 NBVV); in his “Sunday meetings” at his Haro Street apartment in 1957 he insisted that “The poem is a reality inviting you to enter, nothing to do with your personal ‘self’,” and hence (as he would come to see) not accessible to judgment. Assessing his early poems in 1969 (after he had re-admitted them “into my life’s work”—*The Years As Catches* xi) he commented that most of them “record personal episodes as poetic resolves or pretensions. Empty, or, rather, cloudy pretensions.” He favoured *Medieval Scenes*, where “flesh and love [are] projected as realities of the poem, the poet himself a voice of the poem, not a claim of the poem” (Notebook B, CU-BANC).

While Duncan was writing the poems in *Letters*, the pace did not let up. In Autumn 1954 he ran a creative writing workshop at the San Francisco Public Library,

through which he met and became lifelong friends with Helen Adam, whose enthusiastic persistence writing ballads reintroduced him to the ballad form, in the process reviving and strengthening in him his long-standing devotion to the uncanny and the occult. Completion and preliminary publication of an acting script of *Faust Foutu* in 1953 led to its performance in January 1955 and the completion—after his long stay in Mallorca and visits to Spain, France and England, March 1955 to March 1956—of another play once he got to Black Mountain College for the Summer of 1956, *Medea at Kolchis*. That Fall he became Assistant Director of the Poetry Center at San Francisco State College, setting up public readings for poets from across the U.S. Along with Blaser (who in 1956 moved to Boston and opened an intense correspondence with Duncan), he began working through the five volumes of the Soncino edition of the *Zohar* (1934). Its aim, to instruct Man in that which is occulted, its highly associative style, its detailed multiple exegeses of a biblical text word by word, syllable by syllable, and indeed letter by letter, chimed exactly with Duncan's own predilections (and the interpretive analytical habits fostered in his childhood by his parents' dinner-time and other conversations). By the time he put *Letters* together, he was roughly halfway through the second volume, and some time probably in April 1956,⁷ *Letters* almost complete, he commented on its title: "These LETTERS are the ones between Alpha and Omega who attend our works, the ones from A to Z, our building blocks" (Notebook 19, NBUU). He wrote the poems specifically for the projected book—a new departure which set the pattern for books which followed; from this point on, he would not (as he had for *Heavenly City*, *Earthly City* and subsequent books) trawl his notebooks for poems to put in his books of new poetry, though he would do so in compiling volumes of selected and collected poems. The poems in *The Opening of the Field*, *Roots and Branches*, and *Bending the Bow* (the three books which open *The Collected Later Poems and Plays*) were written specifically for them.

⁷ This "Statement on LETTERS" appears on a fresh page in the middle of Duncan's draft of his lecture "An Introductory Proposition," which he was preparing for his course at Black Mountain College that summer. He began the draft on 4 April. Duncan habitually, when an idea or the line of a poem took his attention, simply grabbed the most convenient piece of paper at hand to record it—sometimes, a blank page in the notebook he was working in right then, sometimes the nearest notebook coming to hand.

Sources and Abbreviations

I am deeply indebted to two major archives of Duncan materials, at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley (CU-BANC) and in the Poetry Collection, State University of NY at Buffalo (NBUU). I thank both for their great and generous help. It also draws quite extensively on the work of Lisa Jarnot, installments of whose forthcoming biography, *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus* have appeared in various journals, and on Ekbert Faas's *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as a Homosexual in Society* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow P, 1983). I have silently incorporated Jarnot's useful corrections to Faas.

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