W

[dix]

a Duncan Delirium

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(The President
orders history
reupholstered)

—Robert Duncan

/ Leslie Scalapino /

Rule (from: *The Forest is in the Euphrates River*)

A depression is a depression in space and it has

no

equivalent

in authority

Depressed dusk walking. Rain is dusk *as occurrence then*. One isn't event, except *as occurrence*. Though speaking wasn't *that* event *as occurrence* ever.

They're coming to check-posts, if they

do not respond

to the hand-signals to slow

or to firing in the air by the US soldiers
who say they'd signaled
the Italian journalist kidnapped returned by the
insurgents

they're being shot

first

returned is shot speeding toward a check-post, the

agent

in the car with her who'd

freed her from the insurgents is killed

all from this a train

by the US soldiers bombs go off in the roads

everywhere

black rose-sewage train beside them

and night everyday killing

civilians and US soldiers

who say any

words after first
a family of five coming to the check-post is
day is beside them too at once
fired on the parents are killed the newspapers say

the children were covered in the parents' blood they

live—a man deported from the US to Syria so

they

can

torture him

push outside him

unlike the US the relation to deportation
is
bursts of blossoming trees here not in
black rose-sewage grounds

says everyday they beat him yet the Syrians say

he's no connection to

terrorists

now, is not related after they

tortured him

it's upheld in the US 'we' *can*

deport

people who'll be tortured to be tortured *there* on

one side is day and a night
on the other side there is horizontal
here

this, on the level of black rose-sewage,

hasn't authority
in order that
not cycle every event of any sort
be first

This intrinsically, on the level of black rose-sewage, hasn't authority. But on other levels it does.

A dumb thought, which there aren't. Thoughts. But one has to flatten space in order that every event of any sort (eventually here) be first.

Depressed dusk walking—rain dusk walking alleviates death (of a mother—who not being there, the effect of that) slightly—the light and dark dusk is everywhere soft in pouring dusk rain—the buildings there that are also the vertically falling rain shafts, in them/the buildings, which they are (rain), and trees boughs in the dusk *are* the heavy rain first.

Precedes as rule with everybody dying a wave of every
thing dying yet first and now mature

lovely woman major in the Marines who's

Hawaiian and lost

both

her legs a pilot of a helicopter that was blown

up in

Iraq
testifying to
a committee on the needs of her soldiers her losing

both legs

having happened right before the committee one
is to have to not be in either family or the outside
not from one's choice but
by events' occurrences only

both my choice and the events are the first occurrence
others are first there her and

floating above the people is the blossoming roof here
only once

At once Halliburton recipient of the US govt

contracts to

rebuild the bombed and

wrecked Iraq is paid ten billion, in that the

US vice president has shares in the company, over
charged by a hundred million for work not performed

while *their* streets swim in black

rose-sewage

a split in one and blossoming trees

their civilians are arrested and removed *on*

no charges horizontal to quell

discontent—while the contractors are not arrested

yet one is neither in the family nor in the outside why

does one see one is no longer in the

outside
anywhere *our*

actions bound
. so the city swims above and in the midst of it the

blossoming plum trees
have to not be in either, not in the outside at all oar
or a family

their occurrences are

so her choice and the events beside it are both first

there rose

A
m not either in the family or in the outside why
does she (I) see she is no longer in the

is there outside by

beside huge numbers peoples surface cruising

on

the floor

of the rose desert is broken floating

one's

the enflamed iris pushes out on blossom

ing trees roof
everywhere rose

surface makes a hole in space's

air from their

the old as rule the forest is in the Euphrates
River
Toyota cruisers river falcon enters space of fore

stalling people dying silent
words first
so, not from it
plane there whose planes are invisible to birds

colliding with them where birds

can *see*

the falcon where is the surface of the rose
floor everywhere
drones floating killing the insurgents citizens
speaking separate isn't

(the insurgents' speaking isn't) first

nor is speaking the event's *as occurrence*

these (at) once

is everything only lying separate
words
one
lies 'night' also of someone else everyone

(why is)

dawn
the forest is in the Euphrates River

where
meeting the dead occurs

only asleep, in one
(words) in everyone harmonious

do 'occur' in present wild friends here

are their words also once

in that they're (one's) *as occurrence*

events bound 'night'
only (separate) outside yet no one is

one isn't event, except *as occurrence*

in the outside (either) can't *be* places

one's mind by from first beside any streams of is

them once one's outside's

events rose desert is everywhere in
that peoples cruising their Toyotas on

the huge floor

break its surface
black rose day first one

---

horizontal bright space (words

at all)

we have to *do*

/ Pauline Butling /

ROBERT DUNCAN in Vancouver: on reading, writing and non-upmanship

I first met Robert Duncan in the winter of 1961 on the pages of *The New American Poetry* anthology that Warren Tallman had assigned as a course text in his Studies in English Poetry course. I met him in person shortly after when Warren brought him to visit our class. I was immediately intrigued by Duncan's special blend of classical erudition, romantic excess, and gleeful playfulness. That spurred me on to write a term paper on his "Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar" for Warren's class (and later to do a Masters thesis on his work). My essay is best left in the musty box where I recently found it, but it was worth a quick scan because it showed the beginning of Duncan's transformative effect on my critical practice. After a belabored explanation of Olson's theories of Projective Verse (done with typical undergraduate earnestness), the essay starts to come alive. Duncan's open process in writing the poem provokes, indeed demands, a participatory reading practice on my part. As I shift gears—from the expository mode of the first few pages to a more exploratory mode, I get excited. I'm having fun. And struggling too, of course, to literally "make sense." But that's part of the fun.

This was one of the hooks that pulled me into a life as a reader, teacher, and critic of contemporary poetry. The "good" student with no particular goals turned a corner. I shelved my plans to travel in Europe for a year and went to graduate school instead. Those two years (1961-1963) proved to be as exciting as any tour of Europe. Duncan was just one of many innovative writers and artists to visit Vancouver during that time. The UBC Festival of Contemporary arts brought in the likes of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Creeley in 1962. *TISH* magazine began in the fall of 1961; Roy Kiyooka started a poetry

reading series for local poets at the Vancouver Art School; bill bissett, Gerry Gilbert and others created a lively downtown scene. And Warren and Ellen Tallman had what seemed like a continuous stream of parties where the young writers, artists, students and professors etc. came together and formed a community. However, in terms of outside influences, Duncan was the first and probably the one with the greatest impact (see also Davey, "Introducing *TISH*"). He became an inspiration, a role model, a treasure trove of poetic techniques, and a catalyst for action.

Duncan's 1961 Vancouver lectures were the start of all this. The story of that event begins in the spring of 1961 when Frank Davey, George Bowering, Fred Wah, and Lionel Kearns asked Warren Tallman for advice about starting a local poetry magazine. Warren said, "hmmmn, maybe we should start with a discussion group to figure out what this *New American Poetry* is all about." And so they did. The study group included the poets who would become the first *TISH* editors— Davey, Bowering, Wah, Jamie Reid, David Dawson; other young writers and grad students who were closely associated with them such as Gladys Hindmarch, Lionel Kearns, Daphne Marlatt, and myself;(1) and Warren and Ellen Tallman. As we argued and puzzled over Olson's "Projective Verse," "Songs of Maximus," and other texts in the *NAP*, we just got more confused. Why not invite Duncan to come to Vancouver and fill us in? said Warren, after a particularly frustrating afternoon discussion of Olson's "by ear, he said" ("Maximum of Gloucester" *NAP* 8). Would he really do that? Yes indeed: we got a few more people involved, chipped in $5.00 each to pay his bus fare from San Francisco—about $100.00 I think—the Tallmans put him up, and Duncan did the talking.

And talk he did, for three evenings, for a total of about ten hours.(2) Duncan in person is an experience not to be forgotten and difficult to describe: picture a pinball machine firing on all circuits, as Warren Tallman once put it ("Wonder Merchants")—i.e. with all the coloured balls bouncing up and down at

once—and you will have an idea. As Duncan himself admits, "I talk so fast, … grab things in twenty different ways or go into a great manic spiel in which… [ideas] are reposed and reformulated in twenty different ways every five minutes" (Interview 84). He talked in ever-widening circles, rarely in "complete" sentences, with his already high-pitched voice going even higher when he got really excited. Add to that the perplexing effect of his double vision and you may begin to get the picture. He was not only cross-eyed—"when I look at something, I see it double and I can never tell which one is the real one" (Interview 65)—but also both near and farsighted. His farsighted eye could roam over an audience while the other eye focused on the page, or people, in front of him. The same was true of his lectures: he roamed far and wide while simultaneously offering close-up views.

For all of the above reasons together with the fact that his was a *lived* knowledge, Duncan could hold your attention for hours. He didn't "explain" Olson, or the *NAP* and its modernist precursors. Instead he gave us his *experience* of that history. He also raised the bar to include what seemed to us like the entire history of the American modernists, ranging over Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, H.D., William Carlos Williams, Djuna Barnes, Louis Zukofsky and on to Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and many more, and including western history and mythology, his far-sighted vision taking us on a roller coaster ride through Western culture.

Simultaneously, he showed us the extraordinary *specificity* of his compositional process—his nearsighted vision, so to speak. A Duncan poem begins with a word, a line, a sound pattern, as he would later explain to Ekbert Faas: "If we take the vowel and take the tone lead from that, we expand the vocabulary and thus expand the possible content. So I am working with sound all the time" (Interview 79). Or that "[a] subject doesn't give me a poem. The beginning of a line does" (Interview 74), as in one of his greatest poems, "Poem Beginning with a Line from Pindar":

> *The light foot hears you and the brightness begins*,
> god-step at the margins of thought,
> quick adulterous tread at the heart.
> Who is it that goes there?
> Where I see your quick face
> notes of an old music pace the air,
> torso-reverberations of a Grecian lyre.
>
> In Goya's canvas Cupid and Psyche
> Have a hurt voluptuous grace
>
> (*OF* 62)

The "*light foot*" in Pindar's line—which refers to the dancer's foot as it listens and responds to Apollo's music (Duncan "Towards" 11) becomes a "god-step" in Duncan's thought processes that starts what Pound called the dance of the intellect in words. The music begins. The poet puts his ear to the ground of language so to speak and listens. In the tone leading from "step" to "tread" to "air"; from "face" to "pace," the poet hears the "old music" of legend and history that will resonate throughout the entire poem. Duncan describes this process in a later essay:

> 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 not from plan. ("Towards" 12, my emphasis)

"Minim": I liked this word, but wasn't quite sure of its meaning so I looked it up—a half note, the smallest unit of measure, a jot (Websters), or a vowel?

In the 1961 lectures, he showed us this "tone leading of vowels" in the opening stanzas of "Osiris and Set"

OSIRIS AND SET

members of one Life Boat are

that rides against chaos,
or into the night goes, driving back
those darknesses within the dark,
as Harry Jacobus saw them on our mountain,
trolls of the underground.

Set lords it over them,
dark mind that drives before the dawn rays.
He is primitive terror, he is the prow,
he is first knowing
and striving there, at the edge,
has all evil about him.
(*Roots and Branches* 67)

Osiris… Life… rides…night…driving…mind…drives…striving.

O… chaos…goes…Jacobus… trolls… lords…knowing….

Clearly, "melody and story" "derive… from impulse not from plan," derive from the "immediate minim"—the vowels—that lead from word to word, line to line. I had been taught to call this "assonance" (referring to a decorative function) but I liked this new term, "tone leading," much better. It posited an active, generative process.

Here was a dramatically different way of writing and reading: language is neither transparent nor instrumental. It is a material and communal matrix within which the poet works and plays. Sound patterns are generative rather than ornamental. Language play expands consciousness, provides entry points into the vast realms of human knowledge and experience. Poems are language events more so than personal expressions. Form is organic and always in process. Here was a poetics of immanence in which cooperation, derivation, and interconnectivity supplanted individuality and self-expression.(3) In Duncan's words, writer and reader engage "a world of thought and feeling in which we

may participate but not dominate, where we are used by things even as we use them" ("Ideas of the Meaning of Form" 24).

Philosophers among you may recognize Alfred North Whitehead's ideas in these pronouncements. Duncan read Whitehead's *Process and Reality* and heard Olson's *Special View of History* (on Whitehead) in the mid-fifties. Whitehead's concept of "presentational immediacy" was especially resonant for Duncan because Whitehead defines it as similar to "cross eyed vision." When we see an object, Whitehead explains, we see more than just the object. Perception includes information about things beyond the object (Whitehead 143, Duncan Interview 65). Whitehead's example is that while looking at the Milky Way we also take in details of the surrounding night sky etc. Whitehead's concepts of *process* and *interconnectivity* as basic principles of the universe were also crucial for Duncan. Such concepts underlie Duncan's emphasis on organic form, his conviction that everything, including the poem, is in a process of becoming.

> Creation is everywhere intending, but only in a cooperation you have particulars emerging. So there is no paradigm. What was interesting to me as it was to Charles [Olson], is that Whitehead pointed out that the primordial is ahead of us. That the past is actually the thing we keep posing as if it came after the primordial which it can't possibly have done. (Duncan Interview 8).

Again, for us neophytes, these were exciting, even startling views that caught our interest, that promised so much more than the current notion of the poem as a "the well-wrought urn."(4)

Following Duncan's 1961 lectures he met with the group to talk about forming a magazine, again offering a radical alternative—this time with invaluable information about what he called "working ground magazines" ("Letter")—such as *Floating Bear*, *Black Mountain Review*, and *Origin*—magazines that provided a model for *TISH*. Duncan stressed the community-building role of

these magazines. By focusing on the local poetry "news," he argued, they fostered a community of poets and readers, a "community of meanings," a shared ground in language as well as an articulation of shared geographic/social/aesthetic location. A year later, in an essay about *TISH's* accomplishments, Duncan is "excited as I recognize everywhere an operating intelligence that is beyond the individual poets…embodying a mystery" ("For the Novices of Vancouver" 255). The Vancouver community was also excited, as *TISH* began its two-year marathon of publishing an issue per month—by the sense of a growing critical mass, by a pride of place, and an edgy, oppositional group identity. Each issue of *TISH* became an event, prompting coffee klatches in the UBC cafeteria and arguments about this or that poem's merits etc. The *TISH* office, the grad student office shared by Davey, Bowering, and W.H. New, hummed with the talk and typing and printing that produced the monthly issues. The frequency in itself demonstrates the high energy level. Egos notwithstanding, the *TISH* poets developed a cooperative, interactive, and locally based model of little magazine publishing that propelled them far beyond their initial goals of simply getting themselves and others into print. Against the conventional wisdom that you have to make it in the big leagues to be heard in your hometown, they proved the reverse. "The bees dance to show where the honey is" Duncan writes (from the "HD Book" *Origin* 10, July 1963 1): the "dance" of the *TISH* poets created such a hum that it was heard across the country, internationally, and resonated long after—so much so that for many, *TISH* was seen as "probably the most cohesive writing movement in Canada" (Gervais Preface to *The Writing Life* 7). They had recognizably shared aesthetics, yes, and they also established a *community* formation that was greater than the sum of its parts. Certainly Duncan played a key role in creating that formation.

Duncan's 1961 visit ended with a poetry reading by the soon-to-be *TISH* poets. Again, his impact was to raise the bar, to offer his double vision, in this case to challenge the young poets to think long term: "Ask yourselves how many

of you will still be writing when you're 40?" he suggested at the end of the reading, instead of offering comments on the merits of this or that poem or poet. Startled by Duncan's deflection of their desire for a nod of approval to the question of long-term commitment, the poets visibly shifted gears. Eager/apprehensive faces turned thoughtful to ponder Duncan's challenge. (And indeed most of them did continue writing and editing, and continue to do so to this day).

I pick up the thread of this story two years later, during the Summer poetry course at UBC in 1963, with Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Allen Ginsberg as the workshop leaders and Margaret Avison, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan and several others contributing to the morning lectures and evening readings. Mid-way through the course, my husband, Fred Wah and I had a party in our small, campus apartment. With some 80 people crammed into our tiny place, Duncan and several others ended up sitting on the double bed in the bedroom. Charles Olson was at the head of the bed with, in his words, "five women in my arms" (Berkeley 19). Duncan was at the other end, flirting with a handsome young Vancouver poet. At one point, Duncan removed his shirt to show off his "bear hair" on his back—no doubt as part of his seduction—also because the bear was a totemic figure for him—to invoke its power. In the midst of all this, he turned to me—I was sitting between him and the Olson menagerie—and said, without any preamble, "you're writing on me and I haven't even kissed you" and then immediately gave me a big, smoochy kiss. I was taken aback, but Duncan seem nonplussed, the kiss being just one link among many in an interconnected cosmic network: Whitehead's "presentational immediacy." The access points are in the immediate interplay, combustion is at the contact points, at the "minim"— the smallest unit of measurement. We also see this interconnectivity in Duncan's bear poem:

"Gladly, the cross-eyed bear" – the cross
rising from the eye a strain of visible song
that Ursa Major dances,
star notes, configurations
from right to wrong
the all night long body stretchd bare
sleep's guy in the game of musical shares
("Crosses of Harmony and Disharmony" *OF* 44)

The cross in "the cross-eyed bear" leads to a "visible song" (the poem), linked to a cosmic song and dance (the big dipper, Ursa Major a.k.a. the bear) that are present in both the body ("the all night long body stretchd bare") and the universe ("configurations / from right to wrong"). Duncan's word-play with "bear" "cross-eyed" and "eye strain" (the "minim" of the poem) moves toward a "community of meanings": from "eye" to "guy"" and from "bear" to "bare" to a "game of musical shares" in which meaning expands to the stars. In his words: "[o]ur consciousness, and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity" ("Towards" 3).

The story of Duncan's impact doesn't end in 1963. He returned to Vancouver many more times to read, give talks, and join in the ongoing dialogues of and in this place with his characteristic generosity, enthusiasm, and passion for all things poetic. For Fred and I, he remained intertwined in our lives in many ways after we left Vancouver in the fall of 1963 to continue graduate studies elsewhere. He became our self-appointed guide to San Francisco when we visited there in 1963 and again in 1973. He also guided me through my Master's thesis, beginning with a twelve-page letter outlining his poetics that arrived out of the blue (when Warren told him I was doing a thesis on him), followed by numerous follow-up letters and typescripts of current poems. He even wrote lengthy comments in the margins of my thesis, not in his own defense but simply to offer possible ways of expanding this or that point. His legendary *HD Book*, an extraordinarily rich exploration of and meditation on contemporary poetics that he published in various magazines throughout the

1960s and 1970s, provided an on-going provocation to think and act in wide-ranging arcs that radiate from whatever is at hand. As did the great poems of that period, collected in *Groundwork Work I: Before the War* and *Ground Work II: in the Dark*.

For myself and for many others, Duncan was one of the great "communitarians" to coin a word, in that he showed us, though his actions and words, so many ways to interconnect—whether in word or act. In his lecture at the 1963 Summer Poetry Workshop, he likens his work in poetry to the Muslim rug maker who makes a rug by tying thousands of tiny knots. Out of each knot comes many threads that provide the material for the next knot. That image captures, for me, the ways in which Duncan became intertwined with and generated so many possibilities in the lives of those who had the good fortune to attend his Vancouver lectures in 1961.

Notes:

(1). See Warren Tallman's essay "Wonder Merchants" for more details of the events leading up to Duncan's 1961 talks. Also note that Tallman's count of the "original group" is incorrect, not surprisingly, given the gender biases of the 1960s he omits the women. I know for certain that Gladys Maria Hindmarch, Ellen Tallman, Daphne Marlatt and myself were also present.

(2). Audio tape recordings of the talks are available in the Contemporary Literature Collection, WAC Bennett Library, Simon Fraser University.

(3). Duncan: "I pose a creative process in which I assemble me from surrounding facts, including the body and so forth" (Interview 71) and "personality is a field" (Interview 77).

(4). See Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947.

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/ Peter O'Leary /

The Dissonances
for Nathaniel Mackey

graph as transfinite numbers I pencil in an old,
earned mode. This gets us to life in the city. I came
to Vienna to learn – not from Freud but from Mozart
strangely – there is nothing so fragile as people.
Collapsing. The set
these numbers assemble into
makes bar & staff cool notes ascend, sound from. As series
this music has infinite continuities choreocosmic
with speed. Permutated, entorsioned speed. And
infinitesimal convergence into an afternoon vision in the
waiting room
at the doctor's office: the crushing rush, piling
on, of molecular-small beads/ball bearings. As if
made of mercury, a whole dynamic flow of them. Granularity.
Spheroids lubricated by tiniest oils of dread. What was it?
Consciousness, I thought. Vision of the particle-mind arriving,
streaming. Its little difficult moments. The limits
of this trigonometry are two questions:
What if this life is the first scratched draft of our thinking?
What if we had begun by executing our consciousness
with feeling instead of reason? We would
be standing vertiginously now in the chambers where
our logic sounds out. The roar in that cavern inspiring our art.

The matrix
words manifest from is so crosshatched with feeling
language is strings taut with nimble tuning, tremoring
thymically. A motile resonator. A womb-oud.
The Church is an amplifier, the waters of life – in evocative
carefully-wrought folk motifs – its radiowaves from an archæon. With language
we ornament every surface we
dwell underneath.

Here's a picture: a lily wand brought by a green-eyed boy.
He says to you: it's OK. Doesn't he?
From the colors of a painting he descended imbued with syllable-auras,
sexual lettering, his little staff. The annunciation he dramatizes. You
are free to travel in three of the largest parts of the world
by virtue of his name, which translates into religion everywhere.
God – forever – is Hypnos. He's the sister
Abraham slept obediently
sweetly
into.

/ Lisa Jarnot /

Three Poems

Mink Tea Prayer

And a bunch of
lunatics
filled with
the frenzy of
apocalyptic mice,
field gods, projecting
into space,
attempting to be
a satellite that's
good, that's bright,
that's clear, o,
make the past a
silent place
a platter of
mink tea.

Untitled

Oh silent ivy,
palpate in the wind
with your wild
leafy superciliousness
inside the bedroom
meadow deck of
deep red
not laced thread

Moon Song

oh moon,
oh craters of the moon,
oh sharp and pointy edges
of the moon that are
its edge,
oh moon
alone in the sky like
I am alone in the night,
oh moon that has no
country house , no horses and no car,
oh moon that lights up
all the cows,
oh cows that light up
all the moon,
oh moon the cars
that speed below,
my mind that
speeds below the
moon, the ebb
and flow of moon,
adjacent to the milky way,
oh moon upon the sky,
indifferent,
for all times, and
ancient and sublime.

/ Leonard Schwartz /

That Very Complex: Poetry and Power in Robert Duncan

In the essay "From Silence to Sound And Back Again" collected in his book *Reflections on Exile* Edward Said writes "There is no sound, no articulation that is adequate to what injustice and power inflict on the poor, the disadvantaged, and the disinherited. But there are approximations to it, not representations of it, which have the effect of punctuating discourse with disenchantment and demystifications" (526). This remark canvases for us some of the key ethico-aesthetic issues that poetry faces today – and at the same time leaves us intellectually and emotionally unsatisfied. There is its particular elision over the meaning of "approximation" in distinction to "representation", which seems a begging of the question. Moreover, if there is no sound or articulation adequate to what the disinherited suffer, the consequence ought to be that silence is the only antidote, as in Adorno's formulation against poetry after Auschwitz. Indeed, silence tempts the mind into a space outside admitted discourse, and as such, in artists as divergent as Cage and Beckett and Fanny Howe, offers a specific liberty. Yet Said does not embrace this silence in his work, or assert its primacy. Instead Said speaks and writes. Here he writes of a negative form of art that might punctuate discourse with disenchantment and demystification. This negative form of art is of course of a given value. I'm sorry Said never turned his attention to L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry, already an important piece of the American canon in his lifetime. He might have found a form of disenchantment and demystification that would have interested him, and a critical apparatus that more closely analyzed terms like "approximation" and "representation" than he does here or even than in his monumental work *Orientalism.* As such his faith in narrative might have been shaken.

I would like to consider the book *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* in relationship to these ideas of silence and articulation, enchantment and disenchantment, representation and anti-representation, but also in relationship to our own continuing conflagration in Iraq, and to the freshly expansive swagger in Empire. *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* chart the break up of a friendship in poetry over the issue of the relationship of poetry to the Vietnam War. It is Duncan's formulation of the relationship between poetics and war that I would want to focus on, with the suggestion that Duncan offers something more than a negative form. And I hope we can think about Duncan's poetics – Duncan's poems! – as forms that bespeak our own need. The task of the poet is to imagine evil, not to oppose it Duncan writes in his polemic with Levertov, and the suggestion is that in imagining evil we expose it all the more, especially in ourselves, instead of constructing an oppositional stance of us (good) and them (evil) which, it almost goes without saying, replicates the dominant paradigm of neo-conservative rhetoric. Thus we can safely wonder: when do projects like Poetry Against The War, to which I contributed, turn into The War Against Poetry? How imagine maximally, which might mean enchantment as well as disenchantment, mystery as well as demystification, where enchantment and mystery might also become interruptive of dominant modes of discourse? Let us consider Duncan as a fount of maximalist energy, and wonder how best read and write from it – in Duncan's own sense of a derivative poetry – in our own circumstance

Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov were friends, close readers of one another's work, and individuals with the utmost mutual respect for one another. They were also poetically aligned in the eyes of whatever literary politics might have been attending them from 1953 to 1971. Yet their relationship was destroyed by their differing attitudes, and acrimonious exchange, concerning the implications of the Vietnam war for poetry. Or so the recent edition of *Letters*,

edited by Albert Gelpi and Robert Bertholf and published by Stanford University Press, makes abundantly and poignantly clear. Indeed, the relationship foundered on the rocks of the Vietnam War, largely owing to Duncan's own injunctions against the turn Levertov's work took towards an anti-war poetry and a vocabulary borrowed from the self-identified political left. Although Duncan wrote poems that might be construed as anti-war poems, most notably "Up Rising: Passages 25", he nonetheless maintained throughout that it was his work to imagine, not to oppose or qua poet take to the streets, and seems to have felt some distaste for the simplifications of his own Uprising.

The letter of October 4th, 1971, in which Duncan critiques Levertov's poem "Staying Alive," most particularly its refrain, "Revolution or Death", amply demonstrates Duncan's attitude:

> Revolutions have all been profoundly opposed to the artist, for revolutions have had their power only by the rule that power cannot be defined. And, as workers in words, it is our business to keep alive in the language definitions as well as forces, to create crises in meaning, yes – but this is to create meanings in which we are the more aware of the crises involved, of what is at issue. In posing "revolution or death" you seem to feel that evolution – which as far as we know is the way in which life actually meets its test and creates its self – does not come into the picture. As if, i.e., Man got to "overthrow" reptiles (Letters 661).

In his letter of November 8th, 1971, critiquing Levertov's lines about the word "revolution", "The wrong word./ We use the wrong word. A new life/isn't the old life in reverse, negative of the same photo./ But it is the only/word we have", Duncan writes:

> There is the name "revolution" which you subscribe to tho it be "the wrong word" Kali belongs to the Wheel of

> Inexorable Revolution. Her wrath destroys good and evil alike, consumes us in an age of conflicts.
> "Rebellion" the word you do not want to think of , that, indeed, you deny we have – is the name of the apocalyptic end of it all (689).

It would be easy to say that Duncan was unfair to Levertov in these and other missives and interview statements. In fact his passion was as real as hers was, but stemmed from his absolute commitment to what he saw as the raptures and hierarchies of the art. In the midst of the Iraq crises what new pressures are put on the poem? Given that the decibel level is less for Iraq than for Vietnam, that there is no draft, that the number of Iraqis who are dying is huge but the number of Americans is only 1600 and counting, and that the word "revolution" currently carries no charge to it outside the advertising world, is Levertov's more explicitly engaged literature now more needed than it would have been then to bring the news? In our particular poetic precinct the view of language necessary for an engaged literature is often seen as naïve. "Poets Against The War" is its inheritor. Sam Hamill forced Laura Bush to cancel lunch. Duncan's ambition on the other hand is huge: to imagine, through Dante, what injustice and power inflict on the poor, the disadvantaged, and the disinherited.

Let me consider some of the writing in Duncan's *Ground Work I: Before The War*, that work which broke Duncan's 16 year silence of book, inclusive of work from 1968 to 1984. Some of the poems roughly parallel the years of the Duncan/Levertov breakup: all come after Duncan's "Up Rising," with its own rather crude characterization of the enemy. Consider the preface to the book, "Some Notes on Notation," dated 2/84 from San Francisco. Here Duncan glosses the system of poetic notation employed in the book:

> In the ground work there is a continuing beat that my body disposition finds and my moving hand directs I follow in reading. Its impulses are not schematic but rise, changing

> tempo as the body-dance changes. The caesura space becomes not just an articulation of phrasings but a phrase itself of silence. Space between stanzas becomes a stanza-verse of silence: in which the beat continues.

Thus for Duncan sound and silence are not mutually exclusive, or distinguishable, or parties without recourse to one another. Sounded silence and silenced sound coexist in the body, and the cadence of the poem, the dance of its syllables, groups number with absence, continuity and pause. This silence is the silence of the body at one moment animal, at another broken open to the human or divine through the act of articulation. Silence quite obviously is the necessary ground of language and speech, but not its final cause, a role which Duncan would probably grant to urge, urgency, the daemon of desire for the beloved body outside the body. The politics of the other follows directly from this urge. No sound, no articulation can ever do justice to the unique substance and form of the other, whether that other be richer or poorer in being or circumstance than myself. The daemon of desire, the delirium of poetic thought, compel one to speak anyway. In May 68 the walls of the Left Bank were grafitteed "Tout Pouvoir A La Imagination". The imagination of a coming and going, of a life/death tide back of the beat is Duncan's more explicitly metaphysical totalization, or plunge into the totalizing risk.

Or Duncan's December 10th 1968 poem "Achilles Song"…

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Thetis, then ,
my mother, has promised me
the mirage of a boat, a vehicle
of water within the water,
and my soul would return from

the trials of its human state,
from the long siege, from the
struggling companions upon the plain,
from the burning towers and deeds
of honor and dishonor,
the deeper unsatisfied war beneath
and behind the declared war,
and the rubble of beautiful, patiently
workt moonstones, agates, jades, obsidians,

turned and returnd in the wash of
the tides, the gleaming waste,
the pathetic wonder […] (4)

Achilles, then, on the beach, bemoaning his political defeat within the tribe, abdicating any further role in the war against the Other, calling for his womb-tomb, life and death in their tidal actions. As elsewhere in Duncan the insistence on a "deeper unsatisfied war beneath/and behind the declared war," the Kierkegaardian necessity of locating any perspective on the wider political scene in a subjective stance, a well of desire, the consideration of which is left out only at the price of a skewed politics, or else in favor of the feigned invulnerability required in order to stake a larger claim to power or self-righteousness. Duncan's Achilles calls to Thetis: she appears, but not the rest of *The Iliad*, lyric divorced from epic. Thus Achilles does not return to the field in Duncan's poem, Achilles frozen at the moment of thwarted worldly desire, of the recognition of the source, of the desire for nothing but the first love indistinguishable from self love, and the refusal to participate in evil. (After the coda: "Time, time. It's time./The business of Troy has long been done.) "There is no time without war", Duncan insists, which, as much as it distances us from a poetics of engagement,

also suggests that the poem which does not acknowledge or take into account the war as part of its declaration or formal agency, is not a poem that can function or respond, and certainly will not be able to aspire to the kind of "news that stays news" which Master Pound had called for.

The Duncan poem from *Ground Work I* most obviously relevant to the question of poetics and power is "Before The Judgement, Passages 35". A brief excerpt from it:

> The president turns in his sleep and into his stupidity seep the images of burning people.
> The poet turns in his sleep, the cries of the tortured and of those whose pain
> survives after the burning survive with him, for continually
> he returns to early dreams of just retributions and reprisals inflicted for his injuries.
> The soldier gloating over and blighted by the burning bodies of children, women and old men,
> turns in his sleep of Viet Nam or,
> dreamless, inert, having done only his duty, hangs at the edge of such a conscience to sleep.
> The protestant turns in his sleep, setting fire to hated images,
> Entering a deeper war against the war. A deeper stupidity gathers (35).

Is this political poetry? Yes and No. The decision to publish in book form for the first time only 15 years later, after the end of the Vietnam War, it may be said deprives poetry of any claim of immediate action or gratification. (If the book offers itself as action, it would only be for us, now.) Again, Achilles defers, leaving the field of battle to those who believe in the battle. So Duncan attacks Levertov for writing poems that betray a desire for immediate action, immediate gratification, and a place in the battle. Surely many of us know what Levertov must have been feeling. Yet as soon as we begin to write out of that feeling we are also overwhelmed by an unutterable rage that chokes off language since no articulation of it can be adequate. If we are the disinherited (the Palestinians, say)

this loss of the inarticulate is our final disinheritance, nor will it help us regain a foothold in what is. If on the other hand our being is not self-identical to that of disinheritance, do we dare cave in to the inarticulate in the name of the other (again, I'm thinking of Palestine)? The poem is lost to anger, which flattens all language, just as anger flattens the diversity of human expression: we all look pretty much the same when we are angry.

Wallace Stevens on the other hand wrote of the profound poetry of the poor and the dead. Duncan is convinced of such. There are risks to the grand imagination, or totalizing image, so far from Celan's infinite patience with a truncated German language, Duncan's maximalism and Celan's minimum (but not minimalist) poetics, such dissimilar forms of Ethos. Is Duncan's effort to keep company with Celan in his poem in *Ground Work* " A Song From The Structure Of Rime Ringing As The Poet Paul Celan Sings" at all convincing? Perhaps Duncan keeps company with Celan in the line "It is totally untranslatable", that is to say, in the fiction of some irreducible but fluid foundation of the ground, there and not there. The fluidity of this ground must never be allowed to harden; an ideology as such would surely arise from it. Duncan's dictum that there has never been a time without war, often taken as a conservative maxim, an injunction against anything but putting one's head in the sand, intends to say that if a time of war forces us to simplify our poetry, then there never was a moment in which the complex was possible. That very complex co-authored by writer and reader that disrupts existing discourse and, even as is clear in Duncan, offers a form of enchantment complementary to resistance, this is what Duncan's poetics desires to sustain. Even should the poet bury his head in the sand, we know that under the sand key productions and key processes of production lie, and too the underground, the inferno. Duncan's polytheistic poetics of rapture and beauty permeates the air with an endless politics the poem and the poet and the reader must all respond to, like Achilles on the beach in the act of resisting the tide of war. Always must respond to means now, and now

again. The responsibility of language: "to keep the whole capacity of the potential intellect constantly actualized". Stop this war with your ear.

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/ Stephen Collis /

Another Duncan Etude: Empire and Anarchy

> There is therefore some activity specific to humanity as a whole, for which the whole human race in all its vast number of individual human beings is designed; and no single person, or household, or small community, or city, or individual kingdom can fully achieve it….it is to exist as a creature who apprehends by means of the potential intellect….And since that potentiality cannot be fully actualized all at once in any one individual or in any one of the particular social groupings mentioned above, there must needs be a vast number of individual people in the human race, through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualized (Dante, *Monarchia* 9-11).
>
> …the refusal of transcendence is the condition of possibility of thinking this immanent power, an anarchic basis of philosophy: "*Ni Dieu, ni maitre, ni l'homme*" (Hardt & Negri 92).

I have titled this paper "*Another* Duncan Etude" as it is a return to and an expansion upon some questions raised and, I feel, left unresolved in a recent paper – "A Duncan Etude: Dante and Responsibility" – published in *Jacket Magazine*. The two questions I want to return to are these: 1) what is the precise nature of Duncan's anarchism? And 2) how can his anarchism be reconciled with his turn to Dante's monarchist writings – and the whole question of "world order" – directly following what I see as the height of his poetic anarchism in 1968's *Bending the Bow* and his opposition to the Vietnam War.

1.

That Duncan had some formative and crucial relationship to anarchism is not in doubt (Ellen Tallman, for instance, describes meeting Duncan, for the first time, at Kenneth Rexroth's "Wednesday night Anarchist meetings" in 1946 – Tallman 1). What I want to arrive at is some sense of the specific *form* his anarchism takes, as there are clearly many anarchisms, a spectrum or range stretching from the extreme individualism of a Max Stirner to forms of collectivist and communist anarchism such as that propounded by Peter Kropotkin. Duncan, like many American anarchists, would seem at first glance to be most closely associated with the more staunchly individualist tradition. Thus, the crucial political binary for Duncan might appear to be that between individual volition and social coercion, which certainly seems to be the case when we turn to his arguments with Denise Levertov in the late 60s and early 70s. Duncan writes Levertov in May of 1969: "My spirit leaps up at Whitman's each man his own law; which is also Vanzetti's: the volitional politic is NOT a movement" (632-33) – and later, in October 1971: "Coercion has always seemed to me the only true evil" (660).

Nevertheless – and I will return to the question of volition and coercion later – it is my contention that the anarchist politics most clearly articulated in *Bending the Bow* (the writing and publication of which underscores the argument with Levertov) are more accurately described as anarco-communist, encompassing an attempted reconciliation of the individual and the mass. Let me take a few passages out of Duncan's "Passages."

From "The Multiversity [Passages 21]:"

> Where there is no commune,
>
> the individual volition has no ground.

Where there is no individual freedom, the commune
is falsified

(BB 71).

From "Orders [Passages 24]:"

There is no
good a man has in his own things except
it be in the community of every thing

(BB 79).

And from "Passages 26: The Soldiers:"

against the bloody verse America writes over Asia
we must recall to hold by property rights that
are not private (individual) or public rights but
given properties of our common humanity.

"The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem"?
Then America, the secret union of all states of Man,
waits, hidden and challenging, in the hearts of the Viet Cong.
"The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth,"
Whitman says – the libertarians of the spirit, the
devotées of Man's commonality

(BB 113).

In "The Multiversity," Duncan argues for a necessary correspondence between what Emma Goldman called the "individual *and* social instincts" (Goldman 64 – emphasis mine) – a holding of the singular and the multitude in mutual implication. In Peter Kropotkin's essay "Anarchist Communism," this is defined as a simultaneity of "the tendency towards integrating labor for the production of all riches in common, so as to finally render it impossible to discriminate the part of the common production due to the separate individual"

and "a tendency towards the fullest freedom of the individual in the prosecution of all aims" (47).

Duncan's thought is close here, but clearly the notion of *private property* – the "owning" of "things" – comes under increasing fire as the United States writes its "bloody verse" of empire over Vietnam. In the face of a "capitalistic oligarchy" which "in the name of industrial free enterprise and democracy attacks wherever it can the 'communist' world" (FC 119), Duncan turns increasingly to the "community of everything," the "commune of poetry," as he calls it in the introduction to *Bending the Bow* (BB vi), and to that America Whitman celebrated – Americans as "devotées of Man's commonality" that exist in "all nations," in all times and places. America, a state of being (rather than a being of state) distinct from the empire-building United States, is here not the usual embodiment of the ideal of individual liberty, but of "the community of everything," or what I want to call a *commoning instinct*.

Essentially I want to argue that Duncan's anarchism – and his sense of "world order" and the Shelleyan "world poem" with which he becomes obsessed in turning to Dante in this period – is an expression of such a *commoning instinct* – that the *field* he would *open* is an enclosed literary commons: "…the great field of poetry," as he writes in *The HD Book*, "...a common ground of language charged with old meanings revived, of form and content as immanent in the universe" (HD Book II: 5, 61).

Thus it may be possible to read Duncan's language of "fields" and "openings" against the historical phenomenon of the enclosure of the English common fields and the tradition of "common right." As Jeanette Neeson has shown, the English commoners, who were "enclosed" out of existence between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, were essentially anarco-communists,

"'of leveling principles…refractory to government…insolent and tumultuous'" (20). These are the words of a "critic of commons" cited by Neeson, whose text is filled with the language of enclosure. Duncan's title, *The Opening of the Field*, hovers everywhere in the reading of Neeson's history of the "open field villages" (55), echoing a common tract title referenced frequently in Neeson: *Inclosing the Open Fields*. In Neeson I even find the linking of the notion of "common right" with "permission" (73). "Often I am Permitted," by common poetic right, to re-enter the commons of language. At the height of the struggle between free market capitalism and state communism, between "private (individual)" and "public [social] rights," Duncan turns to the "common rights" and permissions of "our common humanity." He seeks the re-opening of all enclosed fields.

2.

This may be to read a slightly different Duncan than we are used to – a Duncan I'm now coming to, perhaps, through the lens of Susan Howe and her interest in open margins and enclosed histories. There is a way, I think, to read an antinomian, if not puritan, Duncan, just as there is a way to read an oddly anarchist Puritanism.

However that may be – hopefully I've given some sense of where to begin locating Duncan's anarchism. But what interest could an anarchist – even a puritan anarchist (or, and I think Duncan may be the only occupant of this category, an anarco-freudian) what stake could such a one have in Dante's monarchism, and what possible reconciliation between these positions could be envisioned? This is the question Dennis Formento can not get past in his essay "Robert Duncan, Anarchist Prince," in which he accuses Duncan's reading of Dante of being "dreamy," "uncritical," and "nostalgic." I will have something to say about dream below, and I will also turn to Hardt and Negri's arguments

concerning the origins of our contemporary global empire. But first, some keys to unlocking Duncan's use of Dante.

2.1 We must not lose sight – as Formento does – of the fact that Dante's view of "world order" is for Duncan a poetic figure – "Whatever [Dante's political writings] once were in a world of popes, city states, and emperors," he writes in the preface to his sequence of poems, "Dante Etudes," "they remain, translated powers…true to my sense of our good" (Ground 94). World order and poetic order are inseparable for Duncan, and his main concern is with, as he writes, "the idea of Poetry" (94). What, Duncan is asking, remains relevant *as poetics* in Dante's politics?

2.2 Duncan is choosy as to what he takes from Dante. Questions of medieval hierarchy and the specific powers of popes and emperors are largely elided in favour of the discussion of the "potential intellect," which, Dante tells us, is immanent, realizable only in the multitude, nowhere centered or centerable. Dante's ideal monarch would be at the service of the unfolding of the true purpose of humanity: the development of the "potential intellect" amongst the multitude. Here is one easy answer to the paradox of anarchy and empire: Duncan focuses on the one clearly decentralized and non-hierarchical model of order discussed in Dante's *De Monarchia*. It is, interestingly, also an argument about futurity – the opening of human potential currently enclosed by the political order. Thus Duncan in turning to Dante joins Susan Howe's proclamation in *My Emily Dickinson* that "My precursor attracts me to my future" (97). Poetry's future is in poetry's past, because the future (this is Howe again) "will forget, erase, or recollect and deconstruct every poem" (13). What faces the future in this way becomes part of the commons, no longer a private property: "What I put into words is no longer my possession" (13).

If Dante figures a sort of commons in the potential intellect, Duncan, in turn, positions Dante as part of the poetic commons – those past texts one has "permission" (common right) to return to and reuse.

2.3 In Dante's discussion of the multitude – the plurality that the actualization of the potential intellect depends upon – Duncan finds another model of his anarchist poetics. Here is Dante: "the human race constitutes a whole in relation to its constituent parts, and is itself a part in relation to a whole. It is a whole in relation to individual kingdoms and peoples…and is a part in relation to the whole universe" (Monarchia 17). Here is Duncan, from the introduction to *Bending the Bow*: "The artist, after Dante's poetics, works with all parts of the poem as *polysemous*, taking each thing of the composition as generative of meaning, a response to and a contribution to the building form" (BB ix, vii). And finally, for excess of quotation and collage, Kropotkin once again, sounding a little like Dante and Duncan: "throughout organic nature the capacities for life in common grow in proportion as the integration of organisms into compound aggregates becomes more and more complete" (53). The "Dante Etudes" are thus a further unfolding of Duncan's poetics of the "grand collage" – the "one Poetry / the poem belongs to" (Ground 118) – the "fittings" and "resonances" of "each part as it is conceived as a member of every other part" (BB ix) – the poem's growing aggregate, becoming common.

2.4 Finally, Duncan focuses most frequently on the implications such a decentered poetics has for (especially authorial) identity, elaborating a *polysemous* poetic and anarchic self – a self as unprivatized commons. "Against the private property of self," he writes of Robert Browning, "he created a community of selves" (FC 113) – and again, in *The HD Book*, he opposes "the 'I' in which all men participate" to the "'I' that is the private

> property of the writer" (HD Book II: 11, 88). As he insists in the "Dante Etudes," there is "no word 'my own'" in his poetry (Ground 119), and, playing upon Pound's refrain "Go, my songs," he writes "'*My*' songs? / the words were ever ours" (122). Dante leads him to the conclusion that if language is a commons then so is the poetic self and the author's identity. Intellectual property, we assume, is to be governed only by "common right," not institutional or statute authority – quotation and appropriation a matter of "permission" one has, again, not by the asking, but by common right. Once again Duncan's Dante is not far from the sources of his anarchist poetics elsewhere – his critique here of "the private property of self" a natural extension of his earlier discussions of derivation and "obedience."

3.

Formento writes that "Dante's monarchism is as vestigial and obsolete as the human appendix" (84), countering (and misreading) Duncan's insistence that Dante's political texts remain "immediate, to the presence of the idea of Poetry" (Ground 94). But let's be "dreamy" for a moment. How "obsolete" is Dante's *De Monarchia*? Might his calls for an "empire…a single sovereign authority set over all others in time" (Monarchia 5) find a contemporary echo in Hardt and Negri's discussion of the new global order in their book *Empire*? There is only room here to suggest some mostly vague possibilities. Both Dante and Hardt and Negri, for instance, describe a totalizing and yet largely decentralized system of power. Dante, writing long before such a world empire was possible, can envision it in utopian terms, Empire as a servant of the smooth unfolding of the "potential intellect" – of human potential writ large and dispersed amongst the multitude. Hardt and Negri, in the midst of the total production of social life that is contemporary global capitalism, describe what a monster such a world-system in

fact is: the multitude are not only made to serve the system (rather than the system the multitude), but they are in fact *produced* by it.

It would seem that Dante's call for world monarchy is simultaneously prophetic and out of date. But one point is clear: Dante locates the authority of his world monarchy on what Hardt and Negri call the "plane of immanence" (71): it exists in the multitude, in the pluralistic and decentralized purpose of humanity to actualize the "potential intellect." As Duncan writes, "The multiplicity of the human potentiality upon which Dante insists meant he knew that true order must insure freedom and peace – in order that each individual be free to actualize its own potential" (FC 118). Hardt and Negri locate Dante's monarchism at the origin of what they describe as "the revolutionary" turn towards the "plane of immanence" (70) – the evolution of what we commonly call humanism – and it is clear that anarchism is one outgrowth and articulation of the shift from a transcendent to an immanent world view.

Donald Nicholl, in the introduction to his translation of *De Monarchia*, suggests that Dante's vision of the task of the multitude "is really the first known expression of the modern idea of humanity" (Nicholl xi). What we may take from this is that the real historical impact of Dante's political thought was not so much his advocacy of world monarchy as it was his vision of a decentralized and authoritative multitude scattered along the "plane of immanence." *Despite* his monarchism, Dante's thought can be seen to be a breading ground of democracy. Thus, Duncan isn't uncritically or even willfully misreading Dante: he is returning to those aspects of Dante's thought which continue to resonate, which remain "immediate." Hardt and Negri would seem to agree, placing Dante's political thought at the origins of a "new understanding of power and a new conception of liberation" (73).

4.

As I have argued, it becomes possible to imagine Dante's world order as a centreless system where real authority is dispersed and disseminated – a "constituent conception" (Hardt and Negri 71) of power – a monarchy with an empty throne at its absent centre. I must now turn towards my conclusion, and get to the dream I hinted at earlier, which involves just such an empty throne. In Duncan's 1963 Vancouver poetry conference talk, "A Life in Poetry," he gives one of the most detailed descriptions of his well-known "Atlantis dream" – the precise language of which I want to pay attention to here. It seems that in some versions of this repeating dream, the circle of dancing children surrounds "a king seated in the middle of the ring," with Duncan, as the dreamer, being selected – or "making" himself – king. The dream then shifts to "a subterranean cave, where there was…an empty throne." Duncan notes that he would "often try to reassert being the king, and being in the throne, which was impossible," apparently triggering the collapse of the underground chamber – "great doors broke open and the cave was flooded with water" (A Life 33-4). The throne *could not* be occupied – authority, on the dream's plane of immanence, could not be centered or assumed by the dream ego's desire to dominate.

I would take the impossible-to-occupy throne as a figure for the true implications of Dante's world monarchy. It is also an apt image of the commons, where authority resides not in the *property rights* of transcendent squires and kings but in the *common rights* of immanent commoners. The unoccupied throne also resonates with Hardt and Negri's advocacy of "desertion" as a means of resisting Empire: "Battles against the Empire might be won through subtraction and defection. This desertion does not have a place; it is the evacuation of the places of power" (212). What must be resisted is occupying the throne; it must be deserted again and again.

I quoted, earlier, Duncan's comments from *The HD Book* on the "great field of poetry" and the "common ground of language," where "form and content" are "immanent in the universe." To approach poetry, as Duncan does, as a literary "commons," working out of a *commoning instinct*, is to see the poetic as unfolding along a "plane of immanence." No poet, no poetry, is transcendent, but each movement into the field, no matter how "masterful," is an admission that "Writing is first a search in obedience" (Opening 12). There is no "coercion" here – the tension between immanence and transcendence ultimately overshadows that between volition and coercion in Duncan's poetic anarchism – authority is donated to the multitude, where it is safely plural and decentralized, the poet a "crowd of one who writes" (Letters x). The notion of the poetic commons thus also provides another version of Duncan's sense of being a "derivative poet" – in his poetics, all poetry, all language, is derived from the commons; poetry cannot be enclosed or privatized – it always exceeds the boundaries we would place around it. As Negri writes in his recent book *Time for Revolution*, "Language is not born and does not develop other than in the common and from the common….Language is thus the mode of being of common being" (Negri 189).

Finally, let me return to the working out of Duncan's anarchism in those poems from *Bending the Bow* – particularly in "The Soldiers." Here we see the great paradox of America: the supposed standard bearer of the commons which attacks all expressions of the *commoning instinct*. Whitman's idea of there being "Americans" in "all nations at any time upon the earth" could be a recognition and reaffirmation of the commons – or it could be a call for conformity and the erasure of all boundaries and outsides that lies at the heart of the globalizing capitalist Empire – the blind certainty that the "inner American" of the people of Afghanistan or Iraq simply has to be let out. This is the danger with anarchism

too – that, historically, ideas of non-hierarchical decentralization have seemingly played into the hands of capitalism's blindly totalitarian development. The hope, I find, that Duncan's poetics enables is found in the radical destabilizing of the notion of private literary and authorial and individual property – the turn at every point to language as a commons that must be reopened again and again – the turn toward the future where all properties are held in the commons of their continued use. The danger in his poetics, however, is that, as in Dante's monarchy, the plane of immanence along which the multitude is spread in its grand decentralization is nevertheless still transected by the transcendent plane of the emperor/poet who keeps his or her ever watchful eye on the aggregate totality. Anarchy and Empire remain possibilities, potentialities. "[O]nce I began to spot that in my work," Duncan says in an interview, "I erased the picture of Empire and king. Already by the Venice poems the emperor stands for the person in command of the whole poem, and yet that emperor is not central" (Bernstein 119). I arrive then at another unanswered question: what sort of empire has an emperor that "is not central"?

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/ Miriam Nichols /

Deep Convention and Radical Chance:
The Two Postmoderns of Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser

I'm going to begin by defining the terms of my title, "deep convention" and "radical chance," and then I will show how these strategies, as developed in the work of Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser respectively, suggest contrasting directions in the early postmodern. I want finish with some speculation on where these strategies take us in terms of contemporary poetics.

Deep convention, then. I'm adapting this term from T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Paul Alpers's *What Is Pastoral*? (1996). The sense I am after is not that connoted by the *merely* "conventional," which suggests unthinking conformity, but rather that of an assembly of participants gathered over some matter of common concern. A convention in this sense of a *convening* makes a verb of the noun and leaves plenty of room for dissent and innovation. My favourite example of such a convening occurs in Paul Alpers's discussion of pastoral, when he questions the possibility of fixing upon a set of defining criteria for the pastoral and imagines instead a gathering of shepherds who engage each other in singing contests, each one trying to outdo the others in prowess and audacity: Colin Cloute and Hobbinol compete with Corydon and Tityrus in an Arcadian showdown.

Robert Duncan's Poetry with a capital "P" suggests just such a convening and on a grand scale. A "place of first permission" ("Often" 7), as Duncan calls it, Poetry is the work of all poets from all epochs. As Duncan explains repeatedly, he seeks entrance to that community of poets—hence his self-fashioning as a derivative writer. In an introduction written to accompany the 1966 collection of

his early poems in *The Years as Catches*, Duncan says of his beginnings: "I saw my own personal life belonging to a larger human life that was foreign to the society into which I had been born, to the American way, to the capitalist ethic with its identification of work with earning a wage and of the work with a saleable commodity, and with its ruthless exploitation of human energies for profit" (*Years* vii). That larger life allows the poet to escape an intolerable quotidian but as Duncan says in *Bending the Bow*, "I want every part of the actual world involved in my escape" (v). Convention in this sense truly means the living imagination of the species and I cannot do better than Michael Davidson did years ago when he wrote that Duncan treats the serial poem as an "open-ended series of variations on a corrupt and corruptible text" ("Caves" 37). Duncan's sense of tradition, Davidson says, is "interpretive" rather than "recuperative" (37). Add to this comment Duncan's own beautiful lines: "What is / hisses like a serpent / and writhes // to shed its skin" ("The Law," *RB* 30). Here in these lines and in this concept of Poetry is Duncan's version of creative agency: repetition practiced as interpretation.

There is another kind of repetition to be found in Robin Blaser's work, however, which incorporates chance. One of the most salient features of Blaser's poetry is the trouvé, manifest in his work as quotation. Quotation in the poems and in the essays is frequent and copious, a passion, if not an addiction. Introducing *Syntax* Blaser speaks of found-things (159) and elsewhere he describes his method as a hunt or "randonnée (*Pell Mell*, "A Note")." The French denotes a ramble or hike, but the word also carries the English word "random" by sound. I am reminded here of two particularly apt metaphors for this method of thinking and writing. Introducing Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt says that for Benjamin the past is not authoritative, but citable: like a pearl diver or a collector (38), the historian dredges up treasures which time has transformed: "Full fathom five thy father lies / Of his

bones are coral made, / Those are pearls that were his eyes" Arendt quotes (38). Wrenched up into the light of the present, the found-thing becomes something "rich and strange," like a precious stone or a collector's item. Thus Blaser in *Syntax*, retrieving Opal Whitely. He discovers her on the CBC, he says, and then he finds her book, *The Story of Opal* (1920). The little gem set into *Syntax* concerns a cow, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose tracks are so dainty and full of poetry that Whitely digs them up from the lane when the mud has dried and saves them (*HF* 204).

I propose that the difference between Duncan's derivations and Blaser's quotations is a difference between homogeneous and hetereogenous temporalities. To go back to the preface to *The Years as Catches* Duncan writes that opposites and dualities are "but the variety of the one" (x)—one Cosmos, one Man, one Poem that tell the human story. However open-ended the unfolding of the Poem may be, however various its manifestations, they remain *commensurable* with each other. Time, in such a figuration, is spatialized and smoothed out, like the meadow of *The Opening of the Field*. Duncan's *oeuvre* is full of tropes and precedents for this kind of temporality. His love of the neo-Platonic and kabbalistic, for instance, brings to mind creation stories which tell the universe as an emanation of the One. Another, nearer, precedent for this version of time is Emerson's circles. Emerson begins his essay of this title with an image of circles widening out toward the horizon, as the circles in a pond widen out from a pebble tossed. In this trope of concentric rings each one surpasses the last. Hence Emerson can write that "Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of fact. The law dissolves the fact and holds it fluid" (226). It is not far from this vision of a dynamic, ontogenetic, living whole to Duncan's "Law I Love." Back of the never ending process of self-explication that is the Cosmos, there is a "Law" that holds the whole together and makes the species "we" pronounceable. Again, in *Bending the Bow*: "So, the artist of abundancies

delites in puns, interlocking and separating figures, plays of things missing or things appearing 'out of order' that remind us that all orders have their justification finally in an order of orders only our faith as we work addresses." What seems to be an "interruption of our composure" is in fact a "juncture in the music" (x). It is because of this hidden coherence that Duncan can work derivatively on pieces that are distant from each other and from his own space-time and culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the early (1942) "African Elegy," collected in *Years as Catches*, in which Death enters the poem through the groves of Africa, Virginia Woolf's suicide, Desdemona, the "Moor of self" and Orpheus singing. There is no embarrassment in this poem about projecting what Duncan calls "the mind's / natural jungle" (33) onto an imaginary Africa, no sense of cultural disjunction between Shakespeare's Othello and "those negroes . . . / holding to their mouths like Death / the cups of rhino bone" (34).

In contrast, Blaser often writes manyness as *in*commensurablility. Homi Bhabha has given us a postcolonial version of this time-space, wherein different cultures repeat, misrecognize and subvert each other in an on-going struggle for and against domination, but Blaser's practice is oriented more to divergences within his own cultural frame. A poem like "Cold Morning Quotations," for instance (*Pell Mell* 1988), gathers, among others, lines from Geoffrey Hartman, Nietzsche and Derrida, madrigals from Monteverdi sounding on the stereo and readings from Hermann Broch's *Death of Virgil.* In between is the phenomenological present: in the kitchen "december tomatoes shine on the top of the refrigerator" as the poet thinks about "fragment structures—serial poems--/all having to do with materiality of / form—having to do with death" (212). From this very small, specific locus, the poet contemplates the diverging perspectives opened up by the quotations, each of which handles differently the aporia of death and art's fascination with it. There is, for instance, Derrida's

"thanatopraxis," or the "sham-infinity" denounced in Broch's *Death of Virgil*, or there is the unarguable beauty of the madrigals from which all mourning flows: practice of death as écriture, refusal of death in religious hope, and mourning of death as loss of love and beauty. Reason's measure here is incommensurable with the unteachable heart.

Or take a much simpler example: in a "Truth is Laughter" poem from *Syntax*, Blaser records a bus conversation between a mother and small child. "F U / C K loud-voiced, 'Mom, / what does that say?' 'That's / not a word,' she said, / looking straight at me 'It / doesn't spell anything'" (168). Here the mother willfully suppresses her son's trouvé as noise and in a flash we can see the two distinctive worlds of child and adult come into focus: the mother's gesture waves away a fatal literacy that will mean the end of childhood and the beginning of the puerility of adolescence, the carnality of young adulthood, the heartbreaks, the procreative urge, the growing up that will be coming for her boy—and her own growing old.

If Duncan recalls Emerson on this matter of temporality, then Blaser comes out of Hawthorne. Owen Warland, clockmaker, fashions an exquisite mechanical butterfly that seems to leap the laws of nature and make beauty everlasting. This has always been art's dream and the rebellion of "clockmakers" has it not?: to outdo time and make beauty last? Never mind that the woman of Owen's delight has married the practical blacksmith and born him a son. The gift, finally presented, lights on the hand of that little boy, still malleable in youth, Hawthorne says, but nonetheless the son of a practical man whose measure of value is utilitarian. By such a measure, the butterfly is worthless. So we see the chubby fingers close and the work of a lifetime disintegrate into a "small heap of glittering fragments" (177). Likewise does the present lay an unwitting hand on its past, only to open the palm on a few fragments that bring to bear a strange

kind of measure on the hand that destroyed them. Here is Blaser in "The Finder":

> I bend 'you' to my mouth
> and suck 'your' breath away
> only worlds caught
>
> in the glinting lights of those
> pieces of glass found in the
>
> forest under a tree crushed
>
> and shining (*HF* 103 – 104)

Cosmology, Blaser says in "The Fire," is the "real business" of poetry, but his is a cosmos torn open by the noise of other galaxies. Listen to the static in *The Moth Poem* in a poem called "it it it it," the words mimicking the fluttering of a moth, of a something, against a window. And if the window were to open? What othernesses, what new constellations, alliances and disjunctions, might come in? "'It springs on you'" says the title of a poem from *Pell Mell*, in which "the poet has no part in being, / is not the priest of ontology" (272), meaning, I take it, that the poet has no claim to Adamic nomination, no fixing of the world that way.

But where does this leave us with respect to creative agency? Agency, of course, is a key issue for the arts now, is it not? the reconstruction of a social imaginary? the leveraging of opposition in a global commodity culture which seemingly has no outside? This is where the early postmodern gets interesting. Writers of the postwar decades, Duncan among them, reached for a global perspective, whether through recognition of the hetereogeneity of populations (Olson), the validity of all cultures (Duncan) or the baseline of language as the common ground of the human species (Spicer and later language writers). These

poets were thinking globally before the term ever acquired its current economic and ecological meaning. But Duncan's kind of globalism really pertains to feeling rather than cognition or praxis. So, for instance, in the preface to *Years as Catches*, he writes of Freud's influence on his early work and the "feeling and thought in a poem, rising as it did out of a hidden resource" (viii). The poems then become an exploration of the poet's self and Self, capitalized, his participation in the self-making of the species. In this same preface, Duncan repeatedly introduces his poems in terms of feeling: in these early poems, he says, he remembers difficulty in "find[ing] speech for the feeling I wanted," and he introduces a war poem, "Passage Over Water," as coming out of "a menacing, desolate and overwhelming world of feeling" (vi). Once we catch on to the level at which Duncan is working, we can re-read his derivations and impersonations from this position as well, as efforts to feel what it would be like to speak from this or that position.

Of all the ways to configure the human, the emotions are probably the most transhistorical and transcultural, and the most resistant to change. We do not need to be Freudians to recognize the phenomenological primacy of emotion and feeling to human psychology and sociality. However often we may mistake the meanings, the intentions, the customs, the languages or the social signage of others that often *trigger* feelings, we know that others have emotional needs similar to ours. Consider again "An African Elegy." I return to this poem because from a contemporary point of view, Duncan's appropriation of "Africa" as Death's heartland is a bit of exoticizing too obvious to bother critiquing. Certainly the imagery in the poem will make it unreadable for some. But the feeling Duncan evokes here of heart-thudding strangeness, of impending event, of coming danger or revelation may be one of the oldest of human experiences: Annubis, the "dog-headed man," is he who arrives. The feeling is shareable if the imagery that evokes it is not. From this angle, Duncan's Poetry, the meadow and

place of permission, is exactly that common ground of the inner life where humanity comes together as a species being. And here, I think, is the beginning of an argument for a global ethics,[1] in a recognition of the common physical and emotional needs of the species. Certainly we ignore the emotional dimension of human life at our peril: witness the current resurgence of fundamentalisms and bad science which answer to human desire, disappointment, and unfounded hope rather than reason or even self-interest. As a poet, of course, Duncan is more concerned with the range of the emotions than with promoting the "right" ones, but in traversing that range he gives us exactly what he promises: a convening place of human life.

If we turn back now to Blaser's "randonnée," we can see that disjunction is all about historical and cultural specificity--the public face of individual and collective life rather than its inner landscape--about what can be constructed more than what can be recognized. Blaser calls his field of attention the real, and so it is; history is the real as we can come by it, and it is woven of conflicting and incommensurate traditions, trajectories and narratives which may open onto different life-worlds, different beliefs, and different futures. Benjamin writes, enigmatically, that each era is weakly "messianic" (254), mortgaged to the past, as it were, with claims that "cannot be settled cheaply" (254). Chance, however, is a loophole in the contract, and as Blaser likes to point out, it is embedded in the materiality of our condition. This he takes from Mallarmé very early in his writing life: that a throw of the dice, a given condition, a seemingly intractable set of determinants, can never abolish chance. This is not to say at all that chance can stand in for willed action, but rather that the occasion calls us to respond, if we can read the occasion. Recall Olson's lines from "The Kingfishers":

Mao concluded:
nous devons
nous lever
et agir!

3

When the attentions change / the jungle
leaps in
even the stones are split
they rive
(*Collected Poems* 87 – 88)

If I read aright, here, Blaser and Duncan complement (supplement) each other because they address the different logics of the emotional and historical respectively. The disagreement between them, particularly the well-aired quarrel over translation, comes when each reads the other from his own position.

I want to put a tag on this talk—a few general comments about the arts and the passing of the postmodern which was the first venture of Duncan and Blaser. Many writers and theorists have complained that the postmodern and the poststructural as well offer unsatisfactory accounts of agency, diffused to the point of impotence in indeterminism, parology or micropolitics. This was Jameson's and Eagleton's critique, offered when the term "postmodern" still had currency; later a similar reproach would be repeated by postcolonial critics. While I am sympathetic to this review of certain theoretical positions—Lyotard's for example—the arts require more critical finesse. First of all, they have always been limited to ostension: they *show* us the world from different angles and suddenly we see what we could not see before. This is to say that they most often work at the cognitive and emotional levels, not praxis. Secondly, what has happened to the arts and to theory as well in the aftermath of the theoretical decades (the phenomenological 60s, the feminist 70s, the deconstructive 80s, the postcolonial 90s) is that there is a marked disconnect between ostension and

praxis, and for this the arts cannot be blamed. If theory taught us anything, it is that cognitive liberation is never enough: change has to take place in social institutions, not in texts. Blaser has repeatedly argued, for example, that the arts have a place *alongside* other practices like politics and philosophy; they cannot displace these others. This is to say that a change of consciousness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a change in the world. Another reason for the disconnect, however, is that a global theatre of action dwarfs not only the gestures of individuals or small groups but even those of nations. All this is merely commonplace, but it perhaps needs to be said that postmodern *theory* exacerbates the impotence that many people feel intuitively as characteristic of our condition. There is no secret here either: the postmodern was initially a response to totalitarian politics and religious claims to the real, not rule by market.

However, if we look again at the *arts* of the last 50 years without the habitual theoretical spectacles, they may help us to articulate the shape of an alternative human universe. We need to map out a new common ground that extends to the human species and not just to our own national cultures or ethnic groups. We need a new humanism that expands and renovates enlightenment ideas of the free, rational, centered and responsible subject as a limit concept for what is an acceptable mode of human life.[2] I have already suggested that this common ground must take account of the emotions and not just rational self-interest if it is not to run aground on the disjunction between cognitive and practical change; we cannot remain slack-jawed and flumbusted, for instance, at the astonishing ability of wage-earning voters to return neo-conservative governments to power when these governments clearly do not serve their practical interests. As well, a 21st century humanism must grow ears for noise: by definition, there is no accommodating of incommensurability, there is only the listening for it, a willingness to suspend immediate judgment and to share

planetary space despite unresolvable differences. We do not have to exit the postmodern with nothing but shabby relativism or commodified theory—the latter an addiction to novelty for sale on the ideas-and-careers market. The arts have always broadened perspectives and they will now if we let them. Assessing the agonistics of a global world will take the kind of principled judgment and *imagination* that comes out of a perspective as large and "otherous" as we can make it. What better school for that than poetry. I'll let Blaser have the last word.

> . . . I want you to see
> the turn of events the horror,
> the childish matches, the flow
> of the effort information is not simply
> genetic, social, momentary, but strife in events
> in the earth—
> unorganized—brilliant, beautiful—
> the heart of the matter unfolds matter (*Pell Mell* 21)

Notes

1. For just such an argument see Jean Curthoys's *Feminist Amnesia* (1997). Curthoys critiques the turn to language in the women's movement as a derailment of a practical program of emancipation. A liberation theologist, Curthoys argues that emancipation begins with the extending of respect to every human as human.

2. See, for instance, Jérôme Bindé's article, "Toward an Ethics of the Future," in *Globalization,* on the significance of a new humanism.

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/ Kim Duff /

Is This Thing On (Anarco-poesis)

i.

factories of reality
await price-tickets:

virtual beliefs

consume truths
outside
/in

poetic languages

ii.

redistribute intelligence
by means of the word:
we make anarchy
through the nothingness
of poetry

not

ephemerally permanent but
permanently ephemeral

post-navigating
modern landscapes
of binary
ecologies and
poetic techne:
energetic repose
and

iii.

energy of distances
complete with nothingness
ephemerally - permanently
closes in on the discourse
of zeros and ones
ones and zeros

iv.

the purpose of poetry
is to destroy all that prose
formally represents

the purpose of technology
is to destroy all that humans
traditionally represent

v.

we find ourselves mutable

our identities fluxating

amidst terminal dial-ups

of anarchistic relationships

that mean nothing

in the poetics of it all

vi.

energy that is aware of the possibility of positive construction devotes itself to an ordered using-up and waste of itself

please enter your password after the tone and we will get back to you.

we, the machine.

vii.

reaching nothing -
vacuum solitude and
silicon abstracts wire into
brief
emotional
interludes.

individual freedom
becomes we
as identities collect
within the singular
address
IP.

viii.

The anarchy of technology
internet mainframes,
corporate melee
of institutionalized
pornographies
of self.
nothingness of energy
and the ephemerally
flickering signifiers:
language here is soft,
is made of light -
prose becomes poetically
unpinnable

It has no system,
harmony, form,
public significance or
sense of duty

ix.

rising from the war machine
of democratized subtlety:
machine becomes anarchist
and
we draw the circumference,
like spiders,
out of ourselves.

/ Jordan Scott /

from **blert**

If you must repeat, blowgun bleat. Tip Phyllobate, masticate equation:
word order = *world ardour*

but um, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum,

Jugulum Buyakkashakka (Zebra Finch phonetic in three refrains)

Genus: Zebra Finch (Taeniopygia guttata)

Call: rapid nasal stops: *bunt, bunt, bunt* **//** 7 % of Zebra Finches stutter with intermittent *yak yak* (like syllables).

Behavior: "They learned to mumble – not to speak – and it was only after paying attention to the increasing noise of the century, and after they got whitened by the foam of its crest, that they acquired a language." *from*, *Australian Finches in Bush and Aviary*.

1.

Incisor chunks Cuckoo to Pango Pango sky. Wingpit spoons the hyoid frantic. Ebb ebb clank palate, vocal tilt flirts with Jiffy Pack, breast plume's litter.

Mantra pinball's boom box, crunk bumps: Knickknack patty whack tonsil clamcrack.

flub hubbub

mugs humbolt

current lub

upwells hummer

bumbles axial

tilt jumble

double trouble

scree rut slurry

nuzzle duplex

dimebag stucco

spelunk glottis

polar fleece

snot lob

scratch ankle

fractal lag

thermal index

prod hightop

scarp pump

Hubba Bubba

patella spread

tonsil box

stucco dermis

a Glacial etch -a- sketch

pop rock moraine

each pattern tonic

liplock knob

bulimic esker

2.

Peacock raptorial jam scaffold tarp, slingshot ZsaZsa, linen or mink slung the dihedral. Comma dermis scabbed Pringle, sweats a lattice spray in blunderbuss array to pearl nape.

Brontosaurus lambada. Thunder-thigh plump; a cucumber saunter.

Trout speckled parlance, flicked iris to hot piston shot opera. In ten pound test tango the gill shook as Chassis roll, slobbed alveoli against coal, dorsal crest poppin' wheelies Pacific. Slap skins as mackerel breach cornflakes lactic dregs. Gullet disco weld cochlea to Mazatlan as tanqueray ebbs mai tai brim, cube rattle, the cool sonata masticate bongo.

birch flexure
mess torso

bramble dent
florescent

shard oxide
sap scrabble

as Pac-man
babble rib

mackerel lunar
tract mango

saline pineapple
zulu xiphoid

blip blip cram

Cronkite carbonates
coma mai tais
musks Tuscan Chachi
caps comets, meteors mangled
in Pago Pago marram

Thread Herring chug
the neoprene thread
speargun cortex:

Mexico Mexico
hung mudlark macho

gales lurk
berserk cortex
a honeyed botox
globs boom of clavicles
cornsilk lips
blitz as
Molotov blisters
Tupperware slur

celeb Texmex
thunder thigh

aerobic gulag
squeeze bottle
Gucci Groin

Fog to cleft a passing tango, rank with mashed mango, lobs chunks to crunk the courtyard, lungs to glide the rung out shards, slang and Lougheed.

cleft and fog
trip tango
reek with split citrus
spill darkens sod
lungs thrash
slang stacks

Fog to cleft, the tango rank. Each clavicle tide Courvoisier.

Lean scythe, fog scatters. Ricochet windbreaker, camelback bladders. The aqueduct thoracic. Spelunk duplex lung brackish, the suffix rung. Lymph dribble kickstarts aquatic blort. The dew plucked. Ameba gleam.

breed smelt

gulf's bulimic kelp

smuggles air sacs

gape to quench thigh

dermis stain

denture watermark

fog. rose.

chorus clast:

drench got pulse

drug sun

each carbon

strain pause

at sway

solstice curls

cocklebur as

Tug orbits

freights boom

fizzbo oratio

tambo – bambo

pounce uvula

until lymph

node bilge

Unzip areolar, a mini-duffel bag rippled mucous. Sippin lean oscillations quake sonic the cheek walls. Belay tongue, tip, repel, drilled lingual. Molar excavates flop. Gak listerene pocket pack from sediment palate, slab menthol burst to lobe, to AC adapter, to labial sponge dipt chorus falsetto with slow Swiffer.

3.

Algae crumples under radar's tiddlywink bleat. The Ghetto blaster perched clavicle, a brackish treble culled Ring-Billed Gulls: *oom oom makak oom oom makak*…gyred pogo style to hibachi picnic, mandible kabob cram operculum, the mollusk husked hotly.

Makak fandangos. Humpbacked gudunkadunk bump and grind trunk, stump, in Tumtum tree, bushwhacks as cranked-up muzak bric a bracs.

What is the syllable.

A strobe chomped. Technoed spectrum on alveolar arch. A cadence, a fragrance burst, fluoride. mur-mur pass though ligature wire.

What is the syllable.
Skookum – Chuck narrows. Pharynx turbulence, hiss.

What is the syllable.
Squatted down in a tuft of fern, and took a nap.

but um, but m, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, but um, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tu mtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, bud dum, tumtum, budum, tumum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy tum, budum, tumtum, budum, tumtum tiddy t

Vancouver Poetry Conference
Evening Session, August 5, 1963
Robert Duncan, "A Life in Poetry"

Duncan: The letters were phrased, when we were asked to come here, I had the impression that – as a matter of fact I had the rather delightful impression that all I was going to do was give a reading and then give a lecture. And I really didn't know I was going – well, as everybody knows, it was a slightly different picture from that. But, as a matter of fact, when I came they said, "Oh, you're not going to give a lecture," but I contrived to give one, because I had, when I was presented with the idea I was going to give a lecture, I had gone to our household oracle and asked them what would be the subject of the lecture. Now while I didn't – I've learned long ago not to say, "Should I give a lecture" and then the oracle'd say, "You will die on February 13th," and then you're sunk. Instead I always ask it, like "What would you think would be a sort of a" – and then at the same time I still feel sort of bounden to follow out the little plan. What the household oracle is, – and that is involved in the talk I'm going to – do I have to stoop over this way? I don't think I do.

Audience: Better without it.

Duncan: Hmm?

Audience: Better without it.

Duncan: Better without it. Is there anyone in the room can't hear my bellowing voice? It would be a surprise. Somebody – five blocks there

Olson: Pauline says you won't get the tape if you . . .

Duncan: Oh, I see. Will the tape get me anyway if – and I don't care about this. Okay. So.

When I thought of lecturing or even – and I didn't miss it – who it was that was going to be here – and that was all the people who already know, in some very definite sense, why they're here – I thought, what in the world do I really have at all to tell and that is some part of my own experience in poetry. Now in the mornings we've flung out great topics and struggled with words that none of us quite agree on – that turn all sorts of colors, but I'm just going – I'm going to be back in something else. Tonight you're going to be – an account of how a life grows up in poetry, and how an idea of poetry forms from that, and certainly it is not a project of what big poetry is like – it's what a life in poetry is

like – now one of those things that's come up in that life of poetry is a thing that I call in the Pindar poem "drawing the sorts."

In a novel by Charles Williams – but what novel I can't remember at the moment – this was referred to, and then lo and behold, when I was despairing of finding out where that "drawing the sorts" had been I was reading Wilkie Collins' *Woman in White* I think, and all of a sudden an old man draws the sorts. What he does – at every point he opens up *Pilgrim's Progress*, and kinda goes like that, and actually he can solve the mystery because it always tells him what to do and tells him what is up. You can do it with a dictionary and people used to do it with the Bible all the time. It is perhaps a symptom of the times that where – and the book – the book I found, I found via a graduate student in oriental studies during the war who had been in Japan, or just after the war this was, in '45, and in Japan the O.W.I. boys had gotten wise to using a Kenkyusha. That is, Kenkyusha's a big dictionary, and in the Japanese-English section you can't tell, as often you would with a regular dictionary, sort of know that if you began with 'A' you might strike such and such a word, and believe it less. Besides which, the Japanese would have a symbol and then give a series of sentences showing how that symbol is used in different – now – so, since 1945 on I have at various times used a Kenkyusha. This particular Kenkyusha, we looked two years before we found one that would agree to live in our house. That is, you would find a Kenkyusha in the bookstore, and you'd say, very politely, you'd say, "Would you like to come home and kind of let me use you?" and the Kenkyusha would say, "Take a very long run to the nearest lake." [Laughter] And – or you'd say, "Are you a truthful Kenkyusha" and Kenkyusha really would say, "Are you kidding?" This particular Kenkyusha actually was agreeable to coming home. And when I took the draw, then, and I'm going to put on the board, and then I will go on – what happ – three draws that would give the shape of a lecture on poetry, and look how it hit it – [writing on board] – that's number one. [writing] This is practically the course of any lecture I've ever given on anything. [laughter] "Go to the office, report to the office, you get your paycheque you gotta give the lecture. He would go to any expense in such matters. Well, cannily, I never like to interpret that as meaning money, so I interpret it as grievous experience or almost anything else. If it were money, I would make it a very small expense. I would go to just that expense that they would advance to get me there – but – and maybe that's what governs the other, too. And – three – "Throw a person off his balance, upset, bewilder." And then I said, "Well, Kenkyusha, you know, you've done very well – thank you, and have you any comments on the entirety of what you have just outlined? What do you think of your own plan for my lecture?" After my *thank you*, which we can put in italics, 'cause I said thank you, Kenkyusha said [writing] "To prevent mistakes, to see that all is right."

What certainly must have haunted me about these instructions was that one of these words, in the very first case, the word "office" was a word that I got

to know very well in medieval studies, and then used, and transferred to this idea of the poet when it was first taking form, and had a very different concept of my relation to a poet from the one that was – that is predominant in my own period, of the poet being the self expressing himself. That is, I was interested – now, actually, if you look around, the poet is not only the self expressing himself, but for all people he has also been an office no matter where – fulfilling an audience – an audience – and audience is part of this picture. My word "obedience" has to do with this office; my word "service," which is close to – and look at the ecclesiastical idea "office" – today of course the only office we have left I guess is the business office, and the fact that we recognize that there are offices within the church. All right – what are the offices, and what is the office of the poet, is part of what I certainly wanted to build a picture of. And in San Francisco, in one of those reaching forwards toward a higher pretension, I wrote an introduction for a reading that I gave five years ago, and there asked the audience not to clap after any of the readings, because I said I wanted to read as it would be in a church, performing the office – you see when you're performing the office, you don't – you are not in the state of how good your performance is. And in that introduction I said, "Yes, at the present time we're so mixed up about performances and offices that we do clap for people as if they were 'specially gifted or talented, when actually what's at issue is one that the church – the Catholic church settled very early. As long as they're performing the mass, they're performing the mass, no matter who it is doing that, and when a man's doing the poem – now we as poets, and even you interested in poems – yes, everybody can recognize it was a really sloppy mess this morning, and he hasn't got it straight – but the thing is taking place. And now this certainly brings up another one of the things I want to lead toward and perhaps give an idea how in my own life this idea came about, and that is that the poem itself is, like the mass, a magical operation using language as those things in the mass are a magical operation and close upon the numinous world – close upon the world charged with divine – divinity. Now – another word that certainly has haunted me that I had not used in any essay, I think – I really can't remember every point that I have or have not made clear – but this one has occupied my mind for some time – is "expense". Now actually with my tendency and thought I would expect an expense, because it is part of the legend. Now I've always been amazed that I have not had the expense, that that's why I really use my other word "pretend" and "pretension." Because I have a very high sense of what the expense is, and then since I also really believe in this office – but then I'm talking about something very different – the poet performing in this office – that's separate, but then the other thing is, is poet as part of the ritual that's bound in poetry – he may come to the expense – now I'm very close to the picture we've had frequently in the morning, and that is of the self's involvement in poetry – and of the transference of heroic engagement – you see that expense used to be what the hero had to do and he really wasn't a poet. The poet sang of heroes – and what

has happened now is, that in an unheroic world the heroic has descended – think of all the things that have descended upon the poets – and by the way, they descended in the 19th century. Read Burkhardt, when he divides all history between the soldier, the priest and the poet. And has his complete picture of what history is going to be from this – what it means there is that the poet no longer is just telling about things, but becomes a central man of action, and no longer starts – he starts the poem and must always as part of his office say, "I sing of heroes," and have to do with the heroic, but now in this – in our time all engagements with language are heroic, because we're – the language itself is the place where that maiden and that dragon are. They've been many places in the past, but it does seem that if there is such an engagement today, it happens in this place of – of the language. So – just by the sense – you know, all this long time of poetry, since they've always had – that's their office – in the office now there is heroic drama. The next one of course is the picture of – excess – of the heroic *hubris* that I also always expect – see, not just the expense, not just the expenditure of the thing, but the "throw off balance, upset, bewilder" – as when this session started in the morning, and I arrived and Robert Creeley and Allen Ginsberg had both already talked about "throw a person off his balance, upset, bewilder," and were presenting that – they used another term – bankruptcy, but this is what the – I mean, I'll stay within these Kenkyusha terms – again I had this – how did a book – I don't – let's say how did a dictionary open to give these three sentences? – chosen at random, by the way – you take the dictionary, and the book opens, and you put your finger down, and then – this is where – it's gotta be exact. You don't move it around – you take just what it is there, and then in another place, and get the form. Well, those are the comments and all I'm going to make about these three remarks, but they will be in back of me, as now what I want to do is to give an entirely other account, the one I can give, and that is actually – some touches – and also I wanted especially – one of the possibilities this evening would have been to read from a book – actually it was an impossibility because the book is written with such – in such concentrated style, that I myself find it difficult to follow as I'm reading it, and this would be impossible in this extension.

But the other thing was: I would like to make a present to you, that – although this is going on a tape, I realize and – with this thing in front of me – I did want to do something that would give you your unique in and also something that would draw from you. I've been drawing for two weeks from the questions you've asked and from, actually, the expressions on your faces, as I also like to write – and in the few times I've ever been able to write – for the stage was at Black Mountain, where I was able to write as the group performing in the play were acting the very – each scene, and they were telling me, not me – they were telling me what was happening in the play. In a sense I want to participate in this play from the things that have reformed this material, and tell in a different style, the story of my engagement in poetry. Now certainly those of you

who have Don Allen's anthology – what I did there in writing a little autobiography was to write the story as I saw it then of my engagement – of how this engagement came upon me in poetry. One thing that seems to me – how is it that so few people – so few among all the numbers actually become poets. My own feeling, and the ones – the premise in which you see all of us – when we are before you, all the way from Allen Ginsberg, myself, and this morning Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley and Charles Olson – in a very immediate sense we have a curious premise, that every one of you or anyone of you would potentially be a person who is going to use us. Now we only have one use in this sense and that is the poem – and how did you get engaged, I wonder? How did I get engaged with this thing that I could not in any way ever – once it was there I had no choice – we talked about – did we talk about choice this morning and I think there was a curious, yes, Creeley had – if you could say yes and no then it wasn't interesting, but you didn't have any choice – you did not have any yes and no about this particular business. You were not – you could not say, "Oh yes I may or may not undertake this office because once it was there it was there. And is there.

Now in the very first engagements that I can remember at all then – and then from here on I'm going to talk about poetry, and see if I can keep off all those big suggestive areas, and I probably can't – the very first thing I can remember – back in the early 20's, was sitting with a – either a nurse or my mother or both at an age before I could read, when they were reading to me from a volume called *Little Pictures of Japan*. As a matter of fact I have recaptured most, but not all, of the key books of my childhood. What happens is that when your parents at least heave a great sigh that you've grown up – the first thing they – at least my parents did was to throw out all those keys of childhood and hope that that awful little creature didn't reoccur. But later you do find there are mysterious fairytale books that you look and look and look – I look and look and look through children's shelves to refind. Now this volume, *Little Pictures from Japan* – was the product of a real educational movement in the United States that took place in the 20's – out of Chicago. And – it was – when I rediscovered it – this isn't always true of those little treasures – for instance one treasure I have, one early little treasure is the first one where that bear that haunts me frequently, when I came to confess it – I – if I could blush my face should be red – it was a sickly sweet ghastly little book about a baby and a bear rescues – well of course the way I always put it was, rescues the baby from his parents, and takes him away in the woods and feeds him stacks of sticky gooey honey – usually the book – I have never found it again, but my memory of it is so sickening, except that there is exactly that bear which returned to me then when I was – as a real – as a real dream totem personal animal, and with much magic action, later, when I had undertaken poetry, when I was 19, 20, 21. In the Japanese book it was just classical Japanese poems – little pictures. Now let me – I was never drawn to write Japanese-like poetry, as anybody who's read me knows, but *Little Pictures*

was some part of it – the very beginning of poetry to me was pictures, and identified by a – by a child's book in the beginning, with sketch pictures that were very vivid when I rediscovered them, and very good translations from Bashō and the Japanese poets. Now, the next – how does – actually I feel that outside of the very early, almost pre-reading acquaintance with poetry, there's a long, dark period – actually in that period I did write poems in the second or third grade until I realized that they were pretty dreadful – I think the time I realized they were pretty dreadful I wrote a poem to mother about how an awful oyster has a little pearl inside him and if you're mad at me, love me tomorrow [laughter] and I looked at something – this may be – we've all been nervous about, how do you judge a poem – well this was something that almost anybody could see was not the thing, and – anyway, wanting to write poetry stopped, and it only started when I saw something better than that, and that was in high school, when there were the dramatic monologs of Robert Browning. Now, what I didn't know – there are school teachers here who are interested in teaching poetry – what I didn't know, and I don't know what or how or what in any way my high school teacher knew. She was a woman who was – who was disappointed about having to teach in the middle of the depression, having to go away when she really wanted to write – she had gone to Taos when Lawrence was still there, she had gone to Carmel because Jeffers was there, so she was a woman who probably very much wanted to be in the area of one of those charged male poets who do gather around them women admirers. Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers both are poets of this particular kind. And so, perhaps as a young boy of 16 or 17 – and I had a – quite a crush on this teacher – if you can call it – no – crush – I fell in love with her because every single day really was molded around the possibility of getting to that classroom and having that hour, and then I very rapidly discovered that I could also go to her house and pour out bad poetry at her by the hour, and she would look enthralled. [laughter] A friend of mine who actually is present, so I can get even in a way – reproved me for saying, "All of us poets need women to listen to us – there's – I – and Robert Graves is right when he talks about the muse, and when he talks about – and as a matter of fact the interesting thing is you have a circle of them around looking enthralled. And yet how did this lead – this again led to judgment of an entirely different kind – because we've been bringing up these questions about how to – why – why would your poem ever get better – look, that woman in that high school class – I really don't know that I've ever seen anybody else look like you'd given her a present, and at the same time she knew it wasn't so good – years later she said, "You don't realize you were the only poet that I ever had and now I've taught thirty years" – and I was in one of the early classes. So with bad poems, oh those poems – my – among those things that were left after my mother's death in an old box were remnants of some of that high school stuff and I looked – there's not a – I don't know what left – there's no one today that writes that poorly, I'm sure, in the wide open, but they were pouring – they were really gifts

and they were taken as such – something in here is collecting, is what I mean, and we are not yet in the presence of – yet I wanted that gift to be more and more: certainly that was true. No one was saying, "This is not the gift." Perhaps actually that gift always was there and I usually put it that I was a poet who started without talent. This may – this is not a statement that has anything to do with humbleness, it has – a statement – with how in the world did I ever produce out of those first effusions – and gross – actually many of them were – as I remember were masturabative fantasies that were rimed line after line in couplets, and – the iambic pentameter – when I discovered that Pound had kicked it out I thought, "hooray!" because thte iambic pentameter was a very suggestive thing for me – it went "ta tum ta tum ta tum ta tum ta tum ta tum ta tum." [laughter] Wow! I *poured* out all sorts of adolescent vomitoria [laughter] into this thing – but what – and my mother said, "You don't understand about thwarted women who want to read this kind of stuff." [laughter] That teacher, actually that remark has been also made about women who gathered around Lawrence, that they must have been a group of thwarted women who wanted to exist in the heat of his personality. Not about Frieda but I'm talking about the other – certainly the remark has been made of Dorothy Brett. So we're both – we're laughing about – and putting – because we're in an awkward period, but we're also describing something primal in the situation of the poet – is the discovery of the female intelligence to whom this poem is going to be delivered up. And that intelligence, as for instance the great puzzle for most people in Dante, in *The Divine Comedy*, is who is Beatrice? And the modern analyst is really, he thinks, "Well, Dante, he only saw her once or twice, and she was 16 when he saw her and she married someone else anyway, and then she was dead at the time of the cantos." This figure of the intelligence of the woman is drawn from women, and yet is drawn by a creative engagement – is recognized – drawn and recognized, or drawn in being recognized, and has to have a demand, in my own picture, *has* a demand, and consequently the poem is improved. Now this – I probably just scared a whole group of school teachers who think they should be – *should* be that intelligence – no, because there're many offices – and one of the offices – what is an office? You serve as a human being to stand for that thing which human beings have recognized as a numenal person. Numen. Numen, yes, it puzzled me enough when I started running across it in Jung, and I want to take it past Jung back to the spirit that inhabits a place or the spirit that inhabits an act. And that spirit inhabits the act or place because we call upon it. Those of you who attended the morning session will remember that at one point I asked, "If we are bankrupt" – which was a proposition, and all such propositions, I think, are alive and to be taken up – "why don't we call upon the spirits that men have always called upon to – and always found ready – I think they never disappear. We disown them in order to demand that they reappear in a higher order, perhaps? I do not know, but the numen we can always perform. And actually, as far as I have ever been engaged in poetry, although I have been

fascinated – I think there is a numen of this thing – oh, of course there is – one that fascinated me: in the story of Erysicthyn where he cuts down the oak of Demeter, and Demeter in a fury goes to her – the other – the un-Demeter, the un-earth mother, who is Famine. And Famine then comes and breathes into Erysicthyn in his sleep and he can never eat enough and he can never be fed. All the things of the earth turn into famine for him and he, I don't remember if he dies being gorged, but this is not important – that he dies would be a release. He actually becomes, though, that figure of the self-induced, because he cut down the oak, because he attacked the earth itself, the source, and the other of that earth. The black part of it came and breathed into him. He becomes the man obsessed with – and nothing else will feed him. Everything refuses to feed him is part of what the story says. We can, yes, perform a magic, and it's been described very early, then, where we can make it so everything will refuse to feed us. But we certainly remember from childhood that we also refuse to eat, and we refuse – this is one of the very major – one of my earliest memories is spitting spinach into someone's face. It may have been the muse's face – I'm sure it was another one of those more intelligent women who were in attendance. The – we throw up. Well, what do you do? I mean you throw in the sponge. Almost all of these things have – you – so that this re – I'm trying to make a picture here of this reciprocity – it refuses to feed you, you refuse to eat. It seems to be tied. It seems to be the counter of attacking the source, the source of the thing, the source that feeds. The oak itself.

Now what I wanted to talk about this evening was work, and the attendance of the tree. What is it that we do? What is it that is our work and what is the tree we attend? I proposed early – in the very first session when I was here I drew a picture of a tree – I'm not going to go to great – I'm not going to try to discover where that tree started in as a thing I am always going back to, but the thing we do attend, or can attack – we can chop and refuse to let it feed us – is the language – are the words and the human experiences stored in them. Well now, the very first poetry if I go back to it that I ever heard as a child – all those Japanese poems were about people living in Japan – it wasn't about – they brought me into – moments in lives of grown ups that were all – that really were mine as a child. Living in paper houses, lying in the cold. I remember one where three men are lying in the cold with the blankets pulled up and their feet – you see these are pictures that were drawn in this book. The two things, drawing the picture and writing the picture, were – now I – no one related to me then that actually these Japanese picture-poems involved puns – go on to many other levels.

When I got to college, then, I wanted – I did not want what was in a literature course. I can remember Miss Keough saying, "You're going to make – you're going to have a choice at college and I'll be very interested to see what you take, which choice you take. You will want to study English literature, but maybe you – but I'm not sure that's what you will really do." What I found of

course was that my little – this classroom had become – in high school – had become for me the place of the numen and I rapidly – right away discovered that the classroom in the university wasn't that – in the first place they didn't have women like [inaudible] I mean – they didn't have women there giving you the poem or relation, so – that ended that one and you had something like me standing up in front and talking at you, and you knew right away – you – that – you were going to have to look someplace else for that, for that poem.

Now the first thing, very early thing that has always stayed with me, then, was that the poem was some kind of ritual. And, in – like the magazine *Tish* that's put out here, when I was in college I put out a mimeographed magazine which I called *Ritual*, and filled with me and a few other people I knew. And tried over and over again, then, to write a poem which would bring me into something else that had fascinated me from childhood – and that was the other – the Greek legends and fairy tales of my early childhood, and some of those must have preceded my reading at all. I do know that when I was in high school, the first – in the whole aura – the first aura of sexuality was entirely interpreted, I entirely interpreted it, and at one point disastrously – not too ultimate a disaster, but I did get my chin torn open with brass knuckles by such a misinterpretation. I thought it was very, I mean, everything seemed to change, in the first floods of sexual feeling, into a world I had read about when I was a child, which was the world of dryads and nymphs, of satyrs, of Pan, of woodlands. I wandered in high school through – I would wander – whenever I was out of school and often when I was supposed to be in school, along deserted river banks from – out from Bakersfield, and the fantasies – actually now I can – I am at the place now, in this book that I'm working on, on H.D., where one of the things I have to do is to recapture those fantasies, but to recapture what it was like, when – and now I'm trying to tell you that at least for me – because often people ask, "Well, why do you have Apollo in that poem, why do you have Mercury, why do you have all those – that Greek stuff?" – I wandered in it at a time when it was not a matter of education, it was a matter of – the fairy tale world of my childhood which had been transformed into an adolescent world and I did not know – I did not know what now I know in reverse – that these varied stories and legends were a secret of sexuality – so that trees, everything – I did not – I had no picture of what – I grew up in a very different period, and I had no picture of what a sexual act would be. I – the most reference that would ever be made to my sexual organs would be my aunt just saying, "Now you know you never take all your clothes off at the same time, you take your shirt off and you put the top of your pyjamas on, and then you" – I can't remember how, I think I must've had very long tops of pyjamas. How did you take your trousers off and get the [laughing] – however it went, you really – you – you kept this secret that was going to come out of its egg sometime. You kept it beautifully in a shell, so that – that shell being is very much like the Greek world – they had initiation. When I said, when I wrote in 1952, a whole string – I was never baptized, I was never psychoanalyzed, I was

never graduated – I meant initiated, and that stood in my mind for a very definite – I will describe that this evening – although, boy, you talk and that little hand goes around so fast that I don't know – but I will describe the business about the struggle not to be initiated. Actually, of course, you get fooled. We do have initiation points and all of us have them. If, if – except that the whole tribe has a very secretive way about going about it. But all of our transitions in life that we make are initiations. Going to college is an initiation, and there are initiations when you come into the family organization from childhood. And one of these initiations that was certainly forced was the initiation of having – moving into this sexually charged landscape – charged and turned into a dream because I had no concrete terms, nor even knowing what it would be, for whatever sexual act would be. So very definitely didn't have them, and in other words would be almost in the position that they found some primitive tribes, where they have no words for acts they perform, that I did not consciously know that I masturbated at all until I went to college. And yet you certainly realize when you refer back to what Freud calls – screen images must be just disappearing – people now – you know, little kiddies are romping around with – with use of ideas – I don't mean that they know – but they are already in the ideas – ideas I was never in – except in this – when I – now some of you will begin to realize, when I talk about those boundaries way out there, how early I must have had them – and had them certainly then, in high school – an excitement you didn't know how to locate – things you began to hear and realized that people were doing and then couldn't even figure out, well, what does that mean, and yet, also in the same time, what is the cost of this? Everything was eroticized – I've never left that – and nothing was as simple as it could have been. One of the – in the very period when I was going through this, earnest and rational people were wanting to make sexuality simple, natural – "clean" was one of their terms – and take away its sacred taboo character. And I am certainly a remnant in one sense, in that I grew up in and consequently am thoroughly of the sacred and taboo. I understand what Lawrence says when he says, "do not touch me," because touch is charged and not familiar for me. I mean no – not for me as an animal growing up and listening to – how much one – but because nobody was – in a sense they were only closing it off – that – the whole world charged with the Greek gods was a world of "do not touch me." It was over-charged whenever it was there.

When I left college, then, when I was a sophomore – I went back in a period much later when I was in my thirties to study history because then I actually was going back for an education – I can make the remark that most people do not go to a college for an education, they go there for the degree and the consequent job and career that lies ahead of it, so it's very rare in our time that anybody goes to college for an education. I mean to find something they want. And it's very difficult, by the way, to go to a university and ask for an education. I had a very difficult time because I was not going to be an historian, but because there was a great historian, I wanted to study with him. This is

almost impossible to explain to a university, that you want to study with a particular man because he is brilliant and because you are fascinated by history but you do not want to be an historian. They feel about, as if you went to apply to a bank and said, "I like banks 'cause I want to take money home." [laughter] They try patiently to explain to you, "That's not what we're doing," [laughter] and "I know we've got lots of money here, but – and you can handle it, and later you may get some of it when you [laughter] – when you learn how to do it kosher," but I, well, this is, and it takes me 'way ahead – what did I do then?

I left San Francisco and Berkeley where I lived. Oddly enough, I had a scholarship to Black Mountain College. I won't tell you the whole story. It's not illuminating in relation to writing, but it is in relation to this sacred – Black Mountain College. I had a scholarship and it was cancelled the day I arrived, the day after I arrived, and was found emotionally insecure or unstable. And so there I was afloat, with having launched all my allowance in getting there. And I had a full scholarship. I hadn't planned – just recently I was trying to figure out how I was broke at this time, because I had – I did have an allowance until I was 21. It must have been a legal affair because my mother wanted to cut it off the minute I decided not to be an architect as my father was, and decided that I was going to be a poet. Oh, and she ran down the whole list of the arts, "Yeah, you could be a painter, and that would be all right, but poets write about things like you were having with your teacher, and this would be disgraceful," was the picture even then.

Now I think what I'll swing back to, before I get to this point, swing back from where I'm on the loose there, because I already had a direction in poetry in a series of finds. And I've described them in the *H.D. Book* and I can summarize them for you because I found them to be real little openings into the world. How soon I came into the world remains for me now, the centre, the masters of, for my own sense of the poem. One of the poems that on a hot summer day Miss Keough read to us was the poem "Heat," by H.D. She gave me, because I – she fed me as far as I would read – she gave me *The Man Who Died* by D.H. Lawrence. She gave me as a kind of challenge to see what I – and she would always give these and say, "I want to see what you'll make of it," or when she gave me *The Man Who Died* said, she said, "You will not understand this now; don't talk, don't try. Read it but don't talk to me about it." In other words, I give this to you and sometime later you will begin to – and my sense was, when I turn back to that, that what she meant was you'll begin to grow through this. Now she was giving me a series of things I actually did grow through, and to me they belonged to something she also must have recognized in me, this very thing I'm talking about. Certainly Lawrence was a key person who had the same highly erotic "No, do not touch me" that was torturing me. I wanted to be like everybody is told in America to be: friendly with everybody and get along with everybody. But I certainly had this charged sense of oneness or one personness, and then the great, great, great other possibility which was the orgiastic – orgy.

The two things, Greek really couldn't fill in between, the picture. They tried to fill it in with an elite, but I don't think that's an adequate – I have never found an elite an adequate picture of myself, even when I wanted to hold it: Calvinist elite or sensitive elite or – I always was really too much of a misfit and any elites I ever met certainly didn't like me. I would imagine, if I'd met an elite who would've included me I would've been very happy, I guess. And had a different view, so being rejected by an elite must be part of this picture. Now, when I got to college I did come close to what I thought was an elite and it had some humorous cast 'cause certainly it was only the kind of – I was overawed. When I was on the freshman staff of the literary magazine, this is the place where – I really wonder how many poets can ever survive being on the Freshman staff of a literary magazine. Well, I did, and – there was a magazine – a poem that came in by Louise Antoinette Kraus. Everybody rejected it except me and I asked if I could return the poem. Now at this point – my whole view of poetry was still at that high school level – I did not know that there was a thing called modern writing and right – the right way, and at this point I was shown the right way, as follows: I sent some poems to this Louise Antoinette Kraus, and then she asked me to meet her and her consort – Robert Huss, who had a Stein collection. It was there I first saw Stein, heard about James Joyce, but I still remember Louise Antoinette Kraus. I was pattering after them along like this, absolutely "Ah..." I mean, [laughter] and – he said, "Should he read Eliot" and she said, "No, his work is already too lurid. He should read Pound." [laughter] Which was really the very highest taste, and I have never been able to include Eliot on any list in good conscience since. I've drawn over and over and over again the list of people who'd be my masters, and actually my work was rather luridly wanting to snatch little things from T.S. Eliot, but when I'd make the list I could never get him on the list. And of course later I'd find that this was very sound, but I suspect my own reasons, because I can still hear the voice saying, "No, his work is already too lurid, Erza Pound." So I went to a book store – there was no Ezra Pound on reading lists in 20th century literature in those days, none at all. I mean he was about as prevalent – well, actually today you can find Charles Olson on reading lists of the University of California – I nearly fell down when I saw that. But in my day you couldn't find Ezra Pound on the reading lists, and so I'd had the right word and discovered that nobody knew anything about – oh that gives you a great kick, to discover nobody knows about it in your English class and you've got the right poet – so I went to a bookstore and I opened it and then I saw that line, "And then went down to the ships," and I thought, "Oh, how could anything be that good?" I mean, "How in the world?" And shut the book as if I had peeked at something that – and it took me three visits to that store to read those – that first line again and again before – and I actually, several times, I bought the book and then still felt, "this is too much for me to – what's going to happen to me if I read this poem?" Actually I was with the *Cantos*, those first thirty cantos, the rest of my life. So, although I'm trying to give a picture, the

thirty cantos became a book of the past. Yes, they certainly did. They became a book of the past in the sense that they no longer presented the challenge, just at the point when the *Pisan Cantos* presented a new challenge, of something really new happening in Pound's work, but Pound has always remained a central master for me.

So I had a concept of masters. Let's think of these layers again. I had the very first concept which was this childhood one just of pictures and just of a world you go into – we talked this morning a little about the other world. Now that was not unmixed with another source, which were fairy tales and Greek legends, which made very clear that there was some other world, and that other world I felt very much around me. Now I cannot remember in childhood that I felt that other world very much around me. It was just in books, I think. I think that I only felt the first descent of this other-worldly quality around me, I can't – my picture's very hazy of childhood – in my adolescence, and then certainly I did. I'm not hazy at all. I actually felt deranged. I knew very well that my picture of the world was exceedingly different from the picture, and often in the period of – thank goodness I wasn't shacking up with Hans Christian Anderson that year, or I would've just ended up an ugly duckling and not the swan that I was to be. [laughter] The feeling of being – that anybody knew except this teacher. Now what is such a permission? This is another word I use. You can just look at those things in the back, I'm not worrying about whether I get there. But this word, when I began to think of that word, it was long after the poem in which it occurs, and I was in New York at a point and Ned O'Gorman had given a talk or something on my poems and he showed me the notes he had and he had "permission." And I said, "How did you know about that?" And he said, "Well, that's in the first poem in *The Opening of the Field*." I said, "Is it?" I had thought that this was one of those words that I had not dared to even tell about. It had increased and increased and increased about where did I have permission, and yet when I look back at it there's three, four years before there had been – and I'll read this opening poem in the field – and actually in this – I think – in a way I prepared for you to see something of – you will see that high school teacher if you want to think of her in here:

[reads "Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow"]

I see something else in this poem now if I were to think now of what I'm trying to do this evening, give you a picture of some of the sources that an individual life has, that feed the poet and the later feeling of the ultimate reality in the poem. And I also can clear up now, because the poem's helped me to see another thing, why I said and in what way it was true that my childhood did not in a way have access to this numenal quality that descended in adolescence so clearly with the sexuality of adolescence. This dream of grass blowing east against the sun and the children dancing in a ring is an obsessive dream I had as a child. It

was terrifying, actually, because in the dream, it was a regular – London Bridges fall down or also, selecting a person to be out or in, a king was selected in the middle of the ring. Then I was the king. Then the *hubris* had been, the going too far, the throwing the person off his balance, and the involved expense had been performed, both by the children in the ring, and I of the children in the ring, in selecting me ask king, and in myself, because I knew I was the dreamer in making myself a king. And this whole thing changed, and it was a subterranean cave, where there was a throne, an empty throne, but then I would also often, because this dream came over and over again, I would often try to reassert the king, and being in the throne, which is impossible – great doors broke open and the cave was flooded with water. Now, what this means, we can, Freudians could interpret it as a birth-trauma dream with a flood of water, especially since my mother died in childbirth they may – I haven't read Otto Rank but he's the one who thought up that idea – my family who were theosophists thought of it as an Atlantis dream, one of the things that closed me off from the numenous world was, while my family did not permit any ideas about sex to be expressed, consequently when I came to my sexual adolescence, I came into the numenal world, they had far-reaching ideas about what childhood meant and I was – and they included childhood fantasy, so that this dream was explained to me – I wonder what's happening to children whose parents are Freudians, who understand their dreams consequently and understand what they're doing – because certainly one of the things that must happen is that the creative life, then is profoundly disturbed. We are disturbing the creative life when we tell somebody else – I mean it takes a great deal of strength to be told what you're doing. In fairy tales, or in any heroic adventure one of the keys is not to be told what you're doing. And yet we want to risk it all the time. I have not faced any younger poet where I do not want to tell him the secret of what he's doing in his work. Now this is, maybe I'm also getting at what I meant by this other thing: woman's intelligence. The woman's intelligence has a way of providing the adventure, almost smiling as if, "you know, you're doing it very well but I've really seen this much and there's much more," and not telling you what that is. This is one of the things certainly the master, the teacher, always wants to tell you, and perhaps we have to learn no to do this. Actually of course all of us are short of the one, the master in the fairy tale does not tell you. He only gives you a few of those understandable things you are to remember and he never gives you more than three. He gives you three and you've got to know when to use them, which is the other part of this thing. He doesn't tell you the whole thing that's there. Well, my childhood really, every fantasy I had in childhood was known and was understood by my parents as for instance at the present time all fantasies in all childhood worlds are understood in Freudian terms, these were understood in terms of reincarnation, and a good deal of my initiative sought perhaps other areas where they wouldn't be interested but they were interested in almost anything. If I drew picture it was a picture of Atlantis. My horoscope

has said that I – in their belief it was a very very dark horoscope – and I had belonged to the last generation that had been in Atlantis when it was destroyed and my parents believed that our total universe, I mean that our total civilization was going to be destroyed in a cataclysm (I actually found the papers from the early 20s) just after the first World War that would haunt us now certainly because we are in the presence of some of this, of something realized in this dimension, that our technique would go on. That our technique of war would go on until we would destroy ourselves: this was the urgency of our time. By the way, that statement can be found in non-theosophical circles. Henry Adams writes home from Japan in the 90s: "If we keep going on in this present direction, physics will blow the universe up by 1940 or something," he says. And there are many other statements that now ring out with, fit into, the picture that people in different ways made in the turn of the century. Well, one of the things then was that certainly I think of as formative, things being kept secret, and at the same time you find that only the necessary, my other statement was only the necessary should be kept secret. Certainly I didn't want after I'd finally find out and enter sexuality I no longer am that interested in its being kept secret. I do think we, our release now is sexuality so that it's no longer magical. I wonder how it could possibly be magical. For the new generation to see it as a simple physical contact and reality – it can have depth. I'm not talking about it's not having depth, but this numenal quality, it must be a demand that it happen someplace else. And I'm giving a picture also then of how one can – yet I'm, from the beginning as I've said, I've always in a sense not belonged. My experience has then been somehow, always there, coming at magic, you see, in a period when with parents who don't talk about sex at *all*, it's numenal. Then I come into a period where *everybody* talks about it and my numenal reality is just as strange, as it ever was. So my picture that I sort of go on in this does hold in a way.

Now I did say I was going to describe what I meant when I said I was not ever initiated. From this per – I'm sure I recognize many ambitions, from the hold I would have on my parents from this period, from this picture that they had that I was an, that I had actually been something before I was a child, so that I could use this at any time. And actually my parents from my horoscope thought that I had, that I was inflicted on them and that I was something considerably more than they were. So, and they in no way bothered to dissemble this, in case you want to know, I don't know. Everybody was talking about egos – I have never been troubled with – it was just sort of there, because every time you wanted to turn that trick you could make a sly allusion to Atlantis and they'd sit around like this and so, [laughter] actually all of this thing – no but all of this thing became not quite true for me, it had been used so many times. At times it's been in poems, but I really can't – Like Hart Crane – get with that Atlantis thing because I'd more – it was – there was a bit of a con job when I was little that removed that possibility, and I can't – in time some of it gathers back. Now, one of the places where I wanted to gather it back because I did have then,

even in childhood, something that coincided with what was there in fairy tales, and that was the idea of having magic power, or of being a power. I'm surprised as we, as you, how much, and you must have reflected, how much what we say, in that morning session, when we're talking about consciousness or something else, has to do with the aura of personal power – to move – I don't mean to have a power over something, but to move as a power and to know yourself as a power moving. And to know yourself as a power in the language, to know yourself as a power among people. Now this is, by the way – what about the power of a number, I mean what are you when you represent the power of something? When are you a power? You see, the whole suggestion is that you're dwelling in, you're inhabiting, a field that you belong to and consequently – now I'm giving you my picture – and part of the picture that I was drawing on when I came, when I began to use a word that came from Charles Olson, from his "Projective Verse." "Field." And then by my hunting and driving, by puns, by any possible means to increase the operation of a word, it came also by reading everywhere about that field, to mean the Roman field and also the field of [Mochpella?] when Abraham saw Adam and knew that this was the center of the world, and the field of power. All of these things are terms borrowed from sciences. They're terms borrowed from all around and transform the world into something very much like the world that was in fairy tales and myths, because it has an absolute requirement of you. Now then, you rediscover freedom in terms of this power. To be a power is to have bounds and you rediscover yourself and freedom, in the terms of the things you draw on and then fulfill. As for instance the only heroic thing, if we think about that human attraction to the heroic – to be a hero – or let's say, to reach the glory – all we have to do is to think of Oedipus in which he does not come to the place where he tears out his eyes: something about the figure, now that, this more and more – by the way – now I'm jumping way ahead – but then – I'm not jumping ahead of what I designed here, when I said: "I feel I have not borne the expense" – and I really – I'm not sure what this is although I believe in it, I believe in it because I do believe in – I mean, I believe in it like I believe in the end of a poem that I haven't reached yet – because of design – design gives you this, and actually design can give you the imperative that you ought to be – you know – that I must – that this story requires – my sense of story requires to be bankrupt – I don't know how I am bankrupt, but the story says now I am, if I could put it that way. What happens in a fairy tale, the first ones you listen to? – you go along, and if you're with it and paying attention to the three things that were said, you have to interpret anything that comes along as being yourself off balance. I mean you have to interpret the right thing, but it has to be – you have to recognize when it comes. Recognizing being off balance, recognizing expense, finally release the thing you secretly were. Then when – you see I'm actually trying to share with you things that I imagine must – must be very puzzling and also must make for an individual – how many people in the room had parents who were theosophists?

One, I mean, how many? Are there any others? Well, this is sort of an isolated – and yet, I'm describing – many of you must have had – of course, then I could also ask how many of you had parents who never mentioned sex and who really contrived a childhood in which you, when you came to the matter of sex it was your matter, not a social matter, hm? – well that's a little more familiar. So it didn't just take being, and as a matter of fact theosophists aren't notorious – my parents were a combination of several things, and they seem to have had a certain common ground. So when people wonder, "Can I read a poem and you understand it?" – all those others can understand another area, but – I'm fascinated by – what gathers with – because I'm trying to locate where do these areas that this thing I call a numenal, a sense of – or the sense of power of its being all your own – where did they originate? What if it's been – something would have been more despoiled it seems to me, if my parents had been like myself where I might very well want the child to be imaginative. My imagination was left free, because my parents – that was helped by the fact that my parents had all those fancy interpretations for everything – I keep wondering what will happen with the parents who sat in on those creative poems with the child – and parents. I don't think mommy and daddy are the muse. I really think that's another round. [laughter] They may very well be because since – well, certainly my mother wasn't the muse, or she was not amused, as it would go. [laughter]

Now, to come back to my – because I'm even resisting discussing my resisting the point of initiation, since in my adolescence – the first poet I met at all was, outside, of course, myself – I had a wonderful perspective. There was just one poet moving on: Robert Duncan, and he was perfectly capable of waking – there were several girls who were rather bewildered, because he was perfectly capable of rushing over to their rooms at college and waking them at three in the morning. I mean there are quite a few college girls who have other ideas of what you're waking them at three in the morning for, and reading them a poem until dawn – well, of course they were very appreciative [laughter], but – it has occurred to me at times that they must have been somewhat puzzled. [laughter] No, not entirely. The first poet I met, that suddenly made it clear there were some other poets, was Sanders Russell. Now actually Sanders Russell was more interested in metaphysics and the same sort of things my parents had been than he was in poetry, so that in the course of his life – and, like Allen, Sanders Russell was interested in yoga and in being – and in entertaining a spiritual world and being – at one point Allen said, earlier that he wanted to be a guru or wanted to be re-illuminated. Sanders Russell was inclu – this – in the time that I knew him, I came clear with myself that I did not want to be illuminated. It was fascinating, but actually there was no – and I felt vaguely as if it was just like – my not wanting to be a graduate student – or my not – not enough, you know to get that A.B. – and not wanting to be a Christian, to be baptized – that was at Sunday school, at a crucial point. There were points of decision when I suddenly said, "No, you don't have any picture of that," or what, I don't know, but what I did

want, that wasn't a challenge. There was no question about my – that was just very clear to me – I didn't want to improve my spiritual being. I didn't want to improve myself was certainly always clear. And then something stubborn in me doesn't like that "onward and upward," you know, "this year a saint and next year an angel." But I was attracted by something that Sanders started to tell, because I had never had sex with a woman – in my adolescence I had been homosexual – and he told me early, then, "Ah! you could be a shaman." So, when I was 17 or 18 the idea of a shaman really seemed, and it was already mixed up with being a poet, I had begun to know, maybe, does shaman connect back from the poetry? Is there a root from Ezra Pound via shaman back to that world that I talked about, the walking in the river valley? In a state, in the tule, fogs of winter is what I'm remembering now a world, or then, oh it changes. It's two years or so of these long walks and fantasies – as if that were a scene where nothing happened, that was – and something was always happening, or about to happen – was that the root [?] that – did those two come together? So in Woodstock I really made some effort to find out if I could enact a shaman. Oh, it included sitting naked all night in the late autumn when it was cold, on a rock, and trying to listen and see if I could, if I really could, talk to trees. It included trying to overcome my fear of snakes. I have a picture of a coil – because I saw one in the children's zoo, so – it should be a charming image of a great – there they had a great coil of snakes like a medusa head of hair, and on those rocks, how near could you get to the snakes, could you? No I could not plunge my hand into the coil – all of these things came out in some way, and not – I will at least do myself the justice – not grotesquely because, for one thing I was alone – they weren't really for someone else, but I was trying to force my way through a place where there was no door. There was no door sitting on the rock, listening to talk to trees – although I have a very close feeling about the reality in living this, and many other times we had seances – this is a different area of shamanistic activity – and so I surrendered and actually though, I decided, "No, I can't, I do not really want to live this way. I do not want to live." Because my picture of shaman was an isolated person and then you saw me, this morning for instance, I was really, when you saw me, in a sense, using Allen, Ginsberg, as a negation, as a thing I was going to negate, it goes back very strongly to a negation that I made then, at 18 or 19, of the possibility of being a shaman. It must have been even later because, at 20 or 21, I was still at times trying magical practices.

Audience: [asking for definition of "shaman"]

Duncan: Shaman, shaman is a – let's not worry about what it is, let's see what I was trying to be, since that's more to the point. What I was trying to be then, how I saw this. In some tribes, the shaman is a homosexual. And the logic in back of it, and that was what I was told when I was 18, was that if you – and I found that

out in even Lawrence, by the way – if you did not touch a woman you were completely male. And that when you touched a woman you had given your – now think of why I couldn't become a shaman if you – is because – in the first place there must be I think a contradiction between the shaman and this poet-muse thing that begins – my key was certainly not in this direction, but it was the – this was strong since I was interested in power and shamans have magical power. Now one thing shamans are, the most important thing shamans do is that they're able to go into the other world by dancing, and the figure of dancing's always had a hold on my poetry, a very strong one, not derived from the idea of shamans, but derived from the fact that in a dance, you forget yourself, you enter into the dance entirely. And in the high performances. And yet this dance I'm describing is folk dancing, our own western folk dancing, not anything more elaborate, but at that elaborate, by the way, because as I remember it's quite a strenuous business. We used to go a whole hour without a break and as fast as you could go and see how many would fall out, was one of the performance things of it. But you're so completely in it that it's very much like the poem for me, I mean, what I remember of dancing in the Catskills, in a later period, which would be – '42 , '43, '44 – is very much like the poem that came for me when I finally was able to dance in the poem itself. Now certainly shamanistic things reappear in the poem. The poem became an agency for me to move in, into another world, and talk to the dead. But I'm trying to draw you also a picture for those of you who look at my poems that the dead really *are* the dead, and that in everything I had as a preparation for life, I believe in the presence and power of the dead – certainly if I'm going to – I will rationalize now so I'll show you what happens when I rationalize on this subject of where the dead are. Because for me since – what was the language, wasn't it, I mean, what are all those forces and voices that can speak through it? And if the language is charged with all the meanings that men have put into it, then those men are still there, and then the dead are still there, too. So the language has ghosts. Oh, let's just go back to, let's take Robert Browning. There will be ghosts of Robert Browning. I mean he's one of the dead. This is one of the places we see the dead right away. And then the dead can be living. In a recent recording session with a group of Vancouver poets, two of them had I think been in a course where they were studying T.S. Eliot and they had "time past, time present" come in. And a ghost of T.S. Eliot had come across the poem. Now a derivation is some kind of trafficking with the dead, and a poem is – it doesn't make any difference if T.S. Eliot's alive, the moment of the *Four Quartets* is one of those things from the land of the dead. So that I've got another picture which is that the poem, when it is completed, enters and haunts us. And the ones that we keep by us do have a role in which they are the dead. And so when I read a poem like the one that we were discussing this morning of Charles Olson's, and The Pot and The Carries, and those dead spirits in there, that includes for me one of those expenses, off-balances, and bewildering things of the poem – that it is a mixture of the live and the dead.

There's another poem of Olson's that directly starts with the dead, and then brings up a figure of nets, and talks about the untying of the nets, and the tying of the nets. That to me seems again, also to include and has seemed in recent years, to include part of what would be the reality of the dead. But these dead I talk about, by the way, in my childhood I heard speaking through people's mouths at seances, and had my – now back to what my parents or grandparents and the people who were around when I was a little child – would meet over a fireplace or around the table, and call up and speak with the voices of the dead. I would be in the other room and what I would hear would be the changes in tone of a voice, and especially attractive when you were a child or strange, would be that they – that one of those voices that's most prevalent is to speak in a baby voice, they would have Indian chiefs and they would have baby and other child voices coming out of the adults around you, talk about the dead. And so that this dimension is, now where would it, I'm trying to think now – when you come to a poem like the Pindar poem – things like this – the whole variety in a way – in a long poem like that begins to come and where for instance I'm writing so rapidly that I can only call upon what I have known to enter in and compose the poem, things like that begin to come in and inform the poem right away. This footfall, by the way, in part four of – page – I was requested to give where the poem is if I'm reading from it – this is page 67 and part four of the Venice poem – this actually is from that period I was describing of attempts at shamanistic practices – listening to snow fall, we also watch snow scenes trying to see in them what we thought the snow was going to – was going to sh – well we call it a show because there's a screen of the falling snow in which you can see things as you can see them in the fire – or in clouds. We also would like, later, in western Massachusetts, lie out on a cellar door I remember and watch the clouds all one night, but by this time this is sort of a game of fantasy where you watch the clouds for their changing faces, and changing forms – now this is – at night, hearing the – footfall here is the snow dropping from the eaves around the house – but so intensely were we living in this – I see what I'm – now I'm a little amused at what I'm doing. I was doing a lot of agreeing with Denise Levertov, but I'm describing a period of self-induced hypersensitivity which returns much later in some actual thing, because this, ye, oh yes!

> Oh yes! Bless the footfall where
> step by step the boundary walker
> (in Maverick Road the snow
> thud by thud from the roof
> circling the house – another tread)

– at the time we followed that snow tread around and spread our superstition about what that snow tread might be, and lay savoring the pure fear of thud thud thud around the house. Nothing could have been then or even in its return

more self-induced. Now I think of all, again in rejoinder to my assent this morning that it shouldn't be self-induced – how much self-induced terror was important in my own childhood. Now that was a territory actually that I found was very very exciting, and frequently indulged in. And when I described the pattern of my poem in an earlier session that we've had, and drew it on the board, I said that at a crucial point in the poem there was a terror that happened, this again. The prejudice perhaps against the self-induced is a prejudice against this shamanistic or magic operational area that the poet is in, that the poet is always near. Now how is the poet near that? Actually this is, the shaman – and the poet at the present time – like the hero has come to be inherited by the poet – and the shaman has, too. If we think of the primary – I usually get the picture now of the poet as being three primary entities that have merged into one – one from the Roman-Greek world, which is *poein,* which is to make the poem, and is the art. The artisan, the craft, and the art. But the second is a very definite one from the Bible, from the Jewish source, which is to speak with God's voice, or with god voices, or – and so intense was the Jewish sense against the art, that Buber quotes a Hasidic interpretation of the commandment not to make a graven image, that is meant specifically that you were not to make a poem, that your poetic impulse was to speak forth without making a poem out of it, and without carving it, and without – so that we have inherited, a really, a great deal of activity is between these two ideas as they wind down in the thread, with a third one. And that is the Celtic-Bardic poet, who – and here I'm going on what we think the Bardic poet is, because there's nothing that's more way out there on the borderline than this picture of the Bard. Not – The Bard then is the one where we verge upon the shaman world. Actually we find all three of these go back to the figure of the shaman, of the man who has to do with the dead, and of a man who can translate himself into an other world. And actually our requirement of the poem, that we have now, that's paramount, that we see into this world where we are, and see its underlying meaning, is to see the other world in the world that we are in. The same requirement that used to be, to go out there, to heaven, or to go under there, to the underground, in many many levels now is to see into things or to see the underlying meaning of things and the techniques of the poem – I myself in writing a thing like the Pindar poem, while it's in the language, find – the poem for me illuminates because I relate it to the things I concretely know in the world. And I take it that in writing it, this is what I'm in search with and for and dealing with – and part of what this says when I – here:

> Oh yes! Bless the footfall where
> step by step the boundary walker
> (in Maverick Road the snow
> thud by thud from the roof
> circling the house – another tread)

– where it inherits from the "Cupidinous Death! / that will not take no for an answer," and is the thing we fantasied or induced, that that thud of the snow was ominous with death, moves forward to the thing the foot certainly was, when it came into the poem –

> that foot informed
> by the weight of all things
> that can be elusive
> no more than a nearness to the mind
> of a single image

– because by the time of this poem that snow fall has given me the foot that's in the poem. And death has given me – death has given me the close that's in the poem. The no – the yes: look:

> ...Cupidinous Death!
> that will not take no for an answer.

– but the "no" there is the thing that gives me the "Oh yes! Bless" – gives it to me, and the death there, via this footfall – all of a sudden it said "Those feet that fall through your poem are death's feet as they once fell from the snow; where you are not making – I mean the feet you didn't – the feet you heard, and the rhythm that you took into you – into yourself at that time – self, but nothing could have been more, well, self-induced, and even a game of course – these things are very much like games when you're in them –

> Oh yes! this
> most dear...

– and this word was used this morning –

> the catalyst force that renders clear
> the days of a life from the surrounding medium!

– Listen, you want – can I take another half hour to try to arrive at the – 'cause I had a vague commandment in my mind that I wanted to give you some of these pictures of what it is that's – and draw upon some of these points in my life, but at the same time, I specifically am working with no more than this [writes on board?] – and at the same time I wanted to entitle – you see I'm – the sweat's coming off my brow, 'cause I wanted to talk about [writes on board] the work – and yet I really could only tell you so much about how one became engaged in it. And some moments – because actually the *the work* is *not* defined in my mind. I don't even – I mean I'm engaged in defining it, that's certainly something I can

certainly say. And, as Denise Levertov this morning said, she thinks she'll live to be a hundred – she has a picture of what you would do in these years – "All my long life." And that's a quote at the end of Gertrude Stein's, with that "all my long life." All my long life I will be engaged in defining and discovering the work, and I will not believe that I can do otherwise, because when you come to read about The Work – and let's take it just now as it appeared in the alchemical sense where it's spoken of as The Work – when you come to read of The Work, no man has ever been anything other than engaged in defining it, and so we participate in it in order for it to be – and our own work defines its area, lets it be in our life and defines something of what that work is. Now – but I said our, and I began this thing by saying one of the most puzzling things, is how few seem to – for all of the fact that everybody is involved with this picture of work or else they reach bankruptcy and despair. Or the alternative, yes, the famine of it – to cut it, to cut at the work – and through out – throw – put it this way – and it does have another face, which is what? The futility, and a very real one. I'm not calling this real or more real than this thing [writes on board] and as far as I can tell, when we talk about – "throw a person off his balance, upset, bewilder" – these two seem to look like – now we can draw it like – I don't know what that meant – you know – like that thing [writes on board, pointing?] – you – engage in this and you'll come to this – and engage in this – I mean – they really are reciprocals so that just at the point, because I don't think of futility as emptiness, but some kind of alternating thing, the alternative that appears. And we have had, I think though, a picture when we're talking about bankruptcy as if it were more real, and also as if it didn't involve thoroughly in the work, and as if you didn't have to do the work in order to even find out what it means remotely, as you had been in the work. Now I do have an example then where I can go back to something I experienced, I did – I was in a drug experience with mescaline, and what happened in the mescaline experience – what I saw was, that tree that I am frequently referring to. Now that tree was intricately made up, and related certainly to the Moslem rugs that I have found terrifically exciting. But the picture I had always thought [?] of the Moslem rugs is that they were made, often they took a whole man's lifetime and he tied little knot by little knot and then the whole thing came into being and it was a great, great design made up of little concrete acts. So that all the lifetime of that incredible rug, he was involved in it, and participating in it. I had a – I saw directly before me such a tree, that was only understandable to me and only acceptable if it had involved the labor – I did not participate in it, I saw it. It was a pure presentation and understandable, yet as far as I – here again we come to our modern rationale. My first thought was, "Oh!" you know, "Plato's archetype." You see, what he says, like, you see in the cave you saw, but I am really very much in this sense a product of our time. That idea was cancelled and I said it came, it came from me? It was me? It was, you know. It was an archetype of my unconscious? And immediately it was understandable. I saw again what about this initiation, and I can explain

something about the rejection you saw this morning of what would happen, what, would I take the gate that would be open to see the tree? No, because I want actually to be engaged in making the tree I do not know of. That somehow is related, by the way, I'm sure to the one I saw, that I saw, knew, was intricately, was made up of all lives and was, and I am, a life, not such a I would not make the leap, would not make the, it was unsatisfying. I burst into tears and rejected it, opened my eyes so it was no longer there. And realized, when I went home and was thinking about it, that one of the things that saves me in the poem is what it [takes?] away again. After all, I knew the tree was there and I've even seen it worked by Moslems, by a good Moslem who's made it into a rug that's at the Metropolitan. I've seen it realized by painters. I would understand it isn't a matter of time, but I understand that it has only been humanly realized through an art. So that now I think I may be getting around to the picture of the work. All those things in my childhood could really have just been – they – after all, they're fantasies, they're fantasies like I mean, the different things that were going on – since, to make them at all real – to realize them, which is another frame of the real, to engage in them so that in – so that you're – so that, through your human effort and also through your human care, and how – in my poems, actually – this also will make clear why I always go back and try to reengage like a person would a thread, and what is the knot, try to reengage everything that otherwise would be a fantasy – otherwise I could see right away – engage it with all the human experience I can possibly engage it with – I do make, at the points that are most still, that I'm most drawn to, and the kind of poem that excites what satisfies the most in me, when I am working on it – I am engaged in, as Olson said, to know the roots of the word, now it is not just – those roots are to tie that knot, and also to be engaged at every single point in relation to every single point, other point in the poem – and feeling along the way, step by step – recognizing how each step is part of the final thing – and of course some of these – actually these things – it's like a folk art, so some of these things in the work are really very well known: when I am – "who let the light into the dark" – this is almost as simple as working with black and white or light and dark when you're working on a rug. I can go back to rugs since I've actually made a rug. It didn't turn out to be one of those, but I meant, at least engaged in the act of rugmaking, since I had repeated dreams about this other medium. But I go, work all the time outside the poem to know more about what that light and dark is, to know more about what the knot is, the light and dark that are already present because I know it'll come again. And I know also, that given, once they occur in a poem, as has happened – Pindar poem, what, is four, five years ago or something – that very light and dark that's there is now in a larger design that is more, that the Pindar poem is a little knot, a little area. And while away the knots. I trust that the knot is not to be, it cannot be, untied. But in the next area I must know everything that it was before and also know why it reoccurs. And this I search for in between time, and I think actually the poem is unlocked, because in this,

because you gather. Oh, we have the phrase "I gather what you mean," because you gather what you mean yourself. And when it gathers in, then you are ready, and you do supply something that actually echoes back until we see our first light and dark having a new depth and a new meaning because of its reoccurrence in the total thing. So these are not, so that the picture I'm making is that things do not recur by habit, but they reoccur because you come to that time of being reengaged with them – certainly, you know, there was an engagement at another level of life. And now my rug is going across the work of art itself. There was an engagement at another level of life when the snow thuds themselves were attended, and cunning. What is craft and guile and cunning as in the passage of that poem "Risk" – I'll read it to you and see what I saw when I found myself, when I found that in the risk:

> This "sky-is-the-limit" reach
> now acclaim! I had not the means to buy the vase
> means what surrender? The lure
> Loki or Mercury contrives must be
> workt by the dumb smith in whose honest
> craft guile melts to form what we longd for.

Now that, for all of the play that goes on there about the "craft, guile," and it does get crafty by the time the subject even comes up in the dumb – I really don't know. I have really hidden from myself and now I'll have to look. Was the smith really dumb? I mean, what is a smith who can't talk? The fashioner who is actually dumb? I do know that we write because there's something we are not able to say. I mean, this is certainly the hazard if, when I lecture. There's something that the poem does do and we've been discussing frequently in the morning sessions the business of what brought the hand into the question. And why the writing, why the reading writing, the dual relationship because the reader also is engaged with the poem and a creator of the poem. Why that something in that, as if when the gift were given, this art, this fashioning, this manipulation of things and the contrivance entered in, you were really dumb when you were speaking. Dumb. Numb. Not speaking when you were speaking and speaking in the hand.

I think there are clearly a number of those keys. When I said, "you're told three things," work. The idea of work and The Work is a key of the – a key of life I would not give up – and for me, for me I see. Olson said this noon, "Perhaps we have some – we should have some homeopathy to pass on" and I would have only the simple one, that where I see when a person has not worked the poem, when the work is not, when you do not have this engagement of work, the poem will still speak, yes, and what it will reveal to us, is this other thing we call futility, bankruptcy, despair. And the minute the work enters the poem, the minute we are reengaged in the work, there is no futility, bankruptcy, despair.

But something is coming into being something. The tree arises again. Well, it could be called the balance. We also are supposed, what, we could say what, belief, unbelief, they could have this off and on business. Now of course a man, drop the poem, fine. And then you aren't going to be caught into the work and the futility but there certainly is a way of going at the poem which tackles the futility of it – and also, how – also where I do agree very strongly with what Denise Levertov was advancing this morning – is that I have always followed in my life – but I also think there was no other way for me so I don't think it was a choice – my natural, my body, body tone, that I spoke of when I know I'm ready to write a poem. And when I'm not, I have not really the experience of trying to write a poem. Now put it this way, the experience of trying to write a poem when you can feel very well that you haven't got such a readiness is excruciating and does involve some areas of futility. So that I'm perfectly willing to accept that if I were to be drawn as a being I'd have many days that don't exist. And considering how important, when I'm addressing a company like this, I feel the tying of the knots are – and that I can even imagine as the *Zohar*, a book of Jewish mysticism, imagines, that a man could tie every moment of his life – and certainly the Moslems who made those rugs did tie every knot of the life. They called it accounting for your days, and they said Abraham accounted for his days, that he really did live every minute of his life and they knew very well that was fantastic. They knew that most men did not live every minute of their lives and live a very very short time of it, indeed. Any of us can reflect what a short time of our lives we have lived. I, when I look back, what, I'm forty-four, and my engagement in the art of poetry itself has been, from its inception when I was 17, – in that time, it isn't – if I were to take just the poems, I'm amazed at how – puzzled even, for all the excitement at – and they recalled all my days. If the poems were [recalled?] all my days I would not have accounted for all my days – because if you think – because you yourself as the reader begin to have a sense of all the days – they are the poems that come forward to you. The poems of another person and so that, and let's say Lawrence has a life in you and he has a life in those poems of Lawrence's that come in and take their life in you and you soon find, at least I do, I find out how little I can let another man's life live in my life. A poet I – Ezra Pound, who I have read since I was 17, and who is still a central poet for me, well, I know how they turn statements like this against him, but – I mean this in good faith because these poems are central for me. And I am aware of how little I've let his life, can let his life, live in me. I read the poem, this is fizz that rises, the poem, you're terrifically excited, you – and it speaks to you, you're in the full emotion of it, but what – the other thing of lasting is some part – so the work is haunted in the west – this may be in the western world – they do marvel – I have seen, in a movie called *The River*, how magnificently in the East they will make a work of art and throw it into the river to sink in the mud. But we have another – we are this work – and this idea of the work as it came up in alchemy was some lasting thing at least at the present stage and I don't think

here I have a definition but it's the thing – let's say I am at least at the stage now where it seems to me that the alchemical gold is something of what would last. And what is disguised otherwise, what we don't – once we recognize it, it proves to – I mean – what they're talking about is that when you see it, when you recognize it, when you see, when what? – when you bring it in to its full creation, it is what they call the gold. And they of course knew that that was some absolute mus – was a matter of fact it has also been called a seed as small as a mustard seed – you may have only – is it a minute? What time is it? What portion of the life or where was it, that was this thing that you were to say? Or in relation to my own poetry, how much of it is actually – do I let live in me? As it had happened. So that one of the works in the poem – each poem itself in the work of the poem seems to me, is to trans – if we think of it in the terms of the alchemical work, is to make a gold, but then I – that's getting out of my – is not giving what I want here – last – what's

Audience: [?]

Duncan: Opus, yeah. The poem is to reengage in something analogous to the alchemical work so that there will be that gold. And, well, as Allen Ginsberg has told us, the poem does, at other times in your life you discover this gold in it. And then you recognize what the poem means. But I'm framing it the other way around, because I think that – I do feel the language is already always willing to yield this gold, but what about the work? I think at the point when you, you may very well, you have not worked that poem and the work of the poem only came at that moment of recognition. The reader can work a poem. The reader can work a poem that the poet failed to work, and arrive at the gold that is in it. And so that the picture I would make, and I can close with this, is that if I have a drive – and it certainly is not always there, because I like to do many things in poems but I'm partic – I'm talking now about one idea of the poem and – as the work. In that – it would be to render – I've used also to *render* this gold and I use the term lasting. This lasting, to make. But also to deliver up the life you have lived in some time. And the language is a medium for delivery, you delivered into the language because, and there, another human being, any other human being can also, if you have done that work, they can go through – they can go into that work and participate in it. If you have not done the work they can – they can do an other work, which is like the work of analysis when the poet has really not. The work of analysis, about why the poem doesn't work, that makes us aware of what it was that would have been there – see that's very different from discovering what is there and why is it hidden there? It's because not all poems – some poems are quite direct. They want to present it right there like that, and I do think you can show that tree that I talked about originally, so when you come to a poet like myself where you are engaged in order to find it or even come to it in participating in it, that's why the poem involves so much. And so my picture

actually of the alchemical work – what if the – what all the alchemists were talking about was just like what Jung says it is. Now it's real easy reading Jung, and yet he is aware that the real work took place by people who demanded that they go into the lap – and they were asking the chemical world to reveal it, as we ask the language world. As a matter of fact it's very hard for us not to view that asking the chemical world to reveal it – it's only very recently with people like Jung that there's been a hint that maybe it was wrong to ask the chemical world to reveal the secret. And part of my being antiquated that I recognize is that I think it's much more reasonable to ask the language to reveal the secret, and find it very puzzling indeed that men ask the – while my imagination grasps that the chemical world is alive – and certainly the language tells us that it's alive – or else it's dead I mean, it has the same alternative of the work and futility. Oh, by the way we call it either alive [writes on board] or it's dead – these aren't two people and so we also engage in the poem to make it alive, make it alive or make it dead. Both can go on in this, but The Work is alive. And The Work can be called life. Religion adds a third one called The Life. The life you make out of the thing of be – well even we recognize that a person is alive seems to us a wonder, whenever we're conscious of it, and we certainly have the sense much of the time that we ourselves are dead to things. Okay, that's you know, we're not going to settle any of these questions by going on in more – [applause]

There is one poem I would like to read because some of the people here in Vancouver had gotten the poem in typescript and wished I had read it the other evening. So I'll close with a poem. It's called "The Continent." It's a poem written this year, just to prove I did write a poem this year. In all its bankruptcy and all that.

[Reads "The Continent"]