

A MADE PLACE, AN ETERNAL PLACE:
ROBERT DUNCAN'S POETICS OF SPACE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the poetry of Robert Duncan and the dominant role space plays in that poetry. By examining the foundations of Duncan's poetics, particularly his anarchist political views, how those views pertain to the law, and his spiritual belief in immanence, I clarify the nature of the many kinds of spaces found throughout Duncan's work. Focusing on three volumes specifically, *The Opening of the Field*, *Roots and Branches*, and *Bending the Bow*, I argue for a conception of space I call *temenos*, a conception that allows for a reading of Duncan's poetry in terms of a poetics of space that informs every aspect of his work. I examine three spaces in particular: the body, the dance-ground, and the household, and through this examination argue for a reading of Duncan's work as creating space and as a space created, exemplified by Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, memorialized in Duncan's poem, "Nel Mezzo del Cammin di Nostra Vita." Finally, reading Duncan in terms of *temenos* allows for a placement of Duncan in postmodern terms and to consider the ways in which *temenos* can be used as a model for considering other spaces, such as Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone and Gilles Deleuze's fold.

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“What I am getting at here is that the man individualizes him-self, deriving his individuality from the ideas and possibilities at large of manhood in a community that includes all that we know of what man is...And the desire to know more of what man is, extending the idea of man beyond the limitations of particular nationalities, races, civilizations, the taking of self in the species, or in the life force, or in the cosmos, is the need for self beyond what can be granted by whatever known community, the need for a manhood big enough to live freely in. The poetic urge, to make a poetry out of the common language, is to make room for the existence of the poet, the artist of free speech...He differentiates the area of existence, creating its ‘own’ area, deriving the individuality as much from dissociation as from identification, disowning as well as owning possibilities of his being, making a place for self in the community of his total consciousness which is an inner counterpart of his awareness of the outer community in which he lives. He recognizes in the world about him those contentions he feels within.”

-- Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*, 256

Introduction

“Taking his Self and his Law, Poetics and Politics, not in the architectures of the Other World, but in an identification with the creative forces working within masses and populations, the poet was to work toward the Wedding of the Ideal and the Actual, even as Blake had proposed a poetic marriage of Heaven and Hell in the Actual. Whitman saw within the actuality of These States the idea of an America latent and at work. Not a poetry commemorative of an established order or a poetry striving to perfect an order out of chaos, but a poetry creative ‘in the region of imaginative, spinal and essential attributes, something equivalent to creation . . . imperatively demanded.’”

-- Robert Duncan, “Changing Perspectives in Whitman,” 65

In his “recovery” piece for *Octopus Magazine*, Keith Newton claims that Robert Duncan “is hardly in need of recovery as a major figure in American poetry.” Yet why, if he were in fact such a “major figure,” would Newton need to participate in such an act of “recovery” for a book so vital to Duncan’s work? Why must Newton make a “case for [*The Opening of the Field*’s] continuing relevance” if there are not those who would make a case against it?

While it may seem I’m taking Newton to task for his apparently contradictory statements about his work’s intentions and his opinions of Duncan’s status in American poetry, I must admit a similar conflicted motive behind my own work. This project arises from a great fondness for Duncan’s extensive body of work, and also from a desire to see that work recognized by a larger audience. Readers and critics alike offer a variety of reasons why Duncan struggles to maintain (or attain) “major” status in American poetry, even 20th century American poetry. Duncan’s self-imposed “silence” between 1968 and 1984 (though he was far from silent) meant that he was

not in the direct poetic spotlight. Critics argue that various aspects of Duncan's style and content put readers off. Take, for instance, *Twentieth Century American Poetry*, edited by, among others, Dana Gioia. In the biographical note, it is said that Duncan's "failure to achieve a mainstream audience was also due to the difficulty of his work" (614). The editors argue though that, "[a]lthough his poetry attracted a small but devoted following during his lifetime, since his death in 1988 many readers have begun to recognize the scope of his accomplishments" (615). One can only hope that the second half of that statement is true, but the dearth of scholarship on Duncan and his seeming absence in the (admittedly tiny) poetry sections of major booksellers like Barnes & Noble and Borders might speak otherwise. Gioia and his fellow editors note that at times Duncan can seem "a little long-winded," while others may look to his admittedly "derivative" style as a hindrance, particularly in a culture which so brazenly demands "newness," even when what they believe to be new is often just the old cleverly repackaged.

While bias may lead me to dismiss the majority of this negative criticism as the sign of lazy, ignorant, or unintelligent minds, I am not so far removed from my own initial, highly puzzled encounters with Duncan to agree with them. In fact, in times of frustration with Duncan I feel these very same arguments coming to my own lips. What I believe may ultimately force Duncan to the margins of American literature will be his overwhelming concern, both in theme and subject, with poetry, and more specifically, poetics. Nathaniel Mackey says that for Duncan, "poetry and poetics are one" ("Uroboros," 89), but I would go further and say that for Duncan life and poetics are one. Thus, moving into a deeper understanding of Duncan necessarily means an exploration of a highly complex poetics drawing from a seemingly limitless range of resources. This is a daunting task, one only entered if given some sort of reason. For me, that reason was the beauty of Duncan's sound and turn of phrase. For those who were initially

unmoved by the more “sensory” elements of Duncan’s poetry, I can easily see that the “real” work, the move into poetics and the ways in which the sensory elements are outgrowths of those poetics, would be a move never made.

Luckily, I was drawn in by a poem that seemed to allow me a glimpse into Duncan’s poetics without frightening me off. “Nel Mezzo del Cammin di Nostra Vita,” Duncan’s praise of Los Angeles’ Watts Towers, provided me with at least a taste of Duncan’s views on art, the role of the artist, the artist’s relationship with authority, and the significance of the artist’s creation, particularly in terms of space. As a former architecture major, I appreciated Duncan’s discussion of the power of the space Rodia had created, and its comparisons to other spaces charged with a certain energy (e.g. the Tower of Jewels at the 1915 Pan-Pacific Expo). I read “Nel Mezzo” as a statement of poetics, using the poem as a touchstone, and I return to it and connect its language, ideas, turns of phrase, references, allusions, places, with other Duncan poems and essays. As Rodia’s tower complex is central to the poem, so the poem became central to my growing understanding of Duncan’s poetics.

The structure of this dissertation is almost the reverse of my progression from “Nel Mezzo.” As already mentioned, my brief architectural background primed me for an affinity for spatial structures as described in the poem. This led me to look for other spaces in Duncan’s work, which did not entail much looking. Almost immediately, Duncan’s concern with space – field, cave, hearth, household, dance-ground, temple, etc. – leapt out at me. Along with those spaces came Duncan’s overwhelming use of spatial language, including the names of his two serial poems, *Passages* and *The Structure of Rime*. Duncan’s use of space and spatial language seemed anything but haphazard, and often these spaces would be described in terms of other

spaces and in terms of the poem or poetic act. Thus, I began casting about for a term to describe the totality of these spaces.

While Duncan's connection to "open field poetics" is well documented and the space of the field occurs throughout Duncan's work, since space is manifested in so many other forms, I felt it necessary to look beyond "field" for such a definitive term. With Charles Olson's *polis* in mind, I turned to Stanley Lombardo, University of Kansas classics professor, writer, and translator, who suggested a number of terms, including *temenos*. The Greek term, meaning, "to cut out" as in a sacred space, fit perfectly with the vision I was beginning to have of these spaces.

But coming to an understanding of the nature of these spaces meant a further exploration of Duncan's poetics, particularly in terms of his politics and his anarchistic beliefs.

Understanding what Duncan believed to be the ideal relationship between the artist and the State, especially in terms of the artist's individual volition, is key to understanding Duncan's poetics. Further, that relationship is reliant on a sense of lawfulness, and more specifically, of the "inner law" or Law. In attempting to understand Duncan's sense of what I believed to be a quasi-Platonic Ideal, I was led to the concept of immanence.

Duncan's poetics (and his politics) are rooted in a spirituality with immanence at its heart. While Duncan's theosophical upbringing is often mentioned, his actual religious beliefs are less than clear. What is clear is his spiritual belief in the numinous presence of the divine in all things. An important component of his immanentist beliefs was his belief in the notion of the cosmos being in a constant state of flux and creation. This meant that the divine was ever-present while also being ever-created, and created not through a Creator beyond the Creation, but "coinherent" in the Creation, thus allowing the individual to participate in that creation through a recognition (and disclosure) of immanence.

Thus, the movement of my project will progress from a discussion of Duncan's politics, since it could be argued they formed prior to his over-arching poetics, to the relationship between anarchism, the law and the Law, and then to a discussion of immanence. These two major components of Duncan's poetics, anarchism, law, and immanence, will then be related to Duncan's use of space, specifically what I call *temenos*. My argument is that, for Duncan, the poetic act is one of space-making *and* space-entering, both crucial to a recognition and revelation of the nature of the universe and of self-actualization. This section will consist of an exploration of spaces crucial to an understanding of the role of *temenos* in Duncan's work: the body, the dance-ground, and the household.

The paper will then continue with an in-depth return to "Nel Mezzo del Cammin di Nostra Vita" and a discussion of the ways in which the poem manages to encompass almost the full range of Duncan's poetic concerns, acting as a sort of poetic "statement of poetics." While this isn't the only poem of Duncan's that could be said to accomplish this, personally and in terms of the progress of my argument I believe it is a fitting end.

A brief conclusion will attempt to place Duncan and *temenos* within a postmodern framework, particularly in relation to postmodern conceptions of poetics and space, using Brian McHale's exploration of the postmodernist long poem, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, anarchist writer Hakim Bey's spatial model of anarchism, the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), and Deleuze and Guattari's explorations of permeability and the fold.

My main focus will be on Duncan's trilogy, *The Opening of the Field*, *Roots and Branches*, and *Bending the Bow*. The three were written in rapid succession of one another (and sometimes overlapping), and signal, particularly *The Opening of the Field*, Duncan "coming into his own" if you will, in terms of his poetic project, and for me, his spatial poetic. Duncan would

continue exploring many of the same themes, styles, and series found in these three volumes in the later volumes, *Ground Work: Before the War* and *Ground Work: In the Dark*, but the gap between their publishing and that of *Bending the Bow* means that they are often viewed as a separate sort of project. (I do reference a few poems from these later works, particularly in regards to Duncan's friendship with Denise Levertov.)

The goal then is to give a framework of poetics with which to read Duncan, a structure of poetics akin to the structures Duncan repeatedly refers to, a structure that serves "as the personal consciousness but also the inner structure of the universe" ("Towards an Open Universe," 12). Ultimately, this is the cosmic structure, the structure of "What Is." This is *temenos*.

Chapter One: Anarchism

“To declare for a doctrine so remote as anarchism at this stage of history will be regarded by some critics as a sign of intellectual bankruptcy; by others a sort of treason, a desertion of the democratic front at the most acute moment of its crisis; by still others as merely poetic nonsense.”

-- Herbert Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, 7

One of the major dilemmas in the anarchist movement is precisely defining anarchism, beyond an oversimplified “advocacy of lawlessness.” Conceptions of anarchism vary widely among practicing anarchists and anarchy theorists, so any discussion of the roles anarchism plays in Robert Duncan’s work must first address what Duncan’s conception of anarchism is.

In the opening chapter of the collection of essays on Duncan and Denise Levertov’s correspondence, *The Poetics of Politics and the Politics of Poetics*, Robert Bertholf lays out Duncan’s early political thought, describing it as anarcho-pacifism (“Decision at the Apogee”). Burton Hatlen in, “Robert Duncan’s Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Kabbalah and Rime in *Roots and Branches*,” calls Duncan a “philosophical anarchis[t]” (207) and eventually a practitioner of “Mystical Anarchism” (226), while Stephen Collis, in *Through Words of Others*, characterizes Duncan (among others such as Susan Howe), as an “anarcho-scholastic” and in “A Dante Etude” as “following the politics of his poetic form, which continued to see language as an anarchist commons and the poet as the servant of a common project.” Eric Keenaghan, in “Life, War, Love: The Queer Anarchism of Robert Duncan’s Poetic Action during the Vietnam War,” argues for a “queer anarchism,” where “queerness is not primarily owed to homosexuality” (637). While these varied description begin placing Duncan within an anarchist framework, these

conceptions of his anarchism are also so wide-ranging and disparate as to complicate the task further.

As the longer Collis quotation and the title of the Bertholf-edited book suggest, for Duncan, separating politics from poetics was nearly impossible, inasmuch as, for Duncan, (nearly) everything including his anarchism was a matter of “poetics.” Ironically, Duncan is too rarely viewed historically and critically as a “political” poet. Keenaghan points out that the “politics underlying [Duncan’s] poetics have largely been forgotten” (“Queer,” 634). Yet, poems such as “The Fire, *Passages 13*,” “Up Rising, *Passages 25*,” and “The Soldiers, *Passages 26*” from *Bending the Bow* are some of the most powerful American political poems of the 20th century.

But a reader would have a difficult time reading the poems mentioned above, or prose like, “Two ways of life – the one realized by the Protestant-Capitalist cult in its terms of usury, real estate, production for profit, and profitable work” (“Rites of Participation,” 117), without seeing the deeply political nature of Duncan’s work. The more challenging task is to see how these politics inform his poetics at a more foundational level, when the subject isn’t so overtly political.

The tricky task of articulating Duncan’s particular brand of anarchism remains. As Terry Perlin points out in the introduction to *Contemporary Anarchism*, anarchism has never been a unified political movement. The range, and often contradictory nature, of types of anarchy render the phrase “anarchist movement” almost nonsensical. Further complicating the matter is anarchism’s ties (and battles) with other political movements like Marxism and communism. Perlin asserts that, at its core, anarchism and various anarchist “arms” share a “distrust of authority combined with genuine concern for the travails of daily life among common people”

(34). In describing his basic tenets of anarchist thought, Bertholf gives three controlling ideas. The first is that “the individual is free to act as long as his actions do not impinge on the freedom to act of other people” (“Decision,” 4). The second is that all “[s]tructured government is corrupt.” The final tenet is the need “to destroy present social and economic systems in order to create new kinds of organization in which the freedom and integrity of the individual [would] flourish” (5). In this final statement we can be inserting Duncan’s own language, replacing “systems” with “orders,” “structures,” and “forms.”

There are at least two pitfalls in this final tenet though. First is the undue emphasis seemingly placed on destruction. Keenaghan notes that, contrary to “popular misconceptions, anarchism is founded upon creative, rather than destructive, modes of opposing the state” (“Queer,” 635). In *Poetry and Anarchism*, Herbert Read speaks to the destructive aspect of anarchism:

I speak of doctrine, but there is nothing I so instinctively avoid as a static system of ideas. I realize that form, pattern, and order are essential aspects of existence; but in themselves they are the attributes of death. To make life, to insure progress, to create interest and vividness, it is necessary to break form, to distort pattern, to change the nature of our civilization. In order to create it is necessary to destroy; and the agent of destruction in society is the poet. (8)

Read’s claim here seems antithetical to the traditionally “creative” role of the poet, a role Duncan embraces. We will see later how Read’s exhortations to “break form” and “distort pattern” allow Duncan to incorporate anarchism into his poetics.

The second pitfall arises from the risk of the creation or even resurrection of “corrupt” structures during the creation of “new kinds of organization,” structures that again violate the

first tenet. Bertholf comments that Duncan, in his split with Levertov, “insists upon the imaginative integrity of the poem and the view of the artist as the projector of literary form” (“Decision,” 15). In getting caught up in the mass anti-war protest and losing her voice in the mass voice of the “movement,” Duncan felt Levertov had just joined one “corrupt” organization in order to protest another. The organization was “corrupt” in that, in becoming a part of it, Levertov had lost her individual voice, her “imaginative integrity,” and therefore abdicated her role as poet. For Duncan, individual freedom and volition were the most important features of anarchism.

The trap in to which Duncan believed Levertov had fallen is at the core of the contradictory nature of anarchism, and is perhaps the reason why a dominant anarchist theory (and organization) has never emerged. As seen in just the basic tenets laid out by Bertholf, a tension between “individual” and “organization” must be resolved. Individual freedom, for the anarchist, is the ideal way towards the communal good; yet, it is the community, or rather its resultant “organizations” and institutions, which eventually becomes “corrupt” when attempt to curtail individual freedom in the name of the greater good of the community. Keenaghan notes that the “queerness of Duncan’s anarchistic project, then, is derived from his impassioned desire to live more freely, to the fullest of his individual potential, while helping realize a commonality” (“Queer,” 637). This is no easy task, and “[p]oetically producing such a queer vision of life was a struggle for Duncan, and some of his project’s finer contradictions – such as the tension emerging between the free, desire-driven individual and the community – remain unresolved.” How is the communal good measured in terms of the individual, or more importantly, the individual poet?

In imagining Duncan's disappointment with Levertov's poetic "loss," one is reminded of the chiding Duncan had received from Charles Olson in "Against Wisdom as Such," where Olson took Duncan to task for being untrue to himself as a poet. Olson says of the poet and the poet's role:

I fall back on a difference I am certain the poet has at least to be fierce about: that he is not free to be a part of, or to be any, sect; that there are no symbols of him, there are only his own composed forms, and each one solely the issue of the time of the moment in its creation, not any ultimate except what he in his heat and that instant in its solidity yield. That the poet cannot afford to traffick in any other "sign" than his one, his self, the man or woman he is. Otherwise God does rush in. And art is washed away, turned into that second force religion. (261-62)

These words resonated with Duncan, as he would incorporate parts of this section into his poem, "Nel Mezzo del Cammin di Nostra Vita." Bertholf argues that "Duncan again maintains that because [Levertov] has given up her individuality to the cause," the "sign" of a mass movement, "she has betrayed the position of the artist; she accepts the mass position, the passionate appeal, and no longer imagines or projects the very nature of the work, the evil she is protesting" ("Decision," 13). Levertov violates Duncan's anarchist poetics, allowing her poetry to be "washed away, turned into that second force religion." One of the most bitter points of contention was Duncan's indicting characterization of Levertov at the People's Park protests as the demonic goddess, Kālī (*Ground Work*, "Santa Cruz Propositions"), a characterization to which Levertov took great exception. Levertov, in attempting to topple an oppressive and coercive organization, had essentially joined another oppressive and coercive organization,

however “noble” that organization’s stated goals. Levertov had given up her individual freedom in the name of what she believed to be the “greater good,” a terrible error in Duncan’s mind.

Duncan’s anarchism, then, is most deeply rooted in Bertholf’s first tenet, with Bertholf noting that as “an anarchist, Duncan believed in the authority of the individual to act with and make decisions freely without compromising individuality” (“Decision,” 12). This stance is crucial for Duncan’s autonomy as an artist. Thus, his particular brand of anarchism is a sort of hyper-individualism. What Duncan has to resolve is the way he defines community that allows for the uncompromised “authority of the individual.”

The anarchist tension between individual and community can be seen early in Duncan’s writing. His landmark 1944 essay, “The Homosexual in Society,” reveals the foundational role Duncan’s anarchist politics played in his larger poetics. As a homosexual, it’s clear why Duncan, faced with the social, moral, and legal landscape of 1944, would be attracted to a political philosophy calling for the dissolution of the State. The authority of the State to criminalize love is a powerful force and Perlin points out that “the right to possess one’s own body, and to live according to one’s own desires, is a premise of anarchism” (11).

In “The Homosexual in Society,” Duncan “calls out” political authority, in the form of law which views homosexuality “a crime against the way of nature,” and poetical authority, in the form of critics who openly ignore homosexual themes and perspectives in such writers as Melville, Proust, and Crane, critics Duncan likens to “modern ghouls” who have “ravaged” these works (44). Both authorities limit the individual freedoms of the citizen and the artist.

Duncan takes on a third authority here, though, an unexpected authority, making the essay much more interesting and seemingly going against Duncan’s anarchist bent. In the introduction to the piece, added upon the essay’s re-publication in 1959, Duncan asserts that

“minority associations and identifications were an evil where they supersede allegiance to and share in the creation of a human community good – the recognition of fellow man-hood” (38). The opening sentence of the text sets out Duncan’s goal clearly: the achievement of “freedom and individual integrity,” not an establishment of a queer poetics or a queer canon. Throughout the piece, Duncan argues that the struggle of homosexuals should not be for recognition of homosexuals as superior to heterosexuals, but that the struggle of all minority groups should be the “struggle for human freedom,” the “struggle for all” (41).

Instead, at least in the queer community, Duncan claims that the rise of the struggle for homosexual rights coincided with “the growth of a cult of homosexual superiority to heterosexual values; the cultivation of a secret language, the *camp*, a tone and a vocabulary that are loaded with contempt for the uninitiated.” Duncan’s use of “cult” here echoes Olson’s previously mentioned “Against Wisdom as Such,” where Olson warns that “secrecy is wearing the skin that truth is inside-out” and that “the poet...is not free to be a part of, or to be any, sect” (261). In this sense, like the protest movement Levertov becomes a part of, Duncan’s homosexual “cult” is similar to the secret “sect” Olson warns against, which, once joined, “washe[s] away” art and is “turned into that second force, religion” (262).

Duncan criticizes the cult of the homosexual artist further, saying, “[T]here are poets whose nostalgic picture of special worth in suffering, sensitivity, and magical quality is no other than this intermediate ‘sixth sense’; there are new cult leaders whose special divinity, whose supernatural and visionary claim is no other than this mystery of sex” (43). In his footnotes to the piece, Duncan rightly points out that his own poetry seems to traffic heavily in “suffering, sensitivity, and magical quality,” as well as “supernatural and visionary claim” (while others might claim, particularly in his relationship with Levertov, that himself became a sort “religious”

force in his own mind). The important distinction to be made, even if Duncan pulls back a bit in his later footnotes, is that his sexuality isn't claimed as the *foundation* of Duncan's poetics.

Duncan's work may be rife with the supernatural and the divine, and those may often manifest themselves in homosexual and/or homoerotic subjects and themes, but these appearances are not intended to indoctrinate into or push a homosexual "agenda," so to speak. Once again, from his footnotes, Duncan emphasizes that the goal of the poet and of his "creative genius" is the successful

communication of personal experience as a communal experience. [The writer] brings us to realize our own inner being in a new light through the sense of human being he creates, or creates in us as we read a new sense of our being. And in Melville, Crane, and Proust I saw their genius awaken a common share in homosexual desire and love, in its suffering and hope, that worked to transform the communal image of man. (45)

Where for the homosexual "clique" Duncan criticizes, homosexuality is in and of itself a sign of superiority for the poet, their "special divinity" and "visionary claim," for Duncan, a poet like Hart Crane's suffering is not just a necessary outgrowth of his sexuality (and its perceived deviance), but, is, along with "rebellion" and "love," the "sources of poetry...not because they are what makes him different from his fellow-men, but because he saw in them his link with mankind; he saw in them his share in universal human experience" (44-45).

The "cult" of homosexuality, like the larger State organizations arrayed against it, diminishes individual volition and "creative genius" in the name of an improved "communal experience" (thought that experience is not, in fact, improved). Rather than argue against

authority, the homosexual “cult” only advocates for the replacement of one authority with another.

These organizations falsely invoke subjects like “communal experience” since their communities are by definition limited. Again and again, Duncan returns to these kinds of sentiments, that the communal experience is a universal experience, and that universality should be emphasized rather than the isolated, secretive, or limited acts of a group intending to set itself purposefully apart from the rest of humanity. Towards the end of the original piece, Duncan repeats his thesis:

What I think can be asserted as a starting point is that only one devotion can be held by a human seeking a creative life and expression, and that as a devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations. To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance. To hold this devotion every written word, every action, every purpose must be examined and considered...It must always be remembered that one’s own honesty, one’s battle against the inhumanity of his own group (be it against patriotism, against bigotry, against – in this special case – the homosexual cult) is a battle that cannot be won in the immediate scene. The forces of humanity are overwhelming, but only one’s continued opposition can make any other order possible, will give an added strength for all those who desire freedom and equality to break at last those fetters that seem now so unbreakable. (47-48)

Duncan’s language here is in step with the rest of the piece, but still striking and ironic, describing the struggle against a cult of homosexual poetics as a “battle” similar to the one

against “bigotry.” But we can see how a larger sense of poetics subsumes Duncan’s sexual identity here. The individual creative mind must be free to assert its own will, free of the “orders” (both in the structural and command senses) of larger groups such as nations, religions, or even sexualities.

Indeed, Duncan felt that this was a danger even (more so) in the poetic community. In a 1978 interview for the Naropa Institute, Duncan discussed the stifling Black Mountain atmosphere:

There was a thing called *Black Mountain Review*, so it labeled itself practically Black Mountain by that time, and then school gets to be like a school of fish....But out of it comes a code of beliefs and particularly a code of hero-worship, so that you can’t think various ways about Charles [Olson]. I get to be a heretic because I was writing before Charles started writing but that doesn’t sound good in Black Mountain ears when I’m talking about what might be right or wrong. (“a little endarkenment,” 18)

Thus, Duncan sees Black Mountain as a kind of “cult of Olson,” with its own static “code of beliefs,” and its own dogma that aimed to stifle the individual will in order to further the communal “beliefs.”

The individual must be devoted to human freedom, and the first act of devotion (or “obedience,” a word found throughout Duncan’s work) is to individual freedom, and every act from there forward is thus a poetic act, an act that either reaffirms the poetics of this devotion, or adheres to the orders of a larger group. In devoting oneself this way, the creative mind will create an “other order” for itself, an order both distinct from the orders of other creative minds, but similar in their distinction, orders of concord *and* discord.

Duncan's alternating praise for and prescriptions against "orders" appears highly contradictory. How can he argue for the destruction of "orders" in the form of "organizations" while also calling for an "opposition" which is intended to "make any other order possible"? Again, the tension, the strife between the orders of individual freedom and those of the "communal experience" occupies a central position in Duncan's emerging poetics. Returning to the earlier Read quotation, it's possible to see how the forms and patterns Read says need to be broken and distorted are "false" patterns. Ironically, many would argue that Duncan's homosexuality is in fact a deviant "distort[ion]" of natural patterns. On the other hand, Duncan would argue that the forms, orders, and patterns that have been established are purely human creations meant to limit individual volition and maintain the status quo and its "static system of ideas" (Read 8). We will see later how stasis and death are imagined through images of worms, snakes, and dragons.

Another tension (or contradiction) exerts as much force on Duncan's anarchist poetics as the individual/community dialectic. In *The Anarchists*, James Joll details one of the major tensions in anarchist thought: "It is the clash between these two types of temperaments, the religious and the rationalist, the apocalyptic and the humanist, which has made so much of anarchist doctrine seem contradictory. It is also this double nature that gives anarchism its wide appeal" (12). Perhaps the wide range of kinds of anarchism is a result of the various strategies (and philosophies) brought to bear on making sense of these supposed contradictions. It's clear Duncan is concerned with this tension, as his poetry and prose are filled with discussions of the strife between the "religious and the rationalist," and the "apocalyptic and the humanist." In "The Truth & Life of Myth," Duncan notes the tension between science and religion, between "the story of the evolution of living forms that takes hold with Darwin's vision of the nature of

the species and the various myths of the origin and destiny of the universe that arise from contemporary physics” and the mythic worldview of the “Christian imagination” (12). The essay, “Ideas of the Meaning of Form,” finds Duncan examining the modern clash between the “religious and the rationalist”: “Poets who once had dreams and epiphanies, now admit only to devices and ornaments. Love, that had been a passion, had best be a sentiment of a sensible affection. Rational piety and respect for God stood strong against divine inspiration and demonic possession” (25). Much of Duncan’s poetry is a working through of this fashion.

Even a casual reader or student of Duncan would have no difficulty reaching the conclusion that Duncan clearly embraced a certain kind of “religious,” or at least “mythical” temperament. (The terms “religious” or “religion” are problematic inasmuch as they imply an organized, static system rather than a fluid process. “Spirituality” may be more apt.) One needs only to look at Duncan’s theosophical upbringing and its use in his poetry to understand that. Duncan’s stepparents were practicing theosophists who, while attempting to maintain the outward appearance of a typical, middle-class family, were also members of the Hermetic Brotherhood and avidly read writers like Blavatsky. They chose Duncan because of his astrological sign, having been counseled to find a baby with that particular birth date as it would signal the baby’s status as a reincarnated soul from the catastrophically destroyed lost civilization of Atlantis. Thus, Duncan’s theosophy is connected to a certain kind of “apocalyptic” vision centered on a recurring dream he called his “Atlantis” dream, which appears in many poems, most notably, “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow.” But what of the “rationalist” and “humanist” temperament?

Duncan seems to have some harsh words for “rationalism.” Again, from “Ideas of the Meaning of Form,” Duncan complains about the “rationalist” artist, claiming that the “rationalist

gardener's art is his control over nature, and beauty is conceived as the imposed order visible in the pruned hedgerow and the ultimate tree compelled into geometric globe or pyramid that gives certainty of effect" (34). The "orders" and "organizations" that are the bane of individual freedom appear again as the "imposed order" of the "rationalist" artist upon nature, creating a "beauty...of effect." Duncan goes so far as to equate the impulse to rationality with the drive to power and war: "Disease, death, terror, and the ruin of cities are not experienced but dealt with, where rational theory wages its wars." He goes on to argue that it is not "[w]rathful inspiration (divine or demonic)" that leads to war; rather, "it is convention, what reasonable men agree upon, that will decide all. War, too, becomes rational." It would seem then that Duncan would not be caught up in the allure of Joll's paradox. But it is not "rationalism" against which Duncan is railing here, but a particular *conception* of rationalism, a rationalism that posits human "genius" as the *ultimate* ordering power or force in the universe.

Duncan's issue is with form "imposed" upon the universe by humans, "the concept of form as the imposing of rules and establishing of regularities" (35). The poet's job is *not* to establish "regularities," but to recognize them. He continues that "theories of civilization, race, and progress, the performances in sciences and arts" are used by the misguided rationalist to "rationalize the universe, to secure balance and class" (35). Sexuality could even be included in that list. The rationalist's established "regularities" become the "corrupt organizations" anarchists rail against, since they become codified and restrict the freedom of the individual.

But the universe doesn't need humans to "rationalize" it, nor does it need man's "rules" in order to have "balance." The misguided rationalist fears and is threatened by the universe, and thus is driven to create an artificial "architecture...of symmetries." While Duncan's poetry and prose are replete with calls for "orders," "structures," and "forms," these are not of the kind

called for by the misguided rationalist, a “scale imagined to hold its own against threat”; rather, they arise like “life.../from scales of the marvelous” (*Roots and Branches*, “Apprehensions,” 42). The orders of life are “anticipated” by the poet, like the caves and cave-ins of “Apprehensions”; the orders, structures, forms, and scales of the universe are there to be apprehended by the poet, if the poet has the “responsibility” to “watch” for them, for “wherever we watch, concordances appear.” At the end of “Apprehensions,” Duncan asserts that the *melos*, the sounds, the notes, the melodies, the relationships *between* sounds, “refer to” orders:

the orders of the sentence in reading;
 the orders of what is seen in passing. There was the swarming earth;
 the orders of commanding images;
 the orders of passionate fictions and themes of the poet in writing

 the orders of the Architect building in the Likeness a temple;
 the orders of the day that include the actual appearance of the pit
 in the garden;
 the orders of stars and of words;

 in these most marvelous. (42)

These are not the orders championed by “Miss Drew” in “Ideas of the Meaning of Form”; though these may be the tools of “rationalists” such as Eisenhower and Roosevelt, these orders and forms, imposed by men, are actually irrationalities, fictions *without* passion, governed by fear of “vertigo and collapse,” and the desire to “bring the troubling plenitude of experience ‘within our power’” (35). Duncan the anarchist rails against this fear and the delusion that man can bend the

universe “‘within our power’.” It is this delusion that Duncan would eventually argue so passionately against in his classic Vietnam poems in *Passages*, the delusion of the will to power that appears as the rational, “reasonable” “business of war” (“Up Rising,” 81). This, to Duncan, is not rationalism but irrationalism, an action of the “idiot psyche,” an action given impulse by “terror and hatred” of an order outside of their control, an order which must be brought under control through the supposedly rationalistic practices of government, business, and science, of “bosses and business- /men,” of “biologists” and “chemists we have met at cocktail parties,” and of the “professional military” (81). “[T]error and hatred” lead to a war against “communal things”; yet in the preceding poem, “Orders, *Passages 24*,” Duncan argues:

There is no
 good a man has in his own things except
 it be in the community of every thing;
 no nature he has
 but in his nature hidden in the heart of the living,
 in the great household. (*Bending the Bow*, 79)

The great evil of Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Johnson, Stalin, Hitler, and others, according to Duncan, is the irrationality of their attempt to impose their own orders on the orders of the cosmos by attempting to destroy “community” and denying the true nature of the universe, of the “great household” in favor of the imposition of their own corrupted natures. In the name of

rationality, these men actually invoke a kind of religion, becoming the centers of cults to themselves, similar to Herbert Read's "cult of leadership," cults which ignore "the community of every thing" and which trample on individual rights in the name of their own god-like powers. The folly of these men? "The cosmos will not dissolve its orders at man's evil" (79).

Thus we see that the "rationalist" orders imposed by men upon the cosmos, orders that ultimately turn out to be "irrational," are anything but "humanist"; rather, these leaders are destroyers of men and community, using artificial orders to turn the world into "a sea of toiling men / stirred [their] will, which would be a bloated thing, / drawing from the underbelly" (81). The hellish "rational" world described in "Up Rising," filled with burning villages, children covered in napalm, "their hair aflame, screaming in agony," "figures of fire and blood raging," is the result of the irrational will to power and "order" that fails to recognize or to respond to the natural orders of the cosmos. Much of the difficulty in trying to resolve the tension between "religious and rationalist" and "apocalyptic and the humanist" is an acceptance of the terms' definitions as given by others, by those who would serve only themselves and their "imposed orders" and established "regularities." These "rationalist" orders are anti-human, driven by "self-interest" that "can betray all / good of self" ("Orders," 79), and instead attempt to exterminate the soul of the people of the community, of the "great household," in the name of a perverted "rationalism" or a perverted "religion," as in the genocide of the Albigensian Crusade at Beziers: "The Abbe of Citeaux orders *Kill them all- / the Lord will know his own*" (78). In the name of the Catholic community, the individual is exterminated. Ironically, the historical and political figures who populate much of this work seem to be caught in the same tensions Duncan and other anarchists find themselves in, but end up resolving the tensions by moving to one pole or the other, privileging the individual over the community (in the name of the

community), but limiting the real freedom of the individual to either a small group or just one person, claiming a rational basis for creating a cult.

In his essay, “Gassire’s Lute,” an exploration of Duncan’s Vietnam War poems, Nathaniel Mackey addresses the contradictions between the religious and humanist temperaments:

The tension between morality and cosmology, ideology and poetry in Barthes’s parlance, bears the brunt of the troublesome impact the notion of inspiration makes on humanistic aspirations. The age-old sense of inspiration as an inspiring, and invasion of a human vessel by non-human daimon or spirit, carries the danger of a loss of touch with human realities and feelings. (83).

As Mackey makes clear, Duncan was criticized for his apparent “dehumanization” of Johnson.

Mackey quotes Duncan: “I have been criticized for dehumanizing Johnson in the poem *Up Rising*, but such men have dehumanized themselves, removed themselves from the human consequences of their acts and from the disorders that lie under their ratiocinations” (83).

Johnson hides behind the veils of “rationalism” and “humanism” in order to “dehumanize” and destroy, brining “disease, death, terror and the ruin of cities” (“Ideas,” 34). Johnson’s rationalism is actually an extreme and deviant form of Joll’s “apocalyptic” temperament.

Duncan is enthralled by this temperament, by Johnson’s destruction. Mackey asks an important question in response to Duncan’s claim in “The Soldiers,” that “Johnson is no inspired poet,”

asking, “But what if Johnson *were* inspired?” (83). Perhaps, if Johnson were truly inspired,

inspired, he would not have to hide his “demonic possession” behind the lie of “rational piety”

(“Ideas,” 25). Johnson, Duncan declares, is a poet, but he is a slave to his *own* orders, rather than

“Orders.” Just like the men who become the “officized–ossified” scales of Johnson, the

“absolute authority / the great dragon himself,” Johnson’s “inner law” has been “silenced” (“The Soldiers,” 79).

We return to Duncan’s prescription that the “poet’s responsibility” is the keeping of the “ability to respond” to the “inner law.” An adherence to the self’s “absolute authority” results in “uninspired poetry,” a poetry worthy of a criticism even leveled at poets seemingly in Duncan’s political camp, such as Brother Antoninus: “Bad art is bad feeling, miserable work is miserable emotion: and the poems are grotesque with bathos. If only they were ‘false’ – but the truth glares at us of a self-obsessed ego” (*Letters*, 270). Johnson is not interested in being “possessed” or inspired “as an inspiriting, an invasion of a human vessel by a non-human daimon or spirit”; rather, Johnson wants to be the invader, the possessor, because he is a “self-obsessed ego” unwilling to give up or sacrifice his own power to determine orders that obey the “inner law.” To resolve Joll’s paradox, the “self-obsessed ego” denies their own humanity, the “human consequences of their acts” in a twisted and perverted show or claim of humanity. A true humanity allows for an “inspiriting,” a “demonic possession” that reveals the natural “order,” that gives voice to the “inner law.” Johnson claims to possess himself and aims to possess others through an imposition of his own orders that come forth from the “idiot psyche” of his “self-obsessed ego.” The anarchist, though intent on privileging individual freedom, risks falling into the same trap of the individual turning only inward and valuing only themselves.

“A Poem Beginning With A Line By Pindar,” from *The Opening of the Field*, shows an earlier political (and poetic) attack on Johnson and fellow Presidents moved by their own “self-obsessed ego[s],” contrasting them with Abraham Lincoln. The theme of the silencing of the inner law and a need for hearing anticipate Duncan’s use of the same themes in the Vietnam War poems. Duncan gives a litany of past Presidents, describing what they “hear”:

Hoover, Coolidge, Harding, Wilson
 hear the factories of human misery turning out commodities.
 For whom are the holy matins ringing?
 Noble men in the quiet of morning hear
 Indians singing the continent's violent requiem.
 Harding, Wilson, Taft, Roosevelt,
 idiots fumbling at the bride's door,
 hear the cries of men in meaningless debt and war.
 Where among these did the spirit reside
 that restores the land to productive order? (63-64)

These presidents/men/poets ignore the sounds they should be attending to, the “holy matins ringing” and the songs of “Indians singing” in favor of the sounds of their own creations, their own orders, their own “self-obsessed ego[s],” the sounds of “factories of human misery,” and the “cries of men in meaningless debt and war.” Like Johnson, these men are dehumanized (and dehumanize) because they do not understand the “human consequences of their acts” and resist or refuse to be “inspirited.”

We see in Duncan's question, “Where among these did the spirit reside” corollary to the idea of “inspiriting.” It seems here that Duncan's language (“spirit reside”) implies that the “spirit” which “inspires” is already within us, “resid[ing]” rather than visiting or appearing to the poet. Once again, the implication or result is that our embrace of both the “rationalist and religious” temperaments necessarily means recognizing the “inspiriting” presence “resid[ing]” in us, which is a reflection of the “inner law” and natural Orders, a recognition or apprehension that insures our continuing humanity. Ignoring that spirit results in a wasting of the land, an

apocalyptic scene of destruction and decay without hope of resurrection, a scene described in H.D.'s *The Walls Do Not Fall* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, an image of the Fisher King and his wasted kingdom. The leaders indicted here take on the impotence of the Fisher King ("idiots fumbling at the bride's door") and that impotence brings blight upon the United States. Invoking Whitman and Lincoln, Duncan presents a fertile land where "lilacs...bloomd."

But instead of a celebratory marking of the year anniversary of Lincoln's death and the burst of life that marks Whitman's poem, Duncan extends the imagery of a diseased land through to the present. Lilacs have not returned, not even in the bleak sense from Eliot's *The Waste Land* ("breeding / lilacs out of the dead land") and rather than the fertile "varied and ample land" in Whitman's poem, the nation (and the poet) "sustain[s] the damage / where smokes of continual ravage / obscure the flame" (64) of inspiration, of the residual/residing "spirit." Thus, Duncan claims, he is moved

across great scars of wrong
[to] reach toward the song of kindred men
and strike again the naked string
old Whitman sang from.

The poet takes on the role of Parsifal/Galahad in "restor[ing] the land to productive order," since the political leaders refuse to respond to the songs of the "inner law." Duncan ends the second section of the Pindar poem with a stanza fertile (pun intended) with imagery and double meaning:

I always see the under side turning
fumes that injure the tender landscape.
From which up break

lilac blossoms of courage in daily act

striving to meet a natural measure.

Duncan's faith in the courageous individual "act" remains intact as he returns to one of his favorite metaphors of poetry as plowing, described in "Apprehensions" as plowing "the given field in rows, / prose and / versus" (33). This "turning" and re-"turning," while dangerous (releasing "fumes that injure the tender landscape"), results in the re-emergence of the "lilac blossoms of courage" which re-affirm and adhere to the "natural measure" of the land, healing the "great scars of wrong." Duncan, then, takes his place in the realm of the "old poets," whose "words," conjuring up the fertility of the land prior to the Fisher King's injury (or Lincoln's death), "shed like tears from / a plenitude of powers time stores" ("Pindar," 63).

Duncan ultimately looks to a poetics and politics which is rationalist and religious, apocalyptic and humanist, but which resists the prevailing definitions of these terms as set out by the corrupt structures and organizations in power. In a March 1969 letter to Denise Levertov, Duncan argues, "great evils are great *diseases*" (*Letters*, 629). And, rather than creating orders, these corrupt structures create "disorders," both in the sense of confusion and chaos and also of sickness; their measures, relationships, "ratiocinations" are of disorder in the name of order, as their rationalism and religion are disordered. They believe neither in the freedom of the individual nor the good of the "great household," but in their "absolute authority" in defiance of the "inner law."

For Duncan, anarchism is a delicate balance between the individual and the communal, "individual choice in thought and action in the community of others also acting individually, and then to the distinction of people acting cooperatively for the common good and people acting uniformly under the coercion of a movement or a government" ("Decision," 5). Bertholf rightly

notes Duncan's attraction to Bartolomeo Vanzetti's "voluntarism" as a model for his anarchist politics and poetics. Again, in an April 1969 letter to Levertov, Duncan warns against movements, even revolutionary ones, pointing out that an

answer that was not "revolution" was Vanzetti's voluntary state. Volition cannot commit itself to a future agreement or covenant any more than it can bind itself to the past covenants; for it must spring afresh from the message of the here and now. When I first heard the Trotskyite slogan of "Perpetual revolution" I thought it meant this volition ever ready to spring afresh, to strike out for freedom even from the parties that carried the names on their banners. (629-30)

Too often, Duncan complains, that rather than seeking "Perpetual revolution" in the name of individual volition, "the Lenins and Castros, heroes of a people's desperation, [settle down] to become magistrates and managers of the lives of others" (630). The danger, as manifested in Duncan's falling out with Levertov, is of revolution becoming just another "nation" which "conscripts" its members as the State does, of becoming "Kālī dancing, whirling her necklace of skulls, / trampling the despoiling armies and the exploiters of natural resources / under her feet. Revolution or Death!" ("Santa Cruz Propositions," 49). Duncan's anarchism is not just a political stance, it is a poetic one, forcing Duncan to think about how these beliefs affect his poetry. His work embraces the "rationalist and the religious," the "apocalyptic and the humanist," such that the imagination's task is to "extend this volition in a wider and deeper range of the communal good: i.e. the concord of individual volitions" (*Letters*, 542).

Yet troubling questions remain: What is this "inner law"? How do we know the "communal good"? Duncan is aware of these sources of dis-ease:

But I'm not sure that all aspects of what determines our sense of evils and goods can be reasoned out and explained. Some are life-intuitions, inner recognitions of what is appropriate to our nature, and may be obscure in its intent. But even these must be *creative* intuitions, for I would follow here Darwin's insight that evolution has within it no "plan." The concord of volitions then is an environment in which individual volitions so fit that they survive; which must always be reimagined, for from every paradise the terms of its not being free for new volition to thrive will become clear.

Duncan invokes both the seemingly anti-rationalist power of "intuition" and the rationalist scientist, Darwin, in order to relate an anarchist world of constant reimagining where "every paradise" can quickly turn into an environment that kills individual volition. The citizen of this environment must attend to "inner recognitions" of good and evil and adhere to the full range of human experience, the rational and the religious. In the introduction to his fine translations of Parmenides and Empedocles, Stan Lombardo says of the early Greek philosophers, "[T]hey did not distinguish science from poetry or religious experience from philosophical understanding" (*Parmenides and Empedocles*, vii). For one to attend to "the concord of volitions," one must be like those Greek philosophers, one must be a kind of poet, for "in creating a Poetry as well as making poems, we seek to create an environment in which our own creative spirit *fits*. And in these current 'Passages' I feel this dance of coming to fit, the most exciting part of the form). Projecting its own lawfulness" (*Letters*, 542). Ironically, "lawfulness" and obedience to the Law are major outgrowths of Duncan's anarchist poetics, thematically dominating much of Duncan's work.

Chapter Two: Law

“That Freedom and the Law are identical / and are the nature of Man – Paradise.”

--Robert Duncan, “In the Place of a Passage 22”

“Lawfulness” and obedience to the law would seem to be strange themes (and bedfellows) for a self-proclaimed anarchist, yet Duncan’s poetry and prose are filled with discussions of law and its importance. The law is a dominant subject and, like the political relationship between individual and community, a major source of tension. Lisa Jarnot notes:

A fascination with law in Duncan's work was not particular to *The Opening of the Field*, but rather formed one of the points from which Duncan structured his whole poetics. Two key texts along these lines were Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* and Harvey's *The Circulation of the Blood*. He read the law as a scientific phenomenon, as well as a metaphysical one, the latter being a preoccupation that came from parents' hermeticism. (*The Ambassador to Venus*)

It’s possible to read Jarnot’s language of “scientific” and “metaphysical” as an extension of Joll’s “rationalist and religious” tension. It is necessary then to understand the dynamics of that tension. Since the law is essentially the mandates determined by organizations or groups that possess power, questions arise about the nature of law: Who determines what the laws are and from where does that authority come? Who enforces the laws? What are the consequences of disobeying them? What if the laws are unjust? Is there such a thing as an unjust law? What is the ultimate goal of the laws and what are their consequences – what do they create?

Much of the tension surrounding law in Duncan is a result of conflicts about these questions, as seen in his lambasting of “lawmakers,” especially in the Vietnam War poems and

throughout *Passages*. Duncan posits a direct conflict between poet and politician, or more specifically, “inspired poet” and “self-obsessed” poet. Back of this conflict we can hear Shelley’s claim, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.” In Duncan’s words, we can see Shelley’s phrase retold as, “Inspired poets are the legislators of the World.” The conflict thus moves into a question of authority: Who has greater authority, the poets or the politicians? This conflict is enacted repeatedly in Duncan’s poems, both stylistically (often in terms of diction) and thematically. Duncan’s anarchism is foundational in this conflict, with the State as the villain and the individual, the poet, as hero, as Galahad, Parsifal, Robin Hood, as successor to Lincoln *and* Whitman.

Political authority, as represented by the State, often appears in Duncan’s work as a “great dragon.” One of the first manifestations of the eventual “great dragon” can be seen in *The Opening of the Field*’s “Structure of Rime I,” following “The Law I Love Is Major Mover,” which ends with the image of Jacob wrestling Law in the form of “angelic Syntax,” the Law ultimately making Jacob a “man.” Duncan continues the exploration of “syntax” in the next poem, the opening to the *Structure of Rime* sequence. The seeming contradictions between poets as legislators, as literal law-bearers, and as “servants” to a higher Law, are described from the outset. Of the quasi-Platonic “unyielding Sentence,” Duncan’s speaker commands: “Speak! For I name myself your master, who come to / serve. / Writing is first a search for obedience” (12). The contradiction found in such phrases as, “your master, who come to / serve” is at the heart of the tension between the politician as poet and the “inspired poet.” The “inspired poet” must claim a kind of power over the “sentence” while also claiming an affinity with the “Creator,” since within the “inspired poet” the “spirit resides,” the “breath of Creation, Spiritus Sanctus, moving between the creator breathing and the breath of his creature” (*Bending the Bow*,

viii). The poet is filled with power, having knowledge of the “Lasting Sentence” and the “snake-like beauty in the living changes of syntax” (“Structure I,” 12). Here again Duncan employs one of his favorite metaphoric images of poetry, the snake-like back and forth movement of the plow previously noted in “Apprehensions.”

Yet the power of the “snake-like beauty” is dangerous. The poet becomes enamored by the beauty of the “living syntax” of “sentence after sentence” made in the “image” of the “Lasting Sentence.” The creations of the poet can be “cosmic intoxications” and can be used, as the Lion says in “Structure of Rime II,” to “charm the beasts” and be “false of tongue” (13). The poet must be on guard against succumbing to the false charms of poetry and of his own “false...tongue,” lest he become “self-obsessed.” The snake image continues into “Structure of Rime III,” but now with less clarity. The poet, studying himself in the mirror, is “challenged” by his “Glare-eyed” self, covered in a “serpent-skin-coated / accumululus of days” (16). The poem appears to be a questioning of the poet’s image, the poet wondering if and when his “time is up” (16). Perhaps it is the speaker feeling “challenged” to be true to the “Lasting Sentence” and the “snake-like beauty” of syntax, rather than attempting to follow his own sentence that ignores the “Lasting Sentence,” enamored by his own beauty, charmed and intoxicated like Narcissus (Narkissos).

Strangely enough, after this critical view of the poet through the image of the snake, snake imagery and references drop almost completely out of *The Opening of the Field*, making only a brief appearance in the Pindar poem, with “snakes.../ guarding secrets” and Eros being called by the oracle, the “Serpent-Desire” (66-67). But the snake/serpent figure eventually returns in *Roots and Branches*’ “The Law,” and the direct connection between snake and poet

has become the bond between snake and false authority: the uninspired poet. Early in the poem, Duncan pits “Law” against “law,” asserting:

the Law
 constantly destroys the law,
 erasing lightly or with turmoil
 coils of the snake
 evil is... (26)

connecting the snake with the “evil” that is the “law.” The “law,” rather than eradicating crime, creates it: “Crime / fulfills the law” (27). In the poem’s third section, the “coils” of the snake transform into “nets” catching men, “nets to please Satan” (28). These nets of laws are “‘unnatural’ restrictions” upon men. In contrast to such “law-givers,” “legislators” such as Justinian (*corpus juris civilis*) and Moses, Duncan places Jesus, “who by Law’s nailed / to a cross” (29). Here Christ is linked directly with “Love” and “Law” (and by extension, justice and mercy) and is one of the “inspired poets.”

In the fourth section of “The Law,” Duncan invokes the “outlaw,” Robin Hood. Duncan’s description of Robin Hood continues the seemingly paradoxical nature of law, with Hood being admired, though an “outlaw,” for “the strength of his own / lawfulness” (29). Like Duncan’s claim that the poem projects “its own lawfulness,” Hood is an “outlaw” because his sense of “lawfulness” does not lie with the authority of the State or of the religious authorities; Hood’s realm, his “greenwood,” is “outside Christendom.” Rather than his law originating from figures like Justinian and Moses, Hood’s law is derived from the “code” of “life” – “his code that took life as its law.” This desire to “abide by [Hood’s] code,” this “hope” the speaker and his childhood companions felt, refers back to the opening lines of the third section:

At every stage
 law abiding or breaking the law
 (disobedience is not careless)
 needs a code. What's the score? Keys
 previous to the music not given by nature. (28)

All relationships with the law (and the Law), either “abiding or breaking,” have a “code” underlying them. Duncan here is drawing the contrast between the followers of a code based on “unnatural’ restrictions,” proclaiming:

“Cursed be he that
 confirmeth not *all* the words of this law
 to do them” –designing therein
 nets to please Satan...

The “cursed” are contrasted with those adhering to a code with “life as its law,” where the

Judge

must have justice as His left hand,
 mercy as His right, to hold them,
 if He be, Love to whom we pray is
 Fisher of Men from the cold living waters
 –for the laws are nets in the seas
 of men’s will... (28-29)

It is the “will” of man that determines which net will find them, the net of Love, of Christ, of the “Fisher of Men,” or the “nets to please Satan.” Individual volition remains an integral part of the Law.

Christ and Robin Hood are “outlaws,” disobeyers of the “‘unnatural’ restrictions” of the laws of human authority. As noted earlier, Duncan’s anarchism makes Hood a sympathetic figure, with Duncan insisting, “WHAT WE NEED IS A LITTLE OF THE RESOURCE AND INITIATIVE THAT THRILLED US IN ROBIN HOOD” (“Ten Prose Pieces, 1945 to 1978,” 2). Hood’s politics, as well as his poetics, his “radical banditry, of anarchist Robinhoodism,” “THRILL” Duncan even twenty years later.

The paradoxes central to Duncan’s discussion of law are no accident, for the poems are attempts at making sense of the law, rather than a fully realized statement. The fifth and final section of “The Law” begins with what appears to be a refutation of the “conclusion” reached at the end of the fourth section, that Hood’s “code / ...took life as its law” (29). “No!” the speaker exclaims immediately after, life “took an Other way as its law.” Life, Duncan says, “uses us like wood / and has no laws in burning we understand.” The law originates in something beyond life, beyond the constant process of “‘breaking down’,”

exchanged in being,
 given over from “I” into “I,”
 law into law, no sooner breaking
 from what we understood, than,
 breaking forth, abiding,
 we stand. (30)

The seemingly positive language of “change” and transformation gives way to language of stasis: “abiding / we stand.” This stasis is represented by the poet, Theodore Roethke, who is “caged in a university” and who has given

if he give over his fate to the Muses

commanding as they do
 strains of a wild melody against the grain,
 knots and hackings of their thread.

The “cage” Duncan sees Roethke in is a danger to all men and, particularly, to all poets, and echoes the “nets” of Satan, the nets that “imitate / knots that cold, hunger, hurt and disease tie,” knots similar to those of the Muses, knots which are “visible defections of what is, that stir / old roots in fearful desire and throw forth / prodigies of judgment” (29).

The language of the “thread” Roethke is tangled in is one in which Duncan confesses to also finding himself caught. Upon being asked to write a piece about “Form-Smashers” for *The Nation*, Duncan complained in a letter to Levertov: “It is time to reiterate what to be radical means, what roots are, what form and image, and service means. That creation is neither conservative nor liberal, but radical. But my mind in recoil goes into a knotted tangle” (273). Duncan spends much of the rest of *Roots and Branches* and *Bending the Bow* attempting to unravel the “knotted tangle” of creation, order, and law. “The Law” ends with a return to the serpent image that opened the poem. But, adding to the confusion, the “knotted tangle” of sense, is the dropping of capitals for “Law” (or which may just be to my own misreading). The snake now fully represents authority, described as the “deceitful coils of institution,” contrasted by the law, a “sense of” which “itself demands / violation” of the “coils” and “unnatural’ restrictions” of “itself” (30). The sense of the poem, like the “knotted tangle” Duncan finds himself in, constantly turns in on itself, making reading the poem a struggle reminiscent of Jacob’s struggle with “angelic Syntax” in “The Law I Love,” the struggle to see the “sentence unfolding” rather than in “deceitful coils.”

The poem ends, fittingly, enigmatically, with the serpent struggling against itself:

What is

hisses like a serpent

and writhes

to shed its skin. (30)

The snake image is then simultaneously one of sloughing, of renewal, of a struggle to break free of an earlier, “deceitful” form, and also one of Uroboros, of self-consuming or self-destruction. The individual poet is compelled towards a “violation” of the law because of the natural “sense of law [which] demands” rejection of a false, “deceitful” law, which is no law at all and which ignores the earlier prescription that the “Judge” must serve “justice” and “mercy.” Those who show “disobedience” in the face of false laws actually follow the law, but, in so doing, run the risk of violating those same laws, of creating their own laws and “restrictions” rather than following a deeper “Law.” In another letter to Levertov, Duncan speaks of this danger, warning, “The permission liberates, but then how the newly freed possibility can insidiously take over and tyrannize over other alternatives” (390). Like the tyranny of the “Lenins and Castros,” what begins as “possibility” can quickly turn into another “restriction,” whether it be a political dictator or one’s own misplaced poetic sensibilities. Duncan’s snake imagery is purposefully confusing, as is what the imagery ultimately says about the dangers of trying to distinguish between law and Law. Responsibility and adherence to the Law can lead to a freedom which ironically results in an ignoring of the Law in favor of one’s own law, of a delusional self-tyranny resulting in a self-destruction or self-consumption fueled by the creation of personal “coils,” the laws of oneself rooted in oneself. Robin Hood’s code does not take himself “as its law,” but takes an order beyond him. In the myth/legend, Hood is contrasted with the Sheriff of

Nottingham and Prince John, evil (and false) representatives of the State, claiming “Law” as their authority but slaves to their own laws fed by a will to power. The struggle then is for the serpent to free himself from himself, to slough off the skin, the “accumulus of days” and reveal “*What is*” as “What Is” (“Structure of Rime III,” 14) and avoid the tyranny of the “self-obsessed ego.”

The frightening realities of the serpent’s tyranny come to fruition in *Bending the Bow’s* “The Multiversity, *Passages 21*.” The serpent has transformed again, feeding off of itself and other men, growing larger and more powerful, now the hydra, the many-headed serpent beast of mythology, “his false faces in which / authority lies” (70). The self-consumption seen possible in “The Law,” the “newly freed possibilities [that] insidiously take over,” now takes shape as “absolute authority,” the “heads of the Bank of America / heads of usury, heads of war,” and the heads of universities – in this case Berkeley’s Chancellor Strong and the California University President, Clark Kerr. The hydra is the tyranny of institution and State fully realized, literally consuming men in a “confront[ation]” with “us,” spurred on by “bile / raging against the lawful demand / for right reason.” The goal of the many-headed State is to create a unified and uniform society, as imagined in the poem as the “university” in direct contrast with the polysemous “Multiversity” of the title. In the unified structures of the State, men become “scales” of the dragon that “officized,” given “offices” of the State, and, as Mackey points out, punning on “officized,” “ossified,” turning from flexible cartilage to bone. Here “ossified” implies death, a move from living to stone, and also an inflexibility, an inability of these men to respond to their “conscience / no longer alive in them.” The State has appropriated and conscripted their consciences as part of the unified apparatus of the State, to be used for its purposes, as Duncan argues any “movement” conscripts its members for its own good.

Duncan's use of "scales" as the skin of the dragon contrasts with his more common uses of scales in terms of weights, as in the scales of "justice" ("The Law I Love"), of relationships and ratios, and in close relation, musical scales, analogous to the "code" needed to understand the law and the "score" ("The Law"). In all of their forms these scales are the ones Duncan refers to at the end of "Apprehensions": "There is no life that does not rise / melodic from the scales of the marvelous" (45). The ossified scales of the State do not give life, but destroy it, silencing "the inner law" in favor of the

cops, police law,
 the club, the gun, the strong arm,
 gang-law of the state,
 hired sadists of installd mediocrities. ("The Multiversity," 71)

The State attempts, through "police law" and "gang-law," to establish a sort of commune, but the State-"installd" commune is no commune at all. Echoing the sounds of "officized" and "ossified," the State-enforced commune, devoid of "individual volition" and "individual freedom... / is falsified" (71).

The loudest of the "voices" of the hydra heads comes from William Blake's "Let the Brothels of Paris Be Opened," which Duncan appropriates and scatters throughout the text as a kind of hideous chorus/counterpoint. Nobodaddy, the "absolute authority" of Christendom, revels in the destruction and falsehoods of Stevenson, Kerr, the "aging Professor," "the heads of usury," "the heads of war":

I love hanging & drawing & quartering
 Every bit as well as war and slaughtering
 Damn praying and singing

Unless they bring in
 The blood of ten thousand by fighting or swinging...
 To kill the people I am loth
 But if they rebel they must go to hell:
 They shall have a Priest and a passing bell. (“Brothels”)

The authorities “farted & belched & coughed” their lies about “peaceful purposes in Asia” and “that only some three hundred students are concerned / about freedom of speech” while attempting to ignore the fact that behind these students is “a hidden community” (“The Multiversity,” 72). As Robin Hood and his band are “outlaw[s]” living in the “greenwood outside / Christendom,” the “hidden community” exists outside of the “falsified” commune of the State and “outside the university” as part of a “The Multiversity.”

Ironically, Duncan has California University President Clark Kerr, who he calls, “the worm’s mouthpiece,” claim that the “Free Speech / Movement has no wide support, only an irresponsible minority going on strike” (70). Kerr’s labeling of the striking students as “irresponsible” violates Duncan’s definition of “responsibility”: “to keep / the ability to respond” (“The Law I Love,” 10). The men who have become the scales of the hydra are the “irresponsible” ones because their “inner law” has been “silenced.” Those in defiance of the State-enforced stasis are literally the responsible ones.

“The Multiversity” ends with a return to the snake imagery, but not before a scene reminiscent of the opening two poems to *The Opening of the Field* (and the poems preceding “The Law I Love”), “Often I Am Permitted To Return To A Meadow” and “The Dance.” The surreal hell of Blake’s *Nobodaddy* is replaced with a serene image of the dawn breaking over a field and song reviving those thought dead:

Each day the last day; each day the

beginning the first word

door of the day or law awakening we create,

vowels sung in a field in mid-morning

awakening the heart from its oppressions. (72)

The serene field, scene of voices singing, the “tone-leading of vowels” that dominated Duncan’s ear, recall the dancers in “The Dance” whose

feet pound the solid green meadow.

The dancers

mimic flowers – root stem stamen and petal

our words are,

our articulations, our

measures.

It is the joy that exceeds pleasure. (8)

The “circulations” of the dancers in “The Dance” imply the circulation of blood connected with the “awakening [of] the heart.” Also, Duncan speaks directly about the importance of “articulations” in the introduction to *Bending the Bow*, the volume in which “The Multiversity” appears. In a section titled, “Articulations,” Duncan describes the ways in which each part of the

poem has multiple meanings (“*polysemous*”) and links interchangeably to the other parts of the poem to create an ever-growing form, a form of “resonances” and “concord and contrasts” (ix). This “putting together and rendering anew operates in our apprehension of emerging articulations of time... This is a presence extended in a time we create as we keep words in mind” (ix). Words here are directly linked with measure, both in terms of three-dimensional space and four-dimensional time, the space and time of the dance and of the poem. The poet, in his “articulations,” “strives not for a disintegration of syntax but for a complication within syntax, overlapping structures so that words are freed, having bounds out of bounds.” The “overlapping structures,” created from complex and ever-changing syntax, have paradoxical “bounds out of bounds,” reminiscent of the strange “bounds” of the meadow in “Often.”

The “words” of the dancers in “The Dance” can be seen as the same as the “hosts” of the “Queen Under The Hill” in “Often,” which are

a disturbance of words within words

that is a field folded.

.....

whose secret we see in a children’s game

of a ring a round of roses told. (7).

The field entered through the “door of the day” is done so through a law both “create[d]” and “awaken[ed],” implying it had already existed and was also a creation of the students. Duncan’s seeming language of disruption and confusion – “complication,” “redistributes,” “overlapping,” “interferences,” “disturbance” – actually emphasizes the importance of energy and action over stasis and death. The worm in his falseness aims for a world where all is “in harmony to our ears” such that “we would dwell in the dreadful smugness in which our mere human rationality

relegates what it cannot cope with to the ‘irrational’, as if the totality of creation were without ratios” (*Bending the Bow*, ix). The great dragon petrifies men into scales of armor rather than ratios and correspondences between tones. Further, it despises the individual disruption in the name of the communal good while the individual, the poet and artist strive for these disruptions, “[f]or these discords, these imperatives of the poem that exceed our proprieties, these interferences...touch upon the living center where there is no composure but a life-spring of dissatisfaction in all orders from which the restless ordering of our poetry comes” (x). The serpent would foul the “life-spring” and cease all creating and awakening in favor of a static law and order derived from itself, from its clear yet false words.

Duncan’s emphasis on words as agents of creation, particularly the language of the line, “beginning the first word,” echoes the powerful opening lines of John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Words are as powerful for the poet as they were for God, since

God works, as the creative artist works, not with a sense of rewards and punishments, but to fulfill the law that he creates. He seeks in His Creation intensifications of Its orders...So, too, the poet has every freedom that keeps alive within itself this faithfulness to the poetry he creates. (viii)

The poet must be attentive to the word as God attends to the Word, the poet to his law as God to his Law, the poet’s law to “keep the ability to respond to” the Law rather than the State. Thus, the allusion to John 1 resonates also with the tensions between John and the Jewish priests who represented the Pharisaical law. John declares that, while “the law was given by Moses...grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” Moses may be “law giver,” but Christ here is bringer of the Law. The Jewish priests come and question John, demanding to know who he is and where he

gains the authority to perform baptismal rites that would normally be the function of the priests. John claims the authority of the Law.

John 2 recalls Jesus' reprimand of the money-changers in the temple, again challenging the laws of the Pharisees. The Pharisees represent the "unnatural' restrictions" of the State and are ultimately the evil and "deceitful coils of institution" while Christ represents the Law, eventually "nailed / to a cross" in order that there may be mercy and justice at the hands of the Judge who is Love.

Duncan ends the poem with an exploration of the nature of evil and the ways in which evil attempts to violate good and, in the form of the dragon hydra, strangle it:

Evil "referred to the root of *up, over*"

simulacra of law that wld over-rule

the Law man's inner nature seeks,

coils about them, not men but

head and armors of the worm office is (72-73).

Evil creates a "simulacra of law," a semblance of law, a "falsified" image or representation of law that attempts to "over-rule" the actual "Law" that men naturally "seek." Evil "coils about" men, turning them from men into "head and armors of the worm" in the name of institutions and the State, with Duncan again playing on "officized" and "ossified" with "office is." Evil will claim good as its intent, yet man must always be able to parse the meaning of intent and respond to it, since

The universe is filld with eyes then, intensities,
with intent,

outflowings of good or evil,

benemaledictions of the dead... (“The Law I Love,” 10)

Man must turn away from the “simulacra of law” and instead give himself over to the Law:

the witness brings self up before the Law.

It is the Law before the witness that

makes Justice.

.....

Him I love is major mover. (10-11)

Continuing to explore the tension between individual volition and the communal good, here Duncan has the individual willfully put “self up before the Law,” rather than above it (“evil”) in the name of their own simulacra of laws that purport to be for the communal good. Duncan’s anarchism paradoxically demands the individual be obedient to Law, “for She is fair, whom we, masters, serve,” for that obedience “makes Justice” (10). Without the individual’s willful bringing of self to the Law, there is only evil: “There being no common good, no commune, / no communion, outside the freedom of // individual volition” (“The Multiversity,” 73).

Duncan returns to good and evil and the need for willful obedience later in *The Opening of the Field* in the final section of “The Propositions,” “The Keeping.” The language of the poem reprises Duncan’s use of music to articulate order, while also speaking of the heart that will later be “awakene[d]...from its oppressions” in “The Multiversity.” “The Keeping” seems to involve a speaker pleading with the “poet” (with the speaker perhaps also a poet). The opening lines reiterate the bringing forth of self from “The Law I Love,” with the speaker declaring:

I would bring my life complete before you,

have given it earnest discriminations,
 discovered its keeping, its natural boundaries,
 named the good Good, the evil Evil. (36)

Again, the poem's language seems contradictory, with the speaker offering his life up while also having "discovered its keeping," as if the "natural boundaries" discovered, along with the recognition (and subsequent naming) of Good and Evil, have allowed the speaker the ability to be a "master" who will "serve." The speaker has "found kin" with the poet, since they both understand the "chords of this longing" and that "from longing my making proceeds." Again blood, the heart, and circulations are directly linked with "tone," "sound" and "harmony," with the awakening of the heart in "The Multiversity" predicted:

What I call magic proceeds from the heart:
 the blood there in its courses
 has pulse in this longing. O melody
 immaculately carrying pulses of this longing! (37)

The beat of the heart, with its tones and pulse and measures of longing, is a cosmic resonance similar to the breath, "Olson's 'the breathing of the man who writes' made anew in the breath of the line. But there is the third: the inspiration, the breath of Creation, Spiritus Sanctus, moving between the creator breathing and the breath of his creature" (*Bending the Bow*, viii). The syncopation of the "Dance" is a measure of the breath and the heart, an articulation of words and time that are reflections of "cosmic affinities" ("The Law I Love," 37). The speaker pleads with the poet:

O poet! if you would share my way,
 come in under the Law, the great Longing.

Dwell, as the guardian plant does, by appetite
 at the shores of the Sun, come
 under the Moon, keep
 secret allegiance to the out-pouring stars
 in Night's courts,

move into the Dance Whose bonds men hold
 holy : the Light

life lights in like eyes.

As in "The Law I Love" where "masters, serve" and the "witness brings self up before the Law," obedience is necessary, for the poet must choose to "come in under the Law" of his own volition rather than being conscripted. And once "under the Law," the poet can fully participate in the "Dance," the orders of which ("bonds") "men hold holy." Again with the "Light" that shines in "Night's courts" we hear an echo of John 1: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

Duncan's anarchism must be understood in relation to his belief in a cosmic Law that permeates all things. For anarchism to succeed, the individual must strive to recognize and respond to this cosmic Law rather than self-pleasing or self-beneficial laws that ignore Law and serve to destroy the communal good. Christ (and John the Baptist), in his adherence to the Law and rejection of the false laws of the Pharisees, is a physical manifestation of Love, the ideal outcome of anarchism. Thus, Joll's "religious" aspect is fulfilled. But it is also Duncan's belief that the Law "in-forms" everything, and that the mind must use its entire faculties, including the

rational, in order to recognize and respond to the Law. Graça Capinha, in “Robert Duncan and the Question of Law,” argues that Duncan attempts, through Law, to reconcile the rational and the spiritual, the humanistic and the apocalyptic:

Duncan will always be in search of a true humanism, a humanistic paradigm that will ultimately be antihumanistic, against the kind of empty humanism that became our dominant, rationalistic paradigm of thought and language. And this is why his poetics and his poetry search and demand a second epistemological break (humanism/rationalism being the first epistemological break at the core of our idea of “modernity”), a break that will reunite two forms of discourse and two rationalities that have long been separated. As [Ernst] Kantorowicz shows, reason and imagination, science and art, two forms of discourse and two rationalities, were united at the core of a divinely human jurisprudence from which our present (even if adulterated) legal system was born. (27)

The Law can be found in the relationships of notes in the scale and in the relationships of amino acids in DNA, in the unfoldings of poetry and the death of a beloved cat (“A Storm of White”), and even in war. The Law is not an abstraction, nor a Platonic ideal only to be observed as a shadow, as Dennis Cooley remarks in “The Poetics of Robert Duncan”:

As [Duncan] recognizes, the view of pattern as something that emerges out of the struggle to compose literature, in contrast to the view of form as eternal paradigms impressed upon resistant matter, is Herculitean or Darwinian instead of Platonic (47).

Rather, the Law has presence everywhere, its power and its “potencies” residing “in common things” (“A Poem Slow Beginning,” 14). The immanence of the Law is crucial to coming to an understanding of the spiritual nature of the spaces found in Duncan’s poetry.

Chapter Three: Immanence

“Divine Being shows itself / not in the rising above, / but embodied...”

-- Robert Duncan, “Another Animadiversion,” 84

In his 1970 essay on Dante and Whitman, “Changing Perspectives in Whitman,” Duncan describes the shared vision Dante and Whitman had of the nature and role of law. Employing language similar to that used to describe Robin Hood’s “greenwood outside / Christendom,” Duncan says that, for Dante, the “monarchy...proves to rest in a mystery, the rule of a Christ-spirit, *beyond Christendom*, in one Prince who can only be identical with the intent hidden in the true nature of each individual man if he be free to follow his own inner law, the Christ within” (italics mine, 70). The ever-present danger, or “catch,” is that the individual’s “inner law” will somehow be corrupt and not follow the “Christ within” but some other driving force. For Duncan, the true “inner law” is a recognition of the Law, “hidden in us, for it—our share of the Law—is what we must create as we create our selves. To be individual is to recognize one’s nature, or the Nature in one, to be conscious and conscientious in thought and action.” Again, Duncan returns to the themes of the centrality of individual volition and recognition of the Law. But at the heart of this recognition is an understanding of the Law as both present and “to be made.” The Law is present and immanent within us all, “hidden in us,” yet also waiting to be “create[d] as we must create our selves.”

Each of our relationships with the Law and each of our identities is unique, though also “part of the universe at large where the truth of the law must comprehend whatever [the individual] is to be” (70-71). Rather than the law determining a group or collective identity, our own joint recognition and creation of the Law “within our selves” leads to creation of unique and

ever-changing identities that are “outflowings” of the Law: “laws are not imposed upon things, but flowing from things; laws are not of imposed orders but of emerging orders” (71). One could argue that the Law is literally the permanence of change: “‘The law of laws,’ Whitman calls it: ‘the law of successions’.” Law posits the self as “creative ground” and the self as creator, as maker, *poietes* of self. This paradoxical notion of the Law as immanent *and* as not yet created (a paradox given many forms in Duncan) will be central to my exploration of spaces, since these spaces will be both entered *and* created by the poet – entered with “permission” through recognition of immanent presence and creation through a response to that presence. These two processes, recognition and response, are what Duncan has said are crucial to being an individual: “conscious and conscientious,” where “conscious” means awareness and “conscientious” means to act according to one’s conscience, or *con-scientia*, “with knowledge.”

Immanence, in spiritual terms, simply means that the divine is “within” rather than “without” or outside of seemingly non-divine objects. While the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, immanence is often paired or contrasted with transcendence, where the divine is believed to be on a higher plane, and often the goal is to transcend the corrupt plane of existence and move up to the divine plane. The implications of the differences between the two philosophies are numerous.

Duncan’s poetics are very much tied to his immanentist beliefs and his sense of the Universe as a Poem, in a constant state of coming into being, a state that is divinely ordered. Perhaps what makes Duncan so challenging at times is the scope of this poetics, in that he can quickly turn from a discussion of the massive and nearly abstract (“cosmos” and “Creation”) to a discussion of the smallest objects (“atoms” and “molecules”) or the seemingly mundane (purchasing a vase as in “Risk”). Yet in terms of immanence, scale is negligible, since all is

charged with the divine, regardless of size, and the poet must be able to respond to the divine wherever it is experienced. In “Towards an Open Universe,” Duncan explores the significance of immanence to the poet and the poet’s relation to the “cosmos,” to the poem, and to the “Poem”:

We begin to imagine a cosmos in which the poet and the poem are one in a moving process, not only here the given Creation and the Exodus or Fall, but also here the immanence of the Creator in Creation. The most real is given and we have fallen away....To answer that call, to become the poet, means to be aware of creation, creature, and creator coinherent in the one event. There is not only the immanence of God, His indwelling, but there is also the imminence of God, His impending occurrence. (6)

The poet first must be conscious, “aware” of the immanence of himself, “creator,” and the “creation” in the ongoing becoming of the Universe, the “one event,” while also “apprehending” that immanence, having a foreknowledge of the divine which will come into being through the creation constantly in process. Further, the poet must be aware of order:

Central to and defining the poetics I am trying to suggest here is the conviction that the order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him or upon his own language is trivial beside the divine order or natural order he may discover in them.

Ultimately, the “contrive[d]” orders of men like Johnson, Stalin, or Hitler, the “laws” they would impose on other men, are “trivial” in the face of the “divine order” immanent in all things, the Law. Duncan’s poetics are dependent on an understanding of the inherent meaning in even the most common of things and the insistence of the ways in which poetry, divine order, and

meaning were linked. These aspects of his poetics, along with the anarchism they go hand-in-hand with, would cause the rupture with Levertov.

In the introduction to his study of postmodern poets and immanence, *Enlarging the Temple*, Charles Altieri argues that poetry after the Romantic period, particularly modern and postmodern, can be “mapped” by its embrace of either Coleridgean symbolist poetics or Wordsworthian immanentist poetics. The most notable poets in Altieri’s Coleridge “camp,” Eliot, Yeats, and (some) Stevens, pursue a “symbolist mode,” with a “central commitment...to the creative, form-giving imagination and its power to affect society, or at least personal needs for meaning, by constructing coherent, fully human forms out of the flux of experience” (17). The immanentist poets, in whom Duncan and Levertov are included, follow “an alternative logical model represented by early Wordsworth,” in which “poetic creation is conceived more as the discovery and the disclosure of numinous relationships within nature than as the creation of containing and structuring forms.”

Later, Altieri succinctly contrasts the differences of these models as “presenting the action of disclosure rather than of creating order” (24). In this simplified sense, we can see how Duncan’s adherence to the Law, and his disdain for and vitriol against those who allow their “self-obsessed ego[s]” to create law(s) independent of the Law, reflect a Wordsworth/Coleridge split. It must be noted though, that Duncan often talks of “creating order,” though not necessarily in the sense that Altieri applies to Coleridge here. In “Decision at the Apogee,” Bertholf connects the prescription of Read to “break form” and “distort pattern” with Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* and his claim that the secondary imagination

“dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create” (167). The vitality of the imagination breaks down existing ways of seeing, projecting the forms of poems,

and of organizing societies, and creates new ways of seeing, projecting poetic forms and organizing societies. (5)

Altieri argues that Duncan and other postmodern poets do not fully subscribe to Coleridge's creative projections, and that their projections are actually re-projections of the immanent.

Again, from "Towards an Open Universe," Duncan argues: "Each poet seeks to commune with creation, with the divine world; that is to say, he seeks the most *real* form in language. But this most real is something we apprehend; the poem, the creation of the poem, is itself our primary experience of it" (3). Like the "creation of the poem...is itself our primary experience of it," so too the order created by the poet is the poet's "primary experience" of that order, such that the order already exists and the creation is both a disclosure and a creation, each made possible by a responsibility to the immanent. Duncan's use of "apprehend," like his use of it in the poem "Apprehensions," helps extend this paradoxical notion, implying a pre-knowledge of the poem before the poem, since the poem rises out of our "primary experience" of the poem (and Poem).

Altieri touches on the importance of laws in his first chapter, pointing out that "Wordsworth emphasizes reorienting the subjective consciousness by teaching it ways of attending to its participation in objective laws" (37), and again, "In elaborating the ways the poem captures laws informing mind and world, Wordsworth works out several points that recur in subsequent aesthetics of immanent presence" (38). Attendance to "objective laws," or Law in Duncan's case, is essential for the poet to maintain his "responsibility." For Wordsworth, "the goal is to enjoy the free play of the mind in nature and to find in the associations that recur in that play and in memory the security of universal laws informing the interplay of forces" (40). Altieri's emphases on "play," "associations that recur," and "universal laws" sound as if they

were lifted directly from Duncan's prose writings on poetics. Take, for instance, this passage from *Bending the Bow's* introduction:

The poem is not a stream of consciousness but an area of composition in which I work with whatever comes into it. Only words come into it. Sounds and ideas. The tone leading of vowels, the various percussions of consonants. The play of numbers in stresses and syllables. In which meanings and ideas, themes and things seen, arise. Rimes, the reiterations of formations in the design, even puns lead into complexities of the field. But now the poet works with a sense of parts fitting in relation to a design that is larger than the poem. The commune of Poetry becomes so real that he sounds each particle in relation to parts of a great story that he knows will never be completed. (vii)

Duncan, throughout this quotation and his work, is interested in recurring associations, "rimes," concordances and discordances that reflect, reveal, and "disclose" the "complexities of the field" of the "design that is larger than the poem," the Law. The Law is not a symbol though, or even a Platonic ideal removed from human interaction. It is for the postmoderns including Duncan, Altieri argues, a universal that is not a "conceptual structure but [an] energy[y] recurring in numinous moments" (42).

The Law and its power are contained in the particular, "in common things." Thus, poems like "Risk" and "A Storm of White" about the seemingly "trivial" open out into explorations and revelations of poetics. But the goal of the poet is not to transcend the "common things" or to use them in order to elevate himself above them on to a higher plane of existence; rather, it is to recognize the numinous presence immanent within those "common things" and so doing apprehend the divine.

Further, the poet strives not just for a recognition of the unchanging divine, what we may see as the Platonic Ideal, since “It” (created and Creator) is in a constant process of creation, of which man, if he is willing, can participate: “We ourselves in our actuality, as the poem in its actuality, its thingness, are facts, factors, in which It makes Itself real” (*Bending the Bow*, vii). Likewise, in “Towards an Open Universe,” seemingly refuting Plato’s sense of the artistic object as significantly removed from the Ideal, Duncan says, “It is not that poetry imitates but that poetry enacts in its order the order of first things, as just here in this consciousness, they may exist, and the poet desires to penetrate the seeming of style and subject matter to that most real” (6). Apprehension of the divine “order of first things,” of “It,” is not an attempt to move (temporarily or permanently) beyond or above “our actuality” (though Duncan often uses the phrase “beside yourself,” meaning to literally see from outside yourself and also to move outside of perceived boundaries). In fact, Duncan argues “our actuality” is already on the divine plane, since the divine is immanent in all things, including us. The poet, in apprehending the divine, furthers the Creative/creative process and comes into a greater revelatory understanding of “What Is”:

This configuration of It in travail: giving birth to Its Self, the Creator, in Its seeking to make real – the dance of the particles in which stars, cells, and sentences form; the evolving and changing species and individualizations of the Life Code, even the persons and works of Man; giving birth within Its Creation to the Trinity of Persons we creatures know, within which in the Son “He,” is born and dies, to rise as the morning forever announces the Created Self, Who proclaims the Father, first known as He named Himself to be Wrath, Fiery Vengeance, and Jealousy, to be made or revealed anew as Love, the lasting reason

and intent of What Is – this deepest myth of what is happening in Poetry moves us as it moves words. (*Bending the Bow*, vii)

This quotation is dense and lengthy, but exemplary of the composite mythic worldview of Duncan, especially in terms of immanence. Science mixes with the Old and New Testaments, all reflections of the immanent, with the Creator described as a kind of Uroboros image, reprising the snake imagery with which Duncan can't quite come to terms. Perhaps we can see the snake image from "The Law" in terms of Uroboros, with the Law in constant state of destruction into laws and rebirth as Law. Thus, Creation and the Creator is always "giving birth to Its Self," in a permanent state of "travail" or painful, creative turmoil, what Duncan calls in "The Law" a "hurt good," Oedipus "tearing out his eyes" (27). While Oedipus is not actually giving birth here, his pain and suffering are revelatory and creative, if not perhaps overly "heroic and dramatic" for Duncan's taste:

Beauty strikes us and may be fearful, as there is great beauty in each step as Oedipus seeks the heart of tragedy, his moment of truth, as he tears out his eyes, and sees at last...For in our common human suffering, in loss and longing, an intuition of poetic truth may arise. ("Towards" , 4)

Oedipus here is a kind of Uroboros or phoenix figure, destroying himself so that he may live, "tearing out his eyes" so that he may see. The process of creation is a laborious one involving a level of pain and destruction that promises a renewal (and vision) via recognition of the immanent. This immanence is revealed or disclosed (and thus recognizable) in physics ("stars"), biology ("cells"), language ("sentences"), architecture and invention ("the persons and works of Man"), and in religion ("the Trinity of persons") (*Bending the Bow*, vii). Again, Duncan occupies the space between (or including) the "religious and the rationalist, the

apocalyptic and the humanist” which Joll argues is so appealing to the anarchist. Altieri points out that “Duncan renders on a metaphysical level the central tensions in the poetry of presence – that in the service of an immanent force it must continually de-create or break down the accepted codes men live by” (152). This isn’t necessarily true: Duncan’s poetry must not “break down” *all* of the “accepted codes men live by,” only those that falsely claim to be Law when they are only law.

Duncan’s anarchism is, then, ultimately one of Law “abiding,” bringing him into conflict with those who disobey the Law in favor of their own creations of law that aim to deny individual freedom and volition. Thus, through facing a common “enemy” in their reactions against the Vietnam War, Duncan and Denise Levertov came to blows over their actions and reactions to the war and the poetics underlying those reactions. While Altieri includes Levertov in his discussion of postmodern immanentist poets, the argument could be made that Duncan saw Levertov turn away from those poetics, into a poetics/politics that ran directly counter to Duncan’s own. For Duncan, Levertov’s activism and participation in mass demonstrations rendered her unable to respond to the numinous world around her, even the immanent presence found in war, and to recognize and disclose that immanence through the imagination. Duncan complains in a 1971 letter to her that her recent poetry had ceased to be “revelation” and had become “no more than a moralizing reproof” (*Letters*, 667). Duncan goes on to argue that Levertov’s political opposition and stances had begun

to forestall any imagination of what the system is, any creation of such a system of greed, racism, and imperialism. These, Denny, are empty and vain slogans because those who use them are destitute of any imagination or feeling of what such greed, racism, or imperialism is like. The poet’s role is not “to oppose evil,”

but to imagine it: What if Shakespeare had opposed Iago, or Dostoevsky opposed Raskalnikov... It is a disease of our generation that we offer symptoms and diagnoses of what we are in the place of imagination and creation of what we are. (669)

The roots of Duncan's later criticisms of Levertov such as those made in this letter can be seen in his response to her earlier war poetry, such as "Advent 1966." For Duncan, mindless "opposition" prevents the imagination from responding to that to which one is "opposed," leading to an inability to recognize immanence, even in war. Instead, that opposition might convince the opposer that they are outside of, beyond, or even above that which they oppose and that their opposition somehow allows them to transcend, in this case, the war. "Mindless" here doesn't necessarily imply "stupidity," but rather a lack of "imagination and creation."

Paul Lacey, in his essay "The Vision of the Burning Babe: Southwell, Levertov, and Duncan," discusses the ways in which the poets' takes on Southwell's "The Burning Babe" (in the context of images coming from Vietnam) reveal the poetic split between the two, particularly in terms of politics and poetic responsibility. I would also urge the split be seen in terms of what appears to be Levertov's renunciation of immanence. While Michael Palmer argues in his introduction to the double volume, *Ground Work*, that Duncan's response to "Advent 1966," "A Seventeenth Century Suite," was "not so much a rebuke, at this point, of Levertov's poem, as a commentary and response from another perspective" (xi), frankly, I see the poem as a rebuke, or at least a dire warning from Duncan that Levertov had abandoned "imagination and creation" and, by extension, belief in immanence.

For Southwell, the encounter with the "Burning Babe" is a transcendent moment – the "pretty babe" appears above him "in the air" and, though at first violent and frightening

(“scorched with excessive heat, such flood of tears did shed”), the image ultimately becomes a vehicle of transformation and transcendence (15). The burning babe is a “furnace” within which souls are saved through “Love,” “justice,” and “mercy,” burning away regret (“sighs”), sin (“shame and scorn”), and “defiled souls” (“metal”). The fire that is “Love” is a redemptive and transformative power that “work[s] [souls] to their good,” baptizing them “in [its] blood,” allowing them to transcend earth to Heaven, and for the speaker, in this visionary moment, to transcend the “hoary winter’s night” for a brief, ecstatic moment.

Both Levertov in “Advent 1966,” and Duncan in “A Seventeenth Century Suite,” incorporate Southwell’s imagery, but also include images of bodies burning from and burned by napalm. Further, both poets struggle to make sense of these burnings, to make poetic meaning from them. Levertov, initially reminded of Southwell’s poem, quickly turns to say how this image, “multiplied, multiplied,” is

not Christ’s, as Southwell saw it, but Christ’s, prefiguring
the Passion upon the Eve of Christmas,

but wholly human and repeated, repeated,
infant after infant, their names forgotten,

their sex unknown in the ashes,

set alight, flaming but not vanishing

not vanishing as his vision but lingering... (Levertov 91)

The transformative power of the fire of Christ is gone, replaced by a consuming fire that erases historical identity, “names,” and “sex,” leaving “ashes” of human remains, “lingering” as horrific memory.

The images of burning challenge Levertov's "strong sight," her "poet's sight." This sight, which in turn will "stir [the poet] to song," is rendered powerless by these multiple images, such that Levertov feels a "cataract filming over / [her] inner eyes" or, even more frighteningly, that "a monstrous insect / has entered [her] head," causing her only to see the image over and over, "as off a beltline, more, more senseless figures aflame." The "unique Holy infant / burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption" of Southwell's vision has turned into a Blakean image of "dark Satanic mills" churning out burning children like mass-produced goods. Levertov struggles against the invasive "monstrous insect," trying to make sense out of the "senseless figures."

In the next to last section of the poem, Levertov, in attempting to reclaim her "poet's sight," proclaims in a parenthetical that the "insect" is actually "not there" but that it is "[her] own eyes [that] do [her] seeing, the insect / is not there, what I see is there"; yet once the parenthetical ends, the original sentence is finished, reading as a whole: "And the insect will not permit me to look elsewhere." The vision of napalmed children has taken over Levertov's poetic faculties, robbing her of individual volition, her "poetic responsibility" and "poet's sight," rendering them "dull and unfocused" (though whether it is "unfocused" or singularly focused seems up for debate). These complaints about poetic sight are exactly the kinds of charges Duncan would level at Levertov in his criticism of her anti-war poetry and activism, arguing in a notebook entry that the "poem...advances 'an idea of the poem,' its language a rhetoric to persuade us to take up the proposition" ("From Robert Duncan's Notebooks"). The "monstrous insect" that has taken over Levertov's sight (though she half-heartedly denies its existence) prohibits her from responding to the immanence contained in such a horrific image, offering not a poem, but an "idea of a poem" dominated by "rhetoric" rather than imagination and sight, a

prescription rather than a revelation. The transcendental and unified quality of Southwell's vision (Duncan said in his notebooks that "the vision of a Burning Babe has unity") has been lost, replaced by a multiplicity of images that is "senseless." The "monstrous insect" then becomes the "Movement," in Duncan's words, which Levertov finds herself a part of and which Duncan sees in the same light as the homosexual "cult" he derided in "The Homosexual Society" and the "great dragon" which conscripts and consumes men. Further, Lacey, taking up the debate over the multiplicity or singularity of vision, says that, "in fact the poet's vision *is* single. What she cannot see, because there is none, is any redemptive power to these multiplied, industrialized, assembly-line deaths" (174). But the issue, in terms of immanence, is not whether there is "redemptive power" in the deaths, but whether there is *any* meaning *at all*. In Levertov's claim that the images are "senseless," she denies immanence, a denial Duncan cannot abide.

Duncan's re-vision of Southwell (and of Levertov) begins with a melding of the two poems – Duncan sees Southwell's "burning babe," but sees it in "double," similar to the "multiplied" visions of Levertov (and perhaps a reference to Duncan's own double-vision, the result of a childhood accident that left Duncan cross-eyed and made every image have a hazy double located up and to the right of the primary image). Duncan muses on his own "bitter core" and "clinker soul," the "stubborn residue / that needed the fire and refused to burn" (70). For Duncan, at least in this section, the burning babe is "no more than an image in Poetry," though the "no more" qualifier is misleading, since Duncan then goes on to group this image with others:

The burning Babe, the Rose,
the Wedding of the Moon and the Sun,
wherever in the World I read

such mysteries come to haunt the Mind,
 the Language of What Is and I
 are one. (78-79)

These images (drawn from Southwell and possibly Blake) participate in the “Imagination’s alchemy” and, while for some being “no more than an image in Poetry” might mean it is easily dismissed, for Duncan being an “image in Poetry” means being the “Language of What Is.”

But another image, of a different burning babe, not the “pretty Babe” of Southwell but the “burnd faces” of Levertov’s poem, of Vietnam, enters Duncan’s poem. These burning babes “have known catastrophe incommensurate with meaning” (79). Duncan runs into the same issue with “meaning” and immanence that Levertov does: How to make sense of a “catastrophe” that seems so “senseless”? These faces, unlike Southwell’s burning Babe, are not images of redemptive power; rather, they are “unredeemd.” Their deaths do not carry the meaning of the “Infant joy that in Desire burns bright” nor do they carry the meaning of the “Holy Martyr” or even Southwell, who also met his death in the name of “Christian martyrdom.” Trying to come to terms with these images assails the poet, pressuring him: “My heart / caves into a space it seems to have long feared.” Unlike Southwell’s gazing upon the image of the Christ child and its “uplifting” effect, “gazing upon the photographs of these young girls” has no such effect, Duncan unable to imagine “the mind / transcending what’s been done to them,” “cav[ing]” him in. The imagination, so key to the “alchemy” of images, fails to “wed” these with “I.” Yet in the next section Duncan, attempts to anyway, trying to imagine the image, detailing vividly the “broild flesh” in language echoing Southwell. Instead of the “blurrd” vision of Levertov, Duncan’s vision is searingly clear, turning into an image of their burning faces and then into one of our own burning faces, “a mirroring face in the accusation beyond accusation / of such eyes.”

We are both “[v]ictor and victim” (80) – this is “*Our fate*” (79). This reflexive, accusatory vision causes “a kind of hurt that drives into the root / of understanding,” damaging our “understanding” while “driv[ing]” the significance of the meaning home, creating a wound of sorts (“hurt,” “sore”) paralleling Southwell’s “wounding thorns” that are the fuel of redemption.

What makes the image so difficult to come to terms with in the “Imagination’s alchemy” is not, as Levertov concludes, that the horrific death is “senseless,” but that the “deed exceed[s] what we would *know*” (80), with the future tense “would” implying a sense of desire or attempt. Duncan’s phrase illuminates the earlier claim that catastrophic burning was “incommensurate with meaning”; it is not that there is no “sense” to be made from this image, but that there is more “meaning” in it than we can know and we are almost struck dumb by the vision, “of the knowledge in the sight of those eyes,” of the reflection of our eyes, “*Our fate*.” In the literal face of an image we believe our “Imagination’s alchemy” cannot “wed,” cannot connect with “I,” we want to avert our eyes, or to claim invasion by a monstrous Other, or to call it “senseless” and without meaning. Southwell understood his vision in transcendent terms: the vision from above promised, even in its frightening visage, redemption. The vision Duncan and Levertov see provides no such redemptive qualities and manages, if only briefly, to rob Levertov of her “poet’s sight.” The image wounds, going “deep into the heart’s fatalities,” and is added to the “sum of abject suffering, of dumb incalculable / injury” that keeps open the “sore of conscience we long avoid.”

The fifth section of “A Seventeenth Century Suite” finds Duncan interrogating himself, asking whether one can claim to “feel” the pain of the image. Southwell not only saw his vision, he felt and was warmed by it. Levertov is invaded by, wounded by her vision, as is Duncan, yet the wound seems to stop Levertov: to her the burning child’s death is without meaning and this

lack of meaning or sense is proof of the senselessness of the war. Duncan, while threatened and wounded by the vision, never stops applying his imagination to it, though it may seem greater than anything he “would” ever want or be able to know. And he goes further than just attempting to apply his imagination or sympathetic/empathetic powers to the burning girls, asking, “What can I feel of it?” and “What can I feel of what was done?” These questions leave open the idea that Duncan is attempting to imagine the vision from two standpoints, the vision “doubled in [his] sight” of both “[v]ictor and victim,” both of which “know not what they do.” As he urges in the already quoted letter to Levertov, Duncan here does not “oppose evil,” but attempts to “imagine it.”

The final two statements of the section end in a typically paradoxical way for Duncan. The last large block of text ends with Duncan claiming, “I think I could bear it” (80). What “it” is here has probably been left purposefully ambiguous, but one gets the sense that “it” is not just the pain of the burning girls, or the “accusation” in either their eyes or the mirrored eyes, or even the motives of the burners, but the totality of “what was done,” the full “knowledge” of the vision. In these terms, the penultimate statement appears to be one of poetic victory, with Duncan claiming that his imagination could “bear” the pain, the “hurt” driven “deep into the heart’s fatalities” and “into the root of understanding.” The “knowledge” will not allow Duncan to “transcend” the image or even this world, as Southwell’s promises to allow, but will allow for an “understanding” of the immanence around him, an understanding Levertov disavows in deeming the deaths “senseless.” Yet the final sentence, at first glance, appears to contradict the preceding one. Duncan ends stating, “I cannot think I could bear it” (80). The initial impulse may be to read this line as meaning Duncan, after considering himself able to “bear” the full “knowledge” of the image, reconsiders and decides he is not able to “bear it.” But the line does

not read, “I *do* not think,” but “I cannot think” – “do” would imply ability while “can,” in the sense of “may,” implies permission. Rather than telling himself he was incapable of bearing the full knowledge of the image, Duncan is warning himself, telling himself not to think that having complete knowledge is possible given a processual world in a constant state of becoming.

Southwell’s vision allows for a transcendent end that occurs in the “faultless breast” of Christ.

Leverlov sees no such transcendence, only “senseless” death and an upheaval of poetic values of seeing and knowing. Duncan, faced with a similar possible poetic upheaval, continues to apply his imagination, however painfully, to the image and, through it, comes to an understanding of the limits of “knowledge.” The vision is ultimately a revelatory one for Duncan, but not a transcendental revelation; rather, his vision is a revelation of immanence in all things, even war, “catastrophe,” and the “broild flesh” of “young girls.”

Leverlov’s claim that the deaths are “senseless” may have even reminded Duncan of his own prose from 1964. Returning again to “Towards an Open Universe,” we find Duncan arguing about the possibilities of “meaninglessness”:

There is not a phase of our experience that is meaningless, not a phrase of our communication that is meaningless. We do not make things meaningful, but in our making we work towards an awareness of meaning; poetry reveals itself to us as we obey the orders that appear in our work....Becoming conscious, becoming aware of the order of what is happening is the full responsibility of the poet. (7)

Even in such horrific events, Duncan sees the Law at work, numinous. The war *does* make sense, it is the “‘the law’ supplanting the Law, / having full mandate from the courts to kill without question” (“Before the Judgment, *Passages 35*,” 36). The war allows for the poet, in the words of Mackey, to participate in a poetic “effort vying with the war effort, a transformative

struggle or an alchemical operation that converts or seeks to convert the ‘lead’ of destruction into the ‘gold’ of poetic thought” (“Gassire’s Lute,” 99). Thus the contrast in “Before the Judgment” between the “Golden Ones, the ancestors of our Good” (37) who “move in invisible realms / wrapt in our thought as in a mist” (34), and the

age of lead, the age of gas, fossil fuels
oil slick on the water, petroleum spread,
the stink of gasoline in the murky air,
the smoking tankers crawl[ing] toward Asia-- (32)

The poet is compelled to continue with the “Imagination’s alchemy” all the more in times of war, when the Law is ignored in favor of “law,” and when other poets are throwing their hands in the air and declaring things “senseless.” That act would be akin to losing “consciousness,” of becoming like the men in “The Multiversity” who are scales of the dragon, “conscience / no longer alive in them, the inner law silenced” (70). Mackey argues that the “deficit of meaning suffered by nonpoetic thought,” particularly in times of war run by “bosses and war-mongers” (“Before the Judgment,” 36),

is a frustration having to do not with a lack of meaning but with the variousness of meaning. What might be experienced as ‘meaninglessness’ is the world’s refusal to submit to a conclusive interpretation, to yield to an ultimate meaning or to come to and abide by a final judgment...To see that the word is not a containment but a contention of meanings is to see also that the war isn’t something existing only outside the poem, a fact to be simply referred to or dealt with as topic. War is also an internal characteristic of the poem, a fact of life at work within each word of which the poem is made. (“Gassire’s Lute,” 102-03)

Thus, in “A Seventeenth Century Suite,” Duncan is at a kind of war with the image, as is Levertov. But where Levertov succumbs to the “monstrous insect” and the image is rendered meaningless, Duncan struggles, *strives* to see it, to feel it, to feel “what has been done,” and in so doing “work[s] toward an awareness of meaning.”

Though Mackey is discussing Duncan’s “Essay at War,” his statements apply here as well: the image “exists not as something to be objected to” (103), recalling Duncan’s letter about Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, “but as a witness to what resides in the heart,” in the case of the burning girls, the “nation’s store of crimes” (“Seventeenth Century,” 80). Like Duncan’s response to Southwell and Levertov, “An Essay at War” is “an occasion for a discourse on poetics,” with the “pervasiveness of a poetic spirit, the rootedness of the poetic and the real in one another, mak[ing] the poem not a secondary fact of life reporting on an outside reality seen as primary, but an omnipresent participant in the thing it’s ‘about’” (“Gassire’s Lute,” 105). The poem is concerned with and *is* the immediate. Duncan declares, in a notebook entry from 1957, that he identifies with Levertov, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Creeley because those poets “give a particular measure of what achievement must be...[M]y work does not move into the realm of potentialities projected [like Pound and Olson], but must be taken, like Denise Levertov’s or Robert Creeley’s, as limited in its imagination and energies to the immediate” (*Jacket* 28). Although “limited” here might seem to be a pejorative, Duncan means it in the sense that he need not look beyond the “immediate” spatial present for poetic presence, for immanence. Duncan’s break with Levertov then is not just political, but also spiritual, and ultimately poetical: Levertov’s participation in the protest “Movement” violated Duncan’s anarchist beliefs, while her seeming denial of the meaning of the “immediate” in “Advent 1966” signaled to Duncan a denial of immanence. Since anarchism and immanence were core aspects

of Duncan's overarching poetics, and further, since poetics for Duncan were much more a theory of "life" than they were a theory of "art," the rupture in their friendship (a friendship that could be called a poetic "Eros") was almost inevitable. Altieri notes this shift in Levertov's work, pointing to "Advent 1966" as the

most powerful statement of the changed landscape where the sensitive eye, which once served to unite the "I" with the numinous scene, now sees only a demonic version of incarnation. And this reversal of traditional possibilities for satisfying mythic transformations is paralleled by the fact that now the intense literal reality of the flames from napalm no longer allows the shift to mythic dimensions of fire... (230)

Altieri then moves Levertov into the Coleridge "camp," describing the crisis of poetic ethics and aesthetics she underwent once she found her old models, the Wordsworthian "poetry of numinous presence" and immanence, needed to "be complemented by models allowing society to 'equate humane with humane'" (231). Altieri ultimately dismisses the work of Levertov after this crisis, which he describes as the "notebook form," as having "little reconstructive value" and "exert[ing] very little authority" (232). Further, he explores what he calls "the undeniable weaknesses in Miss Levertov's efforts" inasmuch as her poetry was "victimized by the very problems she describes in the aesthetics of presence" (233). Perhaps this is what Duncan feared in reading "Advent 1966."

In the end, while Levertov might have seen the split in other ways, like Altieri, Duncan saw the break in terms of poetics and the role of the poet. For Duncan, that role, especially in times of war (which was essentially always: "THERE HAS BEEN NO TIME IN HUMAN HISTORY THAT WAS NOT A TIME OF WAR" (*Letters*, 667)), is to follow the "root of

understanding,” the “rootedness [of] poetic spirit,” and in so doing attempt to “apprehend,” to recognize and disclose that immanent spirit. Revealing that spirit, the “Language of What Is,” literally brings it into being, “disclose[s]” the Law where it is being “supplant[ed]” by the “laws.” The poetic act is a never-ending state of apprehension and disclosure of the immanent Law in the face of “self-obsessed egos,” “‘unnatural’ restrictions,” and false orders that deceive and turn the world into an earthly Hell as described in Duncan’s Vietnam poems.

Interestingly, Lacey views both Levertov’s and Duncan’s poems not in terms of immanence but of transcendence, seeing in Duncan’s alchemical references an attempt at a sort of gnostic elevation:

But gnosticism always asserts a higher knowledge above daily experience as a way to transcend its suffering. Whether Duncan convinced his readers of the transcendence caught in Art and Song is a live question. As we look at Levertov’s strategy in “Advent 1966,” and even in her later overtly Christian poetry, she seems determined not to escape into the transcendent, if such transcendence means repairing to a realm of knowledge from which we will assent to the brutalities of war. (179)

Lacey’s language here seems to favor Levertov’s “strategy” over what he feels is Duncan’s strategy to try to “escape into the transcendent,” into “a realm of knowledge from which we will assent to the brutalities of war.” Duncan would have appreciated the play on “assent” and “ascent,” but other than the reference to alchemy, Lacey points out no real language in which Duncan posits transcendent escape as the strategy of dealing with the war and its attendant conflicts. In the poem Duncan declares, “I cannot imagine, gazing upon photographs / of these young girls, the mind / transcending what’s been done to them.” Southwell’s poem may rely on

a transcendent escape from corrupt to divine, but Duncan's relies on application of the imagination to this horrible, yet very real image, in order to understand how to resolve immanence with such a hellish vision. Levertov's "strategy," at least for Duncan, is no strategy at all, but a surrender to poetic and imaginative stasis akin to death. Lacey ends quoting the eighth section of "A Seventeenth Century Suite," "Passages 36," yet stops short of the final lines:

I do not as the years go by grow tolerant
of what I cannot share and what
refuses me. There's that in me as fiercely beyond
the remorse that eats me in its drive
as Evolution is in
working out the courses of what will last.

In Truth 'tis done. At last. I'll not
repair. (87)

The images of the burning girls "refuse" Duncan in that they are "incommensurate / with meaning," yet Duncan does not "grow tolerant" of those images, using them to "escape" from or agree to the "realities of war." In fact, in direct contrast to Lacey's "repairing to a realm of knowledge," Duncan asserts, "I'll not / repair." In Duncan's mind, Levertov's declaration of the burnings as "senseless" is the "escape," not the attempt to come to an "awareness of meaning" that recognizes and reveals the immanent. Duncan fears that Levertov is the one who has "repair[ed]" to a place of static blindness, of a darkness with no light or a lightness with no dark, a sort of Hell.

The alternative to this Hell is a different kind of space, what Duncan calls at the end of “Towards an Open Universe,” a “Kingdom”:

The other sense that underlies the new form is one that men have come to again and again in their most intense or deepest vision, that the Kingdom is here, that we have only now in which to live—that the universe has only now in which to live. (12)

Rather than wait for a Messianic figure to de-scend from the heavens and allow us to transcend back up through that figure’s divinity, Duncan argues that the divine “Kingdom” is upon us and that the space revealed and entered through recognition of immanence is also upon us.

Throughout the essay, Duncan refers to “structure” and “order,” which will ultimately take on spatial form. Duncan ends the essay with a quotation from Alfred Whitehead, in which Whitehead refers to the “present” in spatial terms, calling it “holy ground” (70). In the following sections I will try and show how Duncan’s foundation of anarchism, law, and immanence results in a poetics of space dominated by what I call *temenos*, after the Greek word meaning “to cut out” as in a space, and implying holy ground.

Chapter Four: *Temenos*

“But the art needs too the foundational – to address the ‘ground’ – and the declaration and carrying through of an architecture.”

-- Robert Duncan, Letter to Chris Edwards

Altieri, in laying out the basic differences between the Coleridgean symbolist poetics and the Wordsworthian immanentist poetics, offers “creative ground” as a concept “abstract enough to capture the different intellectual strategies poets explore as possible reversals of [the] demonic experiences” of nausea and narcissism (33). “Creative ground,” Altieri argues, is a reaction to the “Victorian laments over the possibility of recovering a Romantic sense of nature,” and becomes the “source of meaningful and potentially universal creative activity, as itself somehow embodied in human consciousness.” For postmoderns like Duncan, Altieri continues, “creative ground would once more become a sense of the vitality in nature or in ordinary social life” (34). Sadly, Altieri’s use of this idea is absent from his discussion of Duncan, particularly since Duncan’s work is so dominated with concerns about fields, boundaries, and space. But, the concept is helpful in thinking about the relationship between immanence, creativity, and space. For Duncan, art is the ultimate creative ground, a continuing of the ongoing processes of creation, and the poetic act – the apprehension and disclosure of numinous presence, of immanence – is literally a spatial act.

As a “Black Mountain” poet, Duncan is strongly linked to Olson’s essay, “Projective Verse,” and the “open field poetics” Olson laid out there. Yet, as with other open field “adherents” such as Levertov and Robert Creeley, how exactly these poetics transformed and manifested themselves in the art of individual poets varied greatly. No one would confuse a

Creeley poem for a Duncan poem on the page or in the ear. Likewise, as Donna Krolik Hallenberg notes in, “Visions of the Field in Poetry and Painting,” Levertov and Duncan had conceptions of the field that diverged more and more over time regarding issues such as “subject formation,” which “would eventually take Duncan and Levertov along different paths” (51).

In terms of space and “creative ground,” the differences between Duncan and Olson are probably most illuminating. Don Byrd’s study of this subject, “The Question of Wisdom as Such,” provides a useful point of contrast, positing Olson as a “literalist” and Duncan as a “fictionalist” (38). This difference can be seen in their approaches to space and the field: “Olson grasps for the object and the relationship of man to object. . . . Duncan creates a space in which to work that is nearer language and the subjective centers which condition language” (45). Duncan, in “The Truth & Life of Myth,” spoke of the power of fiction to create space in this way:

So too, the vast theatrical space projected in the opening passages of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is mythic architecture, passing into a felt dimension, given by the depth of Satan’s fall, where again the fictional form operates to move the poet and the reader into an ‘other’ space in the reality of which actual space fades. (40)

While stylistically both Olson and Duncan use the “field” of the page in similar ways, their metaphoric or poetic conception of the field differs in this opposition between literal and fiction, between object and created space. This is not to say that Olson is *not* concerned with space; on the contrary, Olson is deeply concerned with issues of space. One must only look to the opening lines of Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* to see this: “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America” (17). Robert Creeley explains, in the Preface to Olson’s *Selected Poems*, that Olson “proposes that *space* is the ‘first fact’ of our present existence, and that we ‘are the last first people,’ an echo still resonant of the locating movement of human life to constitute

place” (xiii). For Olson, space and place are inextricably linked – space is not a fictional, created space, as it is for Duncan, but a literal place, such as Maximus’ Gloucester, that serves to “locat[e] movement of human life.” Creeley argues that Olson’s open field poetics attempts to be “capable of encompassing the full range of human ‘history’ in all the extensive facts of ‘place,’ the topos he emphasizes, with tropos and typos, as being, together, the three determinants of human condition” (xvi). Place, topos, and more specifically Gloucester as *polis*, is the “grounding element for all of Olson’s material.”

Much of Olson’s *Maximus Poems* is an exploration of Gloucester. A poem like “The Twist,” for example, proceeds through both the landscape (“Between Newton and Tatnuck Square the tracks / go up hill”) and history of Gloucester (“It rained / the day we arrived”). But there is a connection between the history of the speaker in Gloucester and the extended history of the place, “the whole of it,” as Maximus calls it, particularly early in the figure of John Smith. In section “1,” Maximus claims that he “find[s] out it is the Severn / goes from Worcester to Gloucester to / : Bristow, Smith called it” (*The Maximus Poems*, 87). Maximus’ placement in the town, his knowledge of his literal and metaphoric “place” in the town, is altered by his knowledge of Smith’s conception of the place. The geographical history of the area plays a pivotal role in the economic, social, and political history of the place, merging topos and polis. Maximus’ identification with Smith strengthens the importance of history and the literal space of “human movement” both within and over time in that place. Olson’s Gloucester “is a densely layered accumulation,” a literal topos or field that tells a “communal story” (Creeley xvii).

In *The San Francisco Renaissance*, Michael Davidson discusses the importance of a “poetics of place” for many of the poets involved in that “scene.” He notes that Kenneth Rexroth, like Olson, was concerned with the “poet’s ability to bring space and time together in

an act of critical reflection” (12). Davidson argues that for many of the San Francisco writers, including “Lew Welch, James Koller, Michael McClure, Joanne Kryger, William Everson...place is both the source and the ground of numinous presence,” echoing what he calls Altieri’s “more theological rhetoric” of immanence (17), the “poetry of place quickly becom[ing] a theology” (15).

Davidson then divides many of his poetic subjects into two loose camps in terms of their relations to space. The first group, consisting of Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Jack Spicer, is described as “urbanists” (13), while the second group, in which he includes Kenneth Rexroth, William Everson, and Gary Snyder, Davidson aligns with a “pantheist and rural treatment of place” (13). Stephen Collis, in his essay, “The Frayed Trope of Rome,” connects Duncan with Olson’s use of *polis* and could be seen as placing Duncan in Davidson’s “urbanists” camp, claiming that in Duncan’s work, particularly *Passages*, “the modernist development of the city-as-poetic form reaches its most complex elaboration” (3). He goes on to claim that Duncan “shares one of the modernists’ central images of formal and citational complexity: the modern city” (3). Yet, while Duncan is concerned with spatial structures, and Collis is correct in pointing out that little commentary has been made about the “urban/architectural aspects of Duncan’s poetics” (4), that doesn’t necessarily translate into a conception of space concerned with polis or the city as Olson’s is. Perhaps the argument could be made for the city or polis as major subject/thematic concern for Duncan in *Heavenly City*, *Earthly City* or “The Venice Poem,” but by *The Opening of the Field*, Duncan isn’t dependent on *topos* or *polis* in the way Olson is. Actually, Duncan’s immanentist beliefs aligned him more with Davidson’s pantheistic rural group. Interestingly, while Duncan is a major figure in Davidson’s work, he is left out of both “rural” and “urban” lists here. Duncan’s turn away from the city motif in *Heavenly City*

and “The Venice Poem” doesn’t signal a turn towards the “rural” camp either. Rather, Duncan moves away from a poetics of place and towards, returning to Byrd, a poetics of space.

Davidson does examine Duncan’s use of “place” and “space,” and the distinctions between the two are important. In positioning Duncan among the other writers of the San Francisco Renaissance, Davidson argues that, for Duncan, “‘Place’ is not a geographical or demographic entity so much as a conceptual field in which propositions of place are generated” (125). He continues, “Clearly ‘place,’ like the poem itself, is an imaginative construct, the boundaries of which are constantly under revision” (126). Though only a small change, I think the term “space” here is more effective in describing the field Duncan references. The use of “place” invokes the *polis* of Olson or of the earlier work in “The Venice Poem” and the literal places of the tensions between the rural and urban dichotomy. In *The Opening of the Field*, *Roots and Branches*, and *Bending the Bow*, the nature of the field has changed and “space” more aptly describes the fields Duncan traffics in, since the nature of those spaces can be rural, urban, imaginary, and so on.

Davidson is also correct in describing these spaces as “conceptual field[s]” and “imaginative construct[s],” but only by half. The field of the poem and the field *created by* the poem are neither wholly “conceptual” nor wholly “imaginative” – they are these, but they are also very real. This paradox is once again embodied in lines that Davidson also examines from “Often,” in which Duncan’s speaker describes the field as a “made place” and “made-up place.” Again we return to the poetic act as one of response, of responsibility, with the poet responding to the poem whereby gaining permission into the poem and its creation. Thus, the “place” of Duncan’s field is much different than the very real, very un-conceptual *polis* of Olson’s Gloucester since, where this place and its attendant “communal story” is grounded in the literal

history of Gloucester and its inhabitants, Duncan's, as Byrd points out, is grounded in the created space and the mythic.

Duncan's open field poetics relies on, demands the constant creation of fields. As the title of *The Opening of the Field* suggests, Duncan's conception of space involves an active creation, an active "opening" of a space. As noted above though, Duncan's exploration of spaces is not limited to the "imagined" spaces or even self-created ones (since the application of the imagination is a creative act). Often Duncan will use a space already created, whether that space is a creative one, such as another poem, an "imagined" space such as the mythical Avalon or Atlantis, or a real space, such as the Watts Towers. But still, as in the case of the towers, the space is seen in terms of art and the imagination rather than in terms of a history.

Clearly Olson's field is not limited to issues of history and space, *topos* and *polis*. My goal here is not to oversimplify Olson or Duncan's conception of the field, but to show how those conceptions diverge, as does Duncan's from other San Francisco writers, when it comes to place and space. Olson's use of *polis* is also helpful here in that it provides a sort of vocabulary to work with, or more aptly, against. In casting about for a term to describe Duncan's particular conception of space, I wanted to echo Olson's *polis* while moving in a different direction. Various Greek words for space were considered ("choros," "cháos," and "cosmos" among others), but none quite captured the processes at work in Duncan's spaces.

In exploring the nuanced differences in the Greek conceptions of these spaces, Stan Lombardo pointed me to the Greek *temenos*, meaning "sacred place," and coming from the root *tem-*, meaning "to cut," as in mark out a space, often for dancing. The Latin *templum* and the English *temple* are associated with the word and root. While, from what I've found, Duncan only used the term once (in "The Performance We Wait For" to which I will return), I was struck

by what I believed to be its appearance throughout his poetry, particularly from *The Opening of the Field* through *Ground Work*. As an added bonus, owing to Duncan's love of wordplay, other cognates provided rich etymological connections and "rimes." A similar word, the Greek *temos*, means "darkness" while another closely related word, the Irish *tamhan*, means "torso," bringing to mind arguably Duncan's most anthologized poem, "The Torso, *Passages 18*."

The *tem-* root and *temenos* for me retain these meanings, *temenos* implying both noun and verb, the space cut out and the act of cutting out that space, a simple plot of land marked out, and also a "sacred plot," even the sacred body, the "torso" (itself coming from the Greek *thyrsus* meaning the stem or stalk of a plant):

At the axis of his mid hriff

the navel, for in the pit of his stomach the chord from
which first he was fed has its temple

At the root of the groin

the pubic hair, for the torso is the stem in which the man
flowers forth and leads to the stamen of flesh in which
his seed rises... (*Bending the Bow*, 64)

Again, beyond its use in "The Performance We Wait For," there is no other indication of Duncan's conscious adoption of *temenos* to his poetics as a whole. But the etymological connections are too intriguing and "deliteful" to overlook for an admirer of Duncan's love for play and correspondence in language. The concept of *temenos* as I envision it allows me a fuller

expression of Duncan's poetics and the ways space illuminates those poetics at the confluence of authority, law/Law, and immanence.

The concept of *temenos* then serves as a way of distinguishing Duncan's "open field" poetics from other spatial poetics concerned with "field," since the spaces Duncan fills his poems with, including the literal field or meadow, the hearth, the household, the cave, the body, and the dance-ground, to name a few, function in ways that move beyond the "field" as described in "Projective Verse." *Temenos*, as described in "The Performance We Wait For," is a "ground of all delight," which is a "fathering force, a temenos, / bounded by grandparents that founds / one field" (55-56). In this sense, *temenos* bears a close resemblance to the field as described in Duncan's Guggenheim application, "known intimately as the given field of my own life, intellectually as the field of language (or spirit), and imaginatively as the field given to Man (of many languages) (Jarnot, *Ambassador*). Jarnot, in her upcoming Duncan biography, *The Ambassador of Venus*, connects the "field given to Man" with the field of Mechpelah:

God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be buried beside Adam and Eve in the secret field of Mechpelah. God had "folded" the field so that The Cave of the Adam was no longer visible to humankind. It was here that God led Abraham and Sarah at their appointed time to die. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be buried beside Adam and Eve in the secret field of Mechpelah. God had "folded" the field so that The Cave of the Adam was no longer visible to humankind. It was here that God led Abraham and Sarah at their appointed time to die.

The connection Jarnot makes between the field (and cave) and family echoes the connection between "grandparents," "fathering force" and *temenos* in "The Performance We Wait For."

Adam here is a “fathering force,” as is God in both “opening” and “folding” the field. Further, Jarnot, in explaining the connection between field and cave, quotes *The Zohar*:

“The term Mechpelah belongs properly neither to the cave nor the field, but to something else with which both were connected. The cave belongs to the field, and the field to something else. For the whole of the Land of Israel is folded up beneath it...”

Here, the “something else with which both were connected” we will call *temenos*.

It’s interesting to note that Jarnot takes up this discussion of the field and space, only to turn away from space and a consideration of “architectural spaces” in Duncan’s work. Jarnot claims, “When architecture occurred in Duncan’s poems, it was linked with homoerotic longing,” but that claim doesn’t hold up in poems like “The Architecture, *Passages 9*,” which seems to speak much more to the domestic joys of creating a “household,” regardless of sexuality, or “Nel Mezzo.” Oddly enough, other critics dismiss space and architecture just as quickly in Duncan’s work. Mark Andrew Johnson, in *Robert Duncan*, argues, “‘Passages’ should not be confused with spatial form” (102). And once again, Collis, while concerned with spatial form in Duncan, focuses on larger spaces of *polis*: “The poem as city, or as public architecture, seeks to be the poem as polis” (145).

Yet to ignore the importance of space and architectures in Duncan’s work means ignoring spatial and architectural language in both his poems and his prose discussions of poetics and his own work. As already noted, spaces such as the cave and dance-ground fill Duncan’s work, as do created structures, like the Watts Towers. Duncan also comes back time and again to language that is “architectural” in nature. “Passage,” “architecture,” and “structure” constantly find their way onto Duncan’s pages, giving a hint as to Duncan’s fascination with these created

spaces, perhaps having its initial impetus in Duncan's family hope that he would follow in his stepfather's footsteps and become an architect (a biographical note that adds an interesting twist to Duncan's "A Sequence of Poems for H.D.'s Birthday" and "A Letter"). In a 1985 interview with Joseph Cardarelli, as quoted by Jarnot, Duncan discussed the role architecture played in the form of his work:

[W]hat I noticed is that I architect my poems. One of the main things that I remember learning in architecture is that rooms are not just square boxes. You design how people move through them and so that's [a] projected imagination already of how you're not going to live in a room, but how you're going to go from one passageway to another. So it's very natural that I would eventually have a long poem called "Passages."

And again, in "The Self in Postmodern Poetry" Duncan calls *Passages*, "a work in which I seek to lose myself in the hearing of the voice of the work itself, a work not of personality or oneself but of structure and passages" (227). For Duncan, the poem is a field and a "passage" (perhaps mirroring field and cave), a man-made space that the poet and reader occupy *and* move through.

Since the field is such an integral part of *temenos*, it will be beneficial to return to "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," since that poem acts as a sort of statement of intention for all of Duncan's work which follows, particularly in terms of a poetics of space. "Often" resists, as does much of Duncan's work, easy interpretation or even paraphrasing. The title acts as the first line of the poem, followed by a series of dependent clauses marked by ambiguous, "double-jointed" language, seemingly contradictory at best and maddeningly paradoxical at worst. The speaker begins by revealing a recurring presence in the "meadow," a presence allowed or "permitted" by a force greater than he. The opening "stanza" consists of three

dependent clauses that may be read as parts of a single continuous description or as independent observations. The first clause describes the meadow “as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,” implying that the space is an imagined one (though the simile which opens the line calls this into doubt). The second clause, “that is not mine,” reinforces the “permitted” of the title, pointing to the speaker’s presence in the meadow as a sort of granted privilege. The third clause must be read as linked with the first or second (or both), since the conjunction “but” causes it to not fit as a completion of the title by itself. This clause also confirms the initial “scene made up” in declaring that the meadow is a “made place,” though “made” by a “mind” not the speaker’s (reading all of these clauses as linked).

The confusion begins in earnest (if it hasn’t already) with the opening clause of the second stanza, where the speaker seems to contradict his preceding statement with the declaration, “that is mine.” The question is what does “that” refer to: the meadow, the scene, the mind, the “made place,” any, or all of them? Since no clear answer presents itself through the rest of the poem, we are almost forced to accept all possible readings. Thus, the meadow is both the speaker’s and not the speaker’s, both a “made place” but also an “eternal pasture.” *Temenos* then, as manifested in the meadow, is an imagined *and* real place, and also a place the speaker, the poet, needs permission to enter.

In further describing the nature of the meadow, Duncan says that it is “created by light / wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall,” positioning the meadow as a Platonic form, though not an “Ideal.” The lines following could be read that the “light” which has “created” the space comes from the “First Beloved,” referred to also as “the Lady” and “Queen Under The Hill,” a such that the meadow is *not* a creation of the speaker, contrary to earlier lines.

Further ambiguities arise as the poem progresses, with Duncan claiming that the meadow “is only a dream of the grass blowing,” referencing to Duncan’s “Atlantis” dream. After describing the dream, Duncan returns to the title (the game of ring around the roses returning to its starting point), followed by the simile: “as if it were a given property of the mind.” The simile implies that the meadow is similar to, but not *actually*, a “given property of the mind,” forcing us to speculate as to what characteristics the meadow would share with said “property.” Also, “given” could mean that the “property” has been established, is a “given,” or that the “property,” like the “permission” needed to enter the meadow, has been “given,” presumably by the force known as “Queen Under The Hill.” Again though, the “as if it were” calls into question the “given”-ness of the property.

Duncan continues the dependent clause pattern of the opening, following with, “that certain bounds hold against chaos,” such that this could be the “given property” and that the meadow is a “hold against chaos.” If the meadow is viewed as the poetic field, then this declaration sounds like a reiteration of a poetics similar to Frost’s definition of the poem “as a momentary stay against confusion.” Yet Duncan’s poetics are quite different from Frost’s. The poem ends with two final dependent clauses, reinforcing the primacy of the space with language reminiscent of Aquinas (“place of first permission”), and also its permanence (“everlasting omen of what is”). Fittingly, this strange juxtaposition reinforces the paradoxical nature of the poem and the space, “everlasting” bringing back the aforementioned “eternal” quality of the space while “omen” implies a “portent of the future” – an eternal portent of the future! At all turns the poem refuses a sort of New Critical reading that attempts to reconcile all meaning toward one, unified Meaning.

Duncan's poetics aren't one of "unity" per se, in the sense that the New Critics might read Frost. Duncan privileges a poetics that, like "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" (*Bending the Bowe*, ix). "Unity," in the New Critical sense, is impossible because the poem is not a closed system, but a part of a larger, ever-changing, ever-"building form." The New Critics would not allow such a form; instead, poetry "was to be brought to heel, obedient to the criteria of rational discourse, of social realities, of taste" ("Changing Perspectives," 77). The polysemous "building form" rejects being "brought to heel."

Thus, the nature of the meadow, of the poetic field, of space, of *temenos*, is also polysemous, full of concord and discord: "What is out of joint with the times moves as this poetry moves towards a doubling of the joint in time, until, multiphasic, we would imagine the figure we had not seen in which the joining is clear when we are" (*Bending the Bow*, x). Duncan's language of "joints" and "doubling" illuminates the technique in "Often" of the opening clause acting as joint for the multiple dependent clauses to bend and "double" from, each "generative of meaning" independent *and* in concert with the other dependent clauses. Duncan, again from the introduction to *Bending the Bow*:

The immediate event – the phrase within its line, the adjoining pulse in silence, the new phrase – each part is a thing in itself; the junctures not binding but freeing the elements of configurations so that they participate in more than one figure....[The poet] strives not for a disintegration of syntax but for a complication within syntax, overlapping structures, so that words are freed, having bounds out of bounds... (ix)

Duncan's organic, multi-jointed poetics results in, contrary to Frost's "*the figure a poem makes*" (italics mine), "more than one figure." The poem moves "out of bounds" while, in classic Duncan style, still "having bounds." *Temenos*, as a reflection of Duncan's poetics, is the four-dimensional "configuration," an "overlapping structure," a "multiphasic" space in which "the old doctrine of correspondences is enlarged and furthered in a new process of responses, parts belonging to the architecture."

In this sense, the poem is a spatial event and, returning to the declarative clauses of "Often," an "eternal" one, yet a "created" and "made" one, a "made up place" and a "dream," yet "everlasting," a space where "certain bounds hold against chaos" yet a "disturbance of words within words / that is a poetic field folded." Perhaps conflating Byrd's literalist/fictionalist dichotomy, *temenos* is both literal and fictional (echoing the seemingly paradoxical title of Duncan's work "Fictive Certainties"). The multiphasic, polysemous spatial event, *temenos*, becomes the controlling poetic motif and mode for the remainder of Duncan's career, evident in the architectural and spatial aspects of his two long serial poems, *The Structure of Rime* and *Passages*.

Again, it's not that other critics have overlooked the metaphorical spatial nature of Duncan's work, as evidenced by Johnson's understanding that *Passages could* be read as "spatial form." Like Johnson, most overlook the connection between the spatial nature of the structures of those poems and the spaces literally contained and explored in those poems as a manifestation of the poems' own spatial structures. For Duncan the poem as spatial event, as *temenos*, is not merely metaphoric and not only or merely a fiction, but also a literal happening, an unfolding and outflowing of "What Is."

Temenos then is a created space of the imagination that is also, in its creation, a disclosing of the existent presence of that space, an “opening” of an “eternal” space one needs permission to enter. The notion of permission and the figure of the “Queen Under The Hill” return us to themes of authority, Law, and obedience to that Law. *Temenos* is the place of the recognition of immanence, particularly through obedience to and recognition of the Law. *Temenos* is the responsibility to Poetry, is the poetic act of making, and is the poem itself, which the poet and others may enter.

Clearly, the anarchist aspect of Duncan’s poetics makes it such that individual volition is a major component of *temenos*. So too, though, is obedience to the Law. Cooley argues that for Duncan, the poet who “imposes order on chaos” is fooling himself, and that this folly is “dangerous and finally disastrous in modern times when man has learned to dominate nature because in his eyes it is alien and dead” (47). This is the folly of President Johnson, “no inspired poet,” believing him to be a creator of living structures, while revering static ones over those of nature. Thus, Johnson fails to produce *temenos*, but instead produces what Cooley calls a “poetry of fixed shapes...one sign of the distance man has put between himself and his environment,” and environment containing a “personal immanent God.” A poetics that limits the individual and ignores the Law results in “simple artificial structures accompan[ying] the withdrawal from a multifarious and unsettled world. Art begins to supplant nature and man’s disharmony with his surroundings shows up in his production of linear and geometric patterns.” Cooley, quoting Duncan from “Notes on the Structure of Rime,” emphasizes the connections between individuality, authority, and life:

“[A]fter Darwin I read an order that reveals itself in the variety of individual lives in variety of species creating in each life the intent of the life. The principle of

governance then must be everywhere in everything, we do not know, but must be ready to follow.” (48)

Here, the revelation of order is found in the “intent of the life,” with that intent itself moving towards the order revealed in the life it intends to be. The paradox flourishes.

Thus, in terms of *temenos*, the individual body becomes perhaps the most important space in Duncan’s poetry. Granted, while not an “architectural” space per se, Duncan is clearly fascinated by the body, specifically by (among other reasons) its functional relationship to the poem. For Duncan, poetics was a bodily endeavor. Body as subject matter pervades Duncan’s work, seen in poems such as “The Structure of Rime III,” “The Dance,” “Night Scenes,” “A Sequence of Poem’s for H.D.’s Birthday,” “A Set of Romantic Hymns,” “The Collage, *Passages* 6,” “As in the Old Days, *Passages* 8,” and “The Torso, *Passages* 18,” to name just a few. The body (and the self), like the meadow in “Often,” is a made place and an eternal place – a creation of others through coupling, but also a creation of ourselves through a recognition of the immanent, the divinely permanent, within us. We return to “Changing Perspectives in Whitman”: “Law is hidden in us, for it—our share of the Law—is what we must create as we create our selves. To be individual is to recognize one’s nature, or the Nature in one, to be conscious and conscientious in thought and action” (70). The fulfillment of Self requires a recognition (recognition: knowing again) of immanence within us, “the Nature in one,” a recognition ultimately of Self as an “eternal place,” yet a place “made” through that recognition. For Duncan, the self and the poem were connected as if through a dance: “One consciousness, and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity” (“Towards,” 3). The recognition of that relationship through poetic consciousness transforms the Self into *temenos*, a sacred space cut out.

BODY

The self as imaginative creature is not the extent of Duncan's concern with the individual. For Duncan, as for many poets, Olson included, the functions of the body are intimately and inextricably connected to the poetic event. The act of creation is so often linked to a mental process that the physical processes of (self-)creation are ignored, the poem an outgrowth entirely of the mind and free of the body. Duncan continues the process of "self" examination and the "demarcation" of self in "The Self in Postmodern Poetry," playing on the notion of language and self in phrases such as "being beside" oneself:

the process of demarcation of utter individuality from the universe I was part of began, a language of boundaries, of "here" and "there," "now" and "not-now." Before speaking began—even, it seems to me, before sounding began—this reading of the world around me began. The later experience of coming to language as such, to the human language defined by the community, was a rediscovery: the signs of light and dark, of in and out preceded the writing upon the light. So we "recognize" ourselves in reading at last. The idea of "self," the necessity of "self," awakens in us a line of definition, self from Self. (230)

Duncan seeks to cross that boundary or line of demarcation and to know the Self, not just the self, again playing on common phrases ("know thyself," "lose yourself"). The "Great Writers" are able to "lose themselves," but in doing so are replaced by "work," and by extension, "a Self, the poet" (225). This is a creative act, mirroring Creation: "We had as babies withdrawn our selves from the boundless presence we were lost in. In the negative theology of the Kabbala, God withdraws from His Self, into Himself, so that a time and space of his absence appears

which we know as the Creation” (231). The play of self and Self is not just a sort of mental gymnastics, but a mental *and* physical act.

Duncan explores the creative functions of the body extensively in “Rites of Participation,” using psychoanalyst Geza Roheim’s work with Australian aboriginal tribal rites as a model for considering the role of the body in poetry:

In story and tribal rite, the Australian native seeks to convert time and space into an expression of his unity, to create language of acts and things, of devouring and being devoured, of giving birth and being born, in which man and the world about him come into one body. (105)

For the aboriginal tribes, physical bodily acts like “bleeding, pissing, casting mucus, spitting into the ground, or in turn, eating the totemic food and drinking the blood of the fathers” (105-106) take on a greater significance than as purely symbolic act; the names of the body parts and the functions they perform are “the alphabet of letters revealed to the initiate as at once the alphabet of what he is and what the universe is and the alphabet of eternal persons” (107). The body is the first *temenos*, cutting out its sacred space through its (sacred) bodily acts and establishing its Self.

The “private parts” of the body, those that seem to somehow identify us as individuals in even greater ways than those “public parts,” take on a role of utmost importance, the most crucial functions (procreation, sustaining life, and evacuation) performed there:

Asshole, penis, cunt, navel, were not only taboo but sacred, words to be revealed in imitations of the soul to the divine body, as at Eleusis the cunt of a woman in the throes of birth was shown. In what we call carnal knowledge in the sexual

union of male and female nakedness, God and His creation, the visible and invisible, the above and the below are united.

Understanding the body as a space of immanence and its acts as capable of disclosing immanence leads to an understanding of the body as *temenos*. Recognition of immanence through the body (rather than solely through the mind or soul, with the body instead as “corrupt” and interfering with transcendence) is essential to the creative act: “We see, hear, taste, smell, feel what we can be drawn into a formal relation, to sense at all involves attention and composition” (108).

In “Rites of Participation,” Duncan is returning to (re-cognizing) themes and subjects already explored (apprehended) in his poetry, particularly, “The Collage, *Passages 6*.” Early in “Rites of Participation,” Duncan, with a nod to Freud, speaks of the “primal scene” and the “pre-rational” (102) as represented by the alphabet and children’s “building blocks”:

the toys in the nursery are not trivia but first given instruments of an extension in consciousness, one creative life. There is a travesty made of sacred objects when the building blocks that are also alphabet blocks, the animal and human dolls, the picture books, are rendered cute and babyish. (101)

In fact, for Duncan these practices and objects are anything but “trivial”; the dolls serve a similar purpose as the body in the aboriginal rituals, revealing the body and its sacred functions, even if that sacredness isn’t initially recognized. In *The Zohar*, Duncan notes, the building blocks inscribed with the alphabet become sacred objects of God: ““When the Holy One, blessed be He, was about to make the world, all the letters of the alphabet were still embryonic, and for two thousand years the Holy One, blessed be He, had contemplated them and toyed with them’.” Our first uttered sounds, those “building blocks” of language are of literally “primary”

importance. In his short piece, “Why Poetics?” for the New College of California’s Program in Poetics Catalog, Duncan speaks to the importance of the most basic of bodily acts, including the first speech acts:

Ciphering and deciphering go back to primary biological functions of reading the environment in trial and error toward vividness and depth of life-time and life-space, toward resonance. In Jewish mysticism the studies of Kabbalah present ideas and encounters with the letters of the alphabet itself – with notation as such – that lead back to a primary religious ground that is suggestive indeed in relation such a primary depth or ground in the field of Poetics. (iv)

Those alphabet building blocks factor into the opening of “The Collage,” with Duncan, playing off of Jess’ collage-style “paste-ups”:

paste-up, the city
we build up of blocks, the
alpha beta and this γ
is gamma so placed (19)

The alphabet, the first words of the child (“da-da and “ma-ma”), the “private parts” of the body and the sacredness of an immanent God are manifest in the body – in “The Collage” as the female sexual organ, represented by the pyramid-shaped Greek letter “delta” (“ Δ / ∇ his vehicle”), the woman’s “zone, Her parvis.” “Parvis,” meaning an “enclosed space” often found at the entrance to the sacred spaces of cathedrals, “is language Pythagoras knew, / leading to the life-door, the cunt.”

The introduction of the alphabet into the poem acts as a sacred ritual similar to the aboriginal rites of naming and speaking the “private parts” of the sacred bodily space. In a kind of aside, Duncan explains the purpose of the “alpha” and “beta” in the poem:

[I mean to force up emblems again into these passages of a poetry, passages made conglomerate, the pyramid that dense, a mountain, immovable; cut ways in it than and trick the walls with images establishing space and time for more than the maker he acknowledges, in it]... (19)

Contrary to Mark Johnson’s statement that we should *not* read Duncan in terms of “spatial form,” Duncan here urges us to, the alphabet allowing Duncan to establish space in the form of *temenos* in what appear to be materials too dense for space – “dense” and “immovable.”

Duncan then connects the body, specifically the female sex organs, to two other important spaces, the “cave” and the “temple,” and also to the poem:

This way below is the way above,
the mouth of the cave or temple growing moist
shining, to allow the neophyte
full entrance.

The body of the poem, aroused having
what mouths?

The body, the “cunt,” the cave, and the temple are all sacred spaces cut out, all *temenos*, as is the poem, with speech and language functions just as sacred as those creating “juices, excretions, the body’s / spit” (20). The importance of language, not just as a mental process and function but as a bodily one is key to Duncan and the aboriginal tribes Roheim examines, with names of body parts and functions taking on integral roles in tribal rites, where body and space converge:

The “beast, anus, semen, urine, leg, foot” in the Australian song chant or enchantment, that is also hill, hole, sea, stream, tree, or rock where “in the Toara ceremony the men dance around the ring shouting the names of male and female genital organs, shady trees, hills, and some of the totems of their tribe”... (106)

The female sex organs privileged at the end of “The Collage,” because of their direct link to creation, continue to play a prominent role in *Bending the Bow*’s next poem, “As in the Old Days, *Passages 8*.”

Here, Duncan connects the “life-door” of the “parvis” and its attendant “temple” with Christ and his wound on the cross, gender and divinity blurring and mixing. Duncan, playing off of the notion of bodily functions from “The Collage,” now brings in menstruation and birth where before the “delta” seemed the space of the sexual act, the vagina “growing moist / shining, to allow the neophyte / full entrance.” “As in the Old Days” is focused on birth, but that focus also allows for the previous lines to be read in terms of birth rather than sex, the “neophyte” being the baby about to enter the world, about to be “aroused” into life; thus, the speaker in “As in the Old Days” is “at the lips before speech, at life’s / labia, Her crack of a door opening, her cunt a wound now” (24). Though it seems the speaker is being metaphoric here, again, the line between metaphor and reality is indistinguishable, the functions of the body, including speech, not symbolic acts but literal, creative ones. Duncan makes an interesting leap in the next line of the poem, the phrase “a wound now” acting as a joint in the poem, connecting the female sexual organ with Christ’s wound received on the cross:

the gash in His side
 from which monthly blood flows •
 so Zinzendorf saw,

all maidens bear Christ's sign with them

- at this flowing
- souls gather •

Menstruation, birth, and Christ's wound are the site of the gathering of "souls," sacred "spaces" whose "flowing" are the sites of sacred acts creative and primal in nature, a return to the introduction to *Bending the Bow* and Duncan's birth imagery there:

We ourselves in our actuality, as the poem in its actuality, its thingness, are facts, factors, in which It makes Itself real. Having only these actual words, these actual imaginations that come to us as we work.

This configuration of It in travail: giving birth to Its Self, the Creator, in Its seeking to make real – (vii)

"Travail" has etymological roots in both "birth" and "torture," the triple images of menstruation, birth, and Christ's wound all containing both implications of the word.

The sacred quality of the individual body and its creative functions, even those not necessarily traditionally seen as creative and those functions not normally seen as "bodily," such as poetry, are outgrowths of Duncan's concern with individual volition and also with immanence. Yet, in thinking back to Joll, the role of community or at least relationships between individuals must be considered. Duncan's anarchism and belief in the importance of individual volition does not mean that he is oblivious to the "communal story" Creeley says is of such concern to Olson. Like the Australian aboriginal tribal rites, the movements, performances, and functions of the sacred body take place within a network of relationships with other individuals, other bodies. Those relationships, those ratios, which are the basis for an ever-increasing, complex *temenos*, are expressed most apparently for Duncan in the act of dance.

DANCE

Arguably the most common metaphor Duncan uses for poetry is that of the dance. In fact, at times it's difficult to tell whether Duncan is employing dance as a metaphor for poetry or vice versa. In Duncan's prose and poetry, the dance is privileged, along with poetry, as a creative act. There are even times when it seems that the dance is even more privileged than the poetic act, the dance *preceding* poetry (poetry in the verbal sense, at least, not necessarily in its Greek sense of "making"). Duncan's essay, "Poetry Before Language," argues for the importance of the dance as a sort of pre-verbal poetry, rooted in the language of the body and its creative functions. Duncan exclaims:

I want to describe Poetry as it was before words, or signs, before beauty, or eternity, or meaning, were. Poetry would not allow the brain to falsify what it was in giving it a word or a "meaning"; and so the "meaning" of the word "poetry" or name "Poetry" is a making. The organs of the body not only communicated but all the organs made things. The act was dancing, the product of the act was the dance, poetry....The foot danced with the sight and the feel which measured the ground and made space, and the eye heard accurately the measures on the ground as the accents of the tread and the numbers of the steps or stops and the stretches or durations or silences between steps and stops. (61-62)

The dance is a primal creative act, and the space "measured" out by the steps of the dance a representation of the *temenos* of the body. In keeping with Duncan's love of etymology, in her exploration of Duncan and the gay community in *The Dark End of the Street*, Maria Damon notes that "dance" is "derived from *danson*, to draw out or extend" (186). The measures of the dance and of poetry originate from the body, with the organs of the body dancing within us:

The mouth made little skips and frolics with much noise. The ear could gather all kinds of noises to set dancing against its sensitive equilibriums. The heart had the blood continually supplying its dance to the full....Then, just as within the yolk of an egg a spot of blood pulsing, and the pulsing becomes an organ of the pulsing – and then the heart and the circulations of the blood, whose full flower is the body – so, in the most intense pulsation of the brain, in the seizure of the dance, there “emerged from the first darkness a point of scintillation.” (62-63)

Here the dance is the birthplace of the “internal world of the brain’s self-orgasm that is called intellect” (63). Duncan seems to be playing off of the Biblical language of creation discussed earlier, but with the dance actually preceding the “Word,” which Duncan describes as a “ground of communication” from which a “second poetry” (after that of the dance) arises, a “poetry that begins as the admonition of realities begins and the Word begins” (62). This “second poetry” is the poetry of the alphabet. The passage could also be read in scientific terms, the dance a sort of creative “Big Bang,” the “total body seizure of the genitals” (63), a sexualized reading that Damon touches on in the Duncan section of her book.

These two passages are important in that they cover many of the recurrent images and themes we find weaved throughout Duncan’s discussion of the dance, specifically the body, the flower, measures and measured space, ratios and relationships, and movement (“circulations”). These images and themes are key in explaining the dance and the dance-ground’s relationship to *temenos*.

Duncan’s concern with the dance is readily apparent from the outset of *The Opening of the Field*, with the first two poems, “Often” and “The Dance” containing images of dancing. In “Often,” the field is the space for the children’s dancing game of “ring a round of roses” that was

a major aspect of Duncan's recurring Atlantis dream. But the "field in the earliest dream I remember" (*Letters*, 134), quickly becomes a space more real in "The Dance."

In the poem, Duncan describes a dance scene filling a "green solid meadow" (8), using language that begins, as noted earlier, implying movement of the blood ("circulations") and of music combined with space ("hit the pitch co- / ordinate"). "Coordinate" also indicates a unity in the dance, a coordination that allows each dancer to be in relation to the other dancers, akin to hitting the correct note or "pitch." Duncan then compares the dancers to flowers, in that they "mimic" the "root, stem stamen and petal." The metaphor sexualizes the dancers, anticipating "The Torso, *Passages 18*" in which the male lover is described in terms of the sexual organs of the flower: "the root of the neck," "the root of the groin," and the torso, described as the "stem in which the man / flowers forth and leads to the stamen of flesh in which / his seed rises" (64). The language here mirrors that of the "self-orgasm" of the mind and the "seizure of the dance" from "Poetry Before Language."

Duncan's detailed description of the body in "The Torso" also connects it, through the metaphor of the flower, back to *temenos* and temple, lingering on "the navel, for in the pit of his stomach the chord from / which first he was fed has its temple" (64). The sexual and bodily nature of the dance reinforces the connection between the "circulations" and "measures" of the body and the poem as dance. The dance is pre-verbal, the "count" kept, and originating, bodily, as is the partner's message: "*You have passed the count,*" which is "understood from her eyes" ("The Dance," 8). The body struggles to control the forces of the body, its "yearning," such that the "numbers have entered [the] feet" and the dancer, reminiscent of Yeats' "Among Schoolchildren," moves "*Into the Waltz,*" becoming a part of the dance he was once apart from.

While there are possible indirect references to Yeats (and possibly Williams' "The Dance"), the dance's connection to art is explicitly made halfway through the poem, with Duncan invoking Rubens' "A Peasant Dance," then moving quickly to Olson's Maximus and his call to us "to dance the Man" (8-9). Whitman then enters the poem through the meadow's "leaves of grass, / likeness and liking, the human greenness // tough as grass that survives coolest seasons" (9). As the dancer cannot be separated from the dance in Yeats, so here the dancers cannot be separated from the dance-ground, the two creating a space of "human greenness" (reminiscent of Robin Hood's "greenwood"). The dance becomes a sort of art form that stands in for all art: painting and poetry and even love-making, the dance a scene of outflowing "joy that exceeds pleasure" (8).

In the wake of the dancers, in their absence, is a "radian[t]" dance-ground, the space "silent" but still able to spark a bodily "pang that is / a flower" (9). Duncan returns to the interwoven images of the fertile meadow, the dance-ground, and the flower as sexual, creative body. These images reinforce the importance of the dance-ground as a potent creative space, one inseparable from the dancers who create it, but also present in the absence of the dancers, as the meadow in the "Often" is both "made" and "eternal."

The poem ends with an open-ended parenthetical in which Duncan seems to gloss the poem with information about the biographical background of the scene. But the gloss never moves completely outside of the poem, ending with Duncan claiming that when he thinks of the "dance-ground" of "that summer," he also thinks of a different space, "another room that summer" with "Friedl, moaning in the depths of" (9). The sexually (and thus creatively) charged energies of both spaces, the dance-ground and the room, revert back to "a meadow" in Duncan's hindsight, the "place of first permission" (7).

Another important aspect of the dance's spatial nature is that its movement, what Duncan calls its "measures," is four-dimensional, elements of the dance arranging and rearranging in relation to one another in space and time, creating fluid, ever-changing boundaries. In this sense, the dance is comparable to another of Duncan's recurring metaphors for the poem and the dance: the mobile. In "Rites of Participation," Duncan connects the *tjurunga* of the aboriginal Australians, "an enclosure in which we see the primal identity of the person" (110), with the

complex mobile that Giedion on *Mechanization Takes Command* saw as most embodying our contemporary experience: "the whole construction is aerial and hovering as the nest of an insect" – a suspended system, so contrived that "a draft of air or push of a hand will change the state of equilibrium and the interrelations of suspended elements. . . forming unpredictable, ever-changing constellations and so imparting to them the aspect of space-time." (113)

The literal mobility of the mobile (and its "aerial structure"), its ability to always be in flux and in motion, appeals to Duncan's poetics, which are also focused on ever-changing ratios and relationships. The multi-dimensional nature of the mobile and its "joints" or arms acts as the various poetic correspondences do in the poem: "each part is a thing in itself; the junctures not binding but freeing the elements of the configurations so that they participate in more than one figure" (*Bending the Bow*, ix). Discussing André Malraux's *Psychology of Art*, Duncan says art that participates in this configuration, this "drama of forms" such as the mobile, always has the chance of being seen with fresh eyes, such that

what were once thought of as masterpieces of their time and place are now seen anew as moving expressions of—but more than expressions, creations and creators of—spiritual life, as acts of drama of what Man is that has not come to its

completion, but which we imagine as a changing totality called Art; so poems too begin to appear as members of a hovering system called Poetry. (114)

The movement of the mobile is a dance through space-time, the various parts of the mobile changing their relationships with other parts, measures changing through time as the dancers move in relation to one another, not “in some evolution or dialectic toward a higher force or consciousness, but in the content of the whole of us as Adam – the totality of mankind’s experience in which our moment, this vision of a universal possibility, plays its part.” The “universal possibility” is that of life and “life-forms.”

Duncan’s image of the mobile’s “interlocking and separating figures” brings to mind the structure of DNA, the amino acids arranged and rearranged to create an infinite number of patterns and life-forms. The image is not lost on Duncan but integral: poetics is not just a mode of thinking about art, but about life – poetics as a cosmology. “For the seriousness of the study of Poetics we intend is the seriousness of the study of creative events,” Duncan proclaimed in the 1981 New College catalog, and what greater “creative event” than the creation of the building blocks of life? DNA is an example of what Duncan earlier calls the “Life Code” and the relations between elements of the poem take on the nature of the dance: “the dance of the particles in which stars, cells and sentences form; the evolving and changing species and individualizations of the Life Code, even the persons and works of Man” (*Bending the Bow*, vii). “We hunt for the key to language itself in the dance of the bees or in the chemical code of the chromosomes” (97), Duncan declares in “Rites of Participation,” the code, the “key to language” able to be found everywhere, an outgrowth of immanence. These building blocks have their doubles in the alphabet blocks of “Rites of Participation” and “The Collage.” Also, Duncan’s “Life Code” reminds us again of Robin Hood and his “code / that took life as its law!” (“The

Law,” 29), and can be found in those things seemingly separate from “Man” (“stars”) as well as in “Man” (“cells”) and in his works (“sentences”).

Interestingly and, I don’t believe unintentionally, Duncan’s language here can be read as implying both possibility and confinement. While “cell” is most likely to be read in terms of biology, another meaning – a place to be locked into, as in a prison “cell” – lurks underneath. Likewise, “sentence,” besides the denotation here of a grammatical construction of words, can also mean a pronouncement of punishment, particularly in terms of length. These puns are strange in light of the seeming freedom of possibility the movement of the dance affords. Again though, Duncan understands the dangers of stasis and confinement (see the earlier discussion of Levertov and “Advent 1966”), and has already invoked prison imagery earlier in *Bending the Bow*’s introduction. The sentence can indeed become a kind of prison “cell,” especially when only one arrangement of the sentence, only one meaning comes to dominate. *Temenos*, by its nature, is a place of creative possibility, not of stasis and dogma. As a poet, Duncan must overcome this danger and allow the sentence to function naturally as “polysemous” of meaning. The mobile needs the “draft of air” (the “breath of the poem,” the “inspiration, the breath of Creation, Spiritus Sanctus, moving between the creator breathing and the breath of his creature” (*Bending the Bow*, viii)) in order to fulfill its nature. Duncan, in engaging the sentence, acknowledges the danger of imprisonment and stasis, boldly declaring his status as an

escapist; as if I could step out of my clothes and move naked as the wind in world
of words. But I want every part of the actual world involved in my escape. I
bring the laws that bound me into and aerial structure in which they are unbound
as outlines of a prison unfolding. (v)

The sentence can be a “cell,” and a single arrangement of the sentence, like a single arrangement of amino acids in DNA, results not in life but in a lack of life, bringing us back to the “‘unnatural’ restrictions” of Julian that turn men into lifeless “scales” of the Worm. Life then is determined by the necessary play of elements, whether it be in the smallest of life forms or the largest of cosmic forms: “To be alive itself is a form involving organization in time and space, continuity and body, that exceeds clearly our conscious design. ‘It is by avoiding the rapid decay into the inert state of “equilibrium,” that an organization appears so enigmatic” (“Towards,” 6-7).

The dance too can be a prison if locked into a single arrangement of “equilibrium,” if dominated by an authority demanding unity and adherence to one human law. But if the dance remains a place of “play,” of ever-shifting ratios and relations, it relates then to a “multitude of laws” opening a space of endless meaning and creation in which the “commune of Poetry becomes so real that [the poet] sounds each particle in relation to parts of a great story that he knows will never be completed” (*Bending the Bow*, vi). The cell is a place of creation and a place of eternity, a place of the future and a place of the past: “Our secret Adam is written now in the script of the primal cell” (“Rites of Participation,” 97). The “great story,” multiphasic and polysemous, is what Duncan sometimes calls, as in “The Structure of Rime I,” “the unyielding” and “Lasting Sentence” (12). The fertile cell is a primal creative space, a primal *temenos* similar to the “World Egg” of “Tribal Memories, *Passages I*” and the “pulsing” egg of “Poetry Before Language.”

The “Sentence,” much like the Law, is ever-present, “show[ing]” Itself forth in the language as [the poet] makes it” (12). The work of the poet is a constant attempt to recognize and respond to the Sentence with sentences of the poet’s own that are presentations of the

Sentence. Thus, the poet is beholden to the Sentence while attempting to master it, leading Duncan to demand of the Sentence: “Speak! For I name myself your master, who come to / serve. / Writing is first a search in obedience” (12). The poet must obey the “multitude” of natural laws as he recognizes them, and one of those laws is the inevitability of the “snake-like beauty in the living changes of syntax” (12), another manifestation of the “Life code.” We return to the danger and allure of the snake image, syntax threatening to enchant the poet and wholly enslave him through the poet’s own “false...tongue” (“Structure II,” 13). The poet must avoid coming to regard his sentences as the Sentence, his laws as Law, lest his sentences become a prison “cell” from which he cannot escape. Instead, the poet is charged with an ongoing responsibility to the “Lasting Sentence”:

O Lasting Sentence,
 sentence after sentence I make in your image. In the feet that
 measure the dance of my pages I hear cosmic intoxications of the
 man I will be. (12)

Duncan’s play on “feet,” meaning both the foot of the dancer and the poetic “foot” (a “rime” Duncan would put to further, extended use in the Pindar poem), connects the poem to the dance. The dance-ground then is *temenos*, serving as a space of creation through a recognition of the immanence of the “Dance Whose bonds men hold / holy” (“The Propositions,” 37). Drawing from the aboriginal Australian tribes, Duncan describes the intimate connections between self, body, dance, poem, Cosmos, creative and created space:

Parts and operations of the human body, but also parts and operations of the
 cosmos, are related in a new ground, a story or picture or play, in which feeling
 and idea of a larger whole may emerge. The flow of the sound from the throat

and the flow of urine from the bladder, the flow of energy from the dancing feet, the flow of forms in the landscape, the flow of water and of air felt, translated in a rhythmic identity disclose to the would-be initiate what man is but also what the world is—both other and more than he is himself, than the world itself is. (“Rites,” 109-10)

HOUSEHOLD

The motif of the household returns us back to the conception of the “fathering force,” with *temenos* as a place of family “bounded by grandparents,” the “secret field of Mechpelah.” The household, like the spaces of the body and the dance-ground, appears throughout Duncan’s work, and is intimately connected to his sense of poetics, particularly in terms of the Cosmos and creation. Duncan explores this constellation of connections in “The Truth & Life of Myth”:

The beginning of the poem stirs in every of area of my consciousness, for the DNA code it will use toward its incarnation is a code of resources my life pattern itself carries....Awakening – listening, seeing, sensing – to work with the moving weights and durations of syllables, the equilibrations of patterns, the liberations of new possibilities of movement....Families of men like families of gods are the creative grounds of key persons. And all mankind share the oldest gods as they share the oldest identities of the germinal cell. (24-25)

The “creative grounds” of the household serve as an outgrowth and disclosing of the body’s creativity, a space, like the dance-ground, given bounds by the spatial relationships between multiple bodies. And, like the body and the dance-ground (and the field of Mechpelah), the household is a sacred space. Along with the sacred household space, the hearth, as the “heart” of the household, is also key, particularly in terms of the “circulations” of both blood and dance.

While it seems strident individualism would rule out an appeal to “household” and “community,” such is not the case for Duncan. Duncan sees the sacred household space as under attack or invasion by the “modern demythologizing mind” that demands “our sense of a life shared with the beings of a household, our sense of belonging to generations of spirit, our ancestral pieties, must be put aside” (34). Indeed, the times and the “American Way of Life [are]

designed to save the householder from his household myths, from the lifestory of working in which he has his communion with the house; as in the factory, the worker, no longer a maker, is removed from his work” (35). The end of this quotation is particularly illuminating in terms of the individual, with the factory worker subsumed into the factory itself, a cog in the machine if you will, rather than an individual “maker.” The importance of the worker’s production is removed, their physical and spiritual connection with what they make severed, as the “householder” has their connection with their household severed, the space merely a space, nothing more, charged with no meaning beyond utility. But the household myths are poetry, and myth, “for Dante, for Shakespeare, for Milton, was the poet-lore handed down in the tradition from poet to poet. It was the very matter of Poetry, the nature of the divine world as poets had testified to it” (39). Thus, the household becomes a poem, a created space that discloses the “divine world.”

When speaking about the household in Duncan’s work, it’s impossible not to discuss his long relationship with the painter, Jess Collins. In his essay exploring Duncan’s concept of the household in light of Cold War politics, Eric Keenaghan says that Jess and Duncan’s “household though, is better conceived as a spatial *imaginary*, an aesthetic *trope*, rather than a representation of one of their homes” (“Vulnerable,” 73). I’d argue that, in fact, for Duncan there would have been no difference, again the household acting as both “spatial *imaginary*” and spatial reality at the same time, a fictional and literal space, made and eternal. The household space is filled with power, contrary to the modern sense of the domestic as a secondary space of importance when viewed against the public sphere, particularly of men. The modern world has forgotten the household gods, the Lares, as it has forgotten the power of the common domestic items and of the architectures of domestic spaces. As Gaston Bachelard says in his exploration of the

domestic space, *The Poetics of Space*, “For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world” (4).

Duncan’s first explicit and lengthy use of the household and hearth motifs occurs in the second section of *Roots and Branches*’ “Apprehensions,” titled “The Directive.” The poem continues Duncan’s use of spatial language, the connection made between the “sentence” of *The Structure of Rime* and literal spaces:

THE DIRECTIVE

is a building. The architecture of the sentence
 allows
 personal details, portals (32)

The command becomes a physical space and the sentence acts as a “portal,” apprehending the notion of “passage” that would later find form in *Bending the Bow* and *Ground Work*. The language of “permission” also returns, the sentence “allow[ing]” for a space of passage while also being that space. This physical space is created through the mind and language, “the concentration fix[ing]” it, “a space figured in language” (33). Duncan, returning to the image of poetry as plowing, details how the act of plowing brings “landscape into being” as the sentence and the poem bring “portals” and space “into being.” The “landscape” of the field, “brought.../ into being,” becomes the “grove,” a space mediated by “interpreting and / interpreted by” the “house and hearth.”

Duncan’s invocation of the household comes with a certain tension, namely between the high and the low, both in terms of height and of opulence. This tension is manifested by the “dome of many-colord glass, / jeweld light, carved woods and deep windows.” The scale and

richness of the structure, particularly its height, threatens to be “too much” – its height needs the counterpoint of depth, what is described here as a “hush...that from above / is deep, a well or wall of holy spirit / defining the humble.” It’s important to note the etymology of “humble,” since it is related to *humus* or “earth,” as in “ground.” Thus, the hall is great in its height while also grounded with the “holy spirit,” connecting each of the spaces here – island field, grove, house and hearth – as manifestations of *temenos*.

Duncan’s next two lines further the sense of these spaces as sacred: “Where there is a temple / man’s kept from base servitude.” The sacred spaces of *temenos* and temple prevent men from succumbing to a kind of slavery, with Duncan’s use of “temple” echoing the language of “Night Scenes,” which appears a few poems earlier. In “Night Scenes” we find an image of dancers cutting out *temenos*, a sacred space like that of the “household” temple of “Apprehensions”:

Attendant, the maiden hours dance,
with tambourines and tiny bells clustering,
circling to slow down ecstasy.

Time in the folds of their skirts’ motion
sways as if from a center

that is female

–there being to four o’clock in the morning

breasts, undulating belly, thighs,

an inner temple of durations. (7)

This passage also anticipates “The Collage,” the height and ground of the space in “Apprehensions” mirroring Duncan’s mantra of, “This way below is the way above,” while the sexual nature of the dancing women mirrors the later descriptions of the “parvis” or sexual “zone”: “the mouth of the cave or temple growing moist” (19). The body, the dance-ground, and the household (along with field, cave, and poem) are all linked in and between these passages. Again from Bachelard: “We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme” (15). That fundamental theme is *temenos*.

Duncan continues in “Apprehensions” with what appear to be pejorative descriptions of the household, the speaker saying that it’s made up of “rude elements.” The “Sage Architect” is then invoked, a figure seeming to return from “A Sequence of Poem’s for H.D.’s Birthday,” where he appeared as the “Father who is architect” and “Father whose signature is in the chemical bond” (12). The Sage Architect works with ratios and relationships, like the high and low aspects of the “high hall,” the “proportions and scales of the soul’s wonder,” both the massive scope of “stars and water” and the “discrete light / defining the lintel” – the “portals” of the opening of the section. The Sage Architect is a source of the household and an extension of the “Queen Under The Hill” from “Often,” as the hall an extension of the hall from that poem, the hall “that is a made place, created by light / wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.” In “Apprehensions,” the speaker asks for the Sage Architect to create a space of creativity, a space where “shadows and the light rays mix”:

Sage Architect of the soul and its image,
 let there be a household of these things
 where such a silence awakens our fearful touch

and flames of beauty in old stuff rage. (34)

The “hush of the high hall” discloses the immanence of/in the space, freeing the speaker’s touch from fear, sparking “flames of beauty” even in “old stuff,” perhaps the “rude elements” of the “household” where “rude” here implies rough or simple (or possibly even sturdy). In fact, the speaker finds himself in a room, but one created by a “rude poetry” (35).

The myth of the Fisher King returns in the next stanza, the hearthroom of the speaker transforming into the King’s “monument” (which had earlier been the speaker’s “monument of what I am,” echoing “Wherefrom fall all architectures of what I am” from “Often”), a space of recognizable and remembered immanence: “one being, one presence, / slowly restoring the house of its kin” (35). The *temenos* of “A Performance We Wait For,” the “fathering force” and familial space, is recalled by Duncan’s phrase “house of its kin,” with “its” being of particular note, since it seems to refer to the “presence” or “being” as having “kin,” thus a possible reference back to the field of Mechpelah, Adam, and God.

By the end of “Apprehensions” (which is both lengthy and complex and deserving of a more thorough treatment than it receives here), Duncan returns to the space of temple as an extension of the cave (a space that dominates the poem) and household, the “orders of the Lord of Love” an echo of an earlier line about the space whose “timbers” were a “rude poetry” (35). In the locating of a cave that had been dreamed of prior to its finding, Duncan fulfills his sense of “apprehension”:

March 27th: We found after the rains a cave-in along the path near the rosemary and thyme, disclosing the pit of an abandoned cess pool. Because of the dream fragment of a month before, the event seems to have been anticipated. A

verification of the caves seen in actual life after they had appeared in the life of the poem.

Wherever we watch, concordances appear. (42)

The relationship between poetic event and life event is an exemplary “concordance,” a “living apprehension,” a disclosing of “orders.” These relationships can be seen everywhere, the poem argues, if we only would pay attention to them, “watch” for them. Those orders are also those of the Sage Architect, “the orders of the Architect building in the likeness a temple” (42-43), a space of high and low, of “the pit / in the garden; [of] the orders of stars and of words” (43). As above, so below.

Though Duncan touches on the theme of household throughout *Roots and Branches* after “Apprehensions,” I will move directly to *Bending the Bow*, since the poems there so closely parallel the language and poetic thrust of “Apprehensions.” The domestic elements of the household, those possibly seen as “rude” or “humble,” begin in earnest at the opening of *Bending the Bow*, with a particular focus on Eros. “Sonnet 4” plays off of the intimate nature of “thee” versus the more formal “you,” the bond between the lovers further strengthened by the intimate familiarity (and occupying) of space: “I would know the red *thee* of the enclosure” (3). “5th Sonnet” continues the theme of Eros, with the lovers now paired in a dance, Duncan’s use of the capital “His” blurring the identity of the lover, bestowing divinity on what would be seem to be a “regular” man, particularly at the end of the poem where *He* is described in Aquinian terms as the

First Caller of the Dance

Who moves me, First Partner, He

in Whom

you are most you. (5)

Divine Lover and lover are conflated here, making Eros (and the dance associated with it) a sacred space created by “intermingling figures” (5).

The tension between Eris and Eros, strife and love, surfaces in the next poem, “Such Is the Sickness of Many A Good Thing,” a tension that plays out through the rest of the book, particularly in the contrast between the Vietnam poems and the domestic poems. “Such Is the Sickness” anticipates the tension between the household space and its attendant communal spirit and the disturbing spaces of war. The private, domestic, Erotic, creative, numinous presence in the household literally is taken over by images of war, with spaces as innocuous as the middle-class backyard invaded: “the fearful hearts of good people in the suburbs turning the / savory meat over the charcoal burners and heaping their barbecue / plates with more than they can eat” (“Up Rising,” 82). These lines don’t initially stand out as an invasion of the domestic, but when paired with images of the burning flesh of victims of war, President Johnson’s “name stink[ing] with burning meat and heapt honors // And men wake to see that they are used like things / spent in a great potlatch, this Texas barbecue” (81), the invasion comes clearer.

But before this tension erupts into conflict, Duncan discloses the immanence in the everyday, in the “Day’s duties”:

Reveries are rivers and flow

where the cold light gleams reflecting the window upon the
 surface of the table,
 the presst-glass creamer, the pewter sugar bowl, the litter
 of coffee cups and saucers,

carnations painted growing upon whose surfaces. The whole
 composition of surfaces leads into the other
 current disturbing
 what I would take hold of. (“Bending the Bow,” 7)

The domestic kitchen scene before Duncan (described as he attempts to write a letter to Levertov, the “other current”) is a manifestation of the line, “potencies in common things.” The stuff of the domestic, of the household, has power. This power continues in the next poem, which is also the first of the *Passages* series, “Tribal Memories, *Passages 1*.” Here, “Her-Without-Bounds,” another incarnation of the “Queen Under The Hill,” goes out to all of the “tribes” around their “campfire at evening” (a hearth of sorts), appearing in the form of the poet. She speaks from the center of the tribe and household, “from the hearth stone, the lamp light, / the heart of the matter where the / house is held” (9). The communal space of the hearth is the seat of the poet, a space crucial to the community since the “City will go out in time, will go out / into time hiding even in its embers. / And we were scattered throughout the countries and times of man” (10). *Polis* is a temporary place, but the diaspora can always return, re-arrange, re-assemble around the hearth and around the poet who “hides / fire among the words in his mouth,” the same “flames of beauty” in “Apprehensions.”

The weaving loom, the subject of the next poem, “At the Loom, *Passages 2*,” has a similar function as the poet in “Tribal Memories,” a sort of central image in the household, a metaphor for *poesis* or making. Duncan continues the language of light and fire prevalent in all of the domestic poems:

There was such a want in the old ways
 when the craft came into our elements,

the art shall never be free of that forge,
 that loom, that lyre—

the fire, the images, the voice. (11)

The domesticity of *temenos* is clear here, the space filled with Eros, with the loom, and with the hearth. Eros as creative, bodily space is emphasized, as noted earlier, in “The Collage” and “As in the Old Days,” the female sexual “zone” resembling the “portals” and “lintel” of “Apprehensions” as the “life-door (19) and “life’s / labia, Her crack of a door opening” (24). Yet, “As in the Old Days” ends with what appears to be a bizarre segue or juxtaposition, moving from a description of the “wound,” which could be Christ’s or the mother in childbirth, to a quoted and italicized discussion of domestic items. Taken together, the lines read:

“To be born again from the wound in His side”

.....

In the streams of the wound they
*“want to have little beds, and tables,
 and everything else.”* (25)

This strange juxtaposition of intense physical spirituality and quaint domesticity makes more sense in light of the poem following, “The Architectures, *Passages 9*.”

Clearly one of Duncan’s most blatant “architectural” poems, “The Architectures” could almost be seen as the poetic analog to Duncan’s prose statement about “architect[ing]” his poems and conceiving of them as “rooms” to move through (Cardell interview). Though I have not been able to find the source of the quotation that ends “As in the Old Days” (Levertov asked Duncan about the source of the quotation in a letter but received no answer), it could possibly

come from Gustav Stickley's *Craftsman* publication, since "The Architectures" begins with a Stickley quotation and uses them throughout. The quotations describe Stickley's ideal living room design, with Duncan moving from the Stickley material to a poetic survey of his own household, similar to that of "Bending the Bow." Duncan's vision is filled with a potent combination of peaceful afternoon light and "night music," the "strains of *Mahagonny* on the phonograph / distant / intoxications of a brazen crisis" (26). The contrast between light and dark echoes the creative play of light and shadow in "Often," the "light toward the knotted tides of dark" (6) in "Night Scenes" and the touch of Eros in "Such is the Sickness," "the lover's hand / from its lightness to what's / underground" (6). Further, Weill and Brecht's dark chorus, "*Könnem einem toten Mann nicht helfen*" ("You can't help a dead man") sits strangely next to the "curtains of daffodil-yellow," yet the combination pairs nicely with Stickley's prescription for "recesses" in a room to break up the space and give it a "slight feeling of mystery" (26). This chiaroscuro effect is furthered by Duncan's catalog of texts: "glimmering titles arrayd keys / Hesiod • Heraklitus • *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics...*" These texts, which later swell to include *The Zohar*, Plutarch, and others, are texts of knowledge, some mystical and occult, and extend the "mystery" of their "recesses" and the household space they occupy. Duncan breaks up the list of the texts with another Stickley quotation that again emphasizes the connectedness of the various "broken" spaces of the home. Links between spaces are key as the poem progresses, the Stickley material stressing the "links" between upper and lower regions of the house, and house and garden, the poem seeming to take a short leap forward in time of day, such that the peppertree in the garden "[b]elow the house," in a "recess of the garden," is seen in the "moonlight embraced / for the mystery's sake" (27).

Duncan's use of outside texts takes another unexpected turn towards the end of the poem, with Truman Michelson's *The Owl Sacred Pack of the Fox Indians*, presumably the text he has open in front of him, entering. The scene moves back inside, the light of a lamp replacing moonlight, a warmth entering the room as Duncan incorporates Michelson and Stickley quotations into a final flourish of romantic love (“*marry those you love*”) and domestic happiness (“*which belong to the inner and individual part of the family life*”) (28).

“The Architectures” plays on the delicate tensions of the household and the links between its various passages and recesses (and perhaps even family members). The household here is charged with an energy, the humble space filled with light and dark, openness and mystery, “moonlight” and daffodils, “brazen crisis” and “jewel highlights.” The household spaces, particularly as Stickley views them, are, like Duncan's own poems, organic creations: “Everything in it should fall into place as if it had grown there before the room is pronounced complete.” In this sense, the organic room or house takes on the qualities of the meadow in “Often,” both “made” and “eternal,” the space growing as if its orders were already determined, apprehended by the creator.

Duncan continues the themes of domestic Eros and the charged presences of the household in “These Past Years, *Passages 10*,” a poem that seems to speak to the easing of “inconsolable grief” over the course of a “sweet marriage,” presumably that of Duncan and Jess. The relationship is connected with the household that nourishes it, both contained in a space but also opening out, like “French doors // opening out upon a porch which / links the house with the garden” (30). The bodies of the lovers, the space of the relationship they create, the domestic space in which that relationship flourishes humble and mysterious, rude and magnificent: all are *temenos*.

The literal domestic household finds a larger role in Duncan as well, especially as the contrast between the peaceful domestic and war-filled nation grows over *Bending the Bow*'s progression. Much of the language of "The Architectures," including "mysteries," "moonlight," "household," and the afternoon scene of light and dark, music and movement, returns in "Orders, *Passages 24*," though now the household of Duncan and Jess is the household "of the folk, commune of communes" (77). Duncan connects this household with the body, manifested in the "hidden seed in the hearts of men / and in each woman's womb hidden." The household becomes "It," a space hidden within the people, a space that is "the good of the people," and a space unknown to the "armed men" who are "hired and conscripted killers against the power of an idea." Mackey described Duncan's "Orders" as "herald[ing] his poetry of the Vietnam War," notable for Duncan "appear[ing] to question his calling as a poet, coming close to disowning the kind of poetry he is most given to" ("Gassire's Lute," 75). The poetic wavering Mackey speaks of can be seen as a result of the "invasion" of the private domestic space as represented by the "armed men" invading the houses of Santo Domingo during the Marine invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965. Mackey describes Duncan's tone earlier in the book as "mythic, rhapsodic" and we can connect that tone to the literal domestic rhapsodies explored so far.

The household is also that of the commune of poetry, with Duncan's consideration of war turning to a consideration of his own poetic stance. Mackey notes that Duncan's language here indicates a certain poetic questioning, with Duncan saying he is going to "put aside // whatever I once served of the poet, master / of enchanting words and magics" (77). Yet, in the very next breath, Duncan says he will *not* "disown the old mysteries, sweet / muthos our mouth's telling." Duncan's poetry turns here, the "enchanting words and magics" of earlier "Erotic" poems gone, replaced by "dark passages," language moving down a "dark corridor," violent

images of mass murder, “Herod’s hosts again / to exterminate the soul of the people” (78). The poetic passages, meaning his poems and the spaces or “rooms” they create, are part of a larger architecture, the “chrestomathy” of the “old masters” (78). The turn toward these “old masters” and their foundational texts seems to send Duncan literally back to the mode, if not mood, of “The Architectures”:

I thought to come into an open room
 where in the south light of afternoon
 one I was improvised
 passages of changing dark and light
 a music dream and passion would have playd
 to illustrate concords of order in order,
 a contrapuntal communion of all things •

The subtle differences in language between this passage and “The Architectures” is key, with Duncan saying he “thought to come” into the space, implying it was his goal but it was not achieved. Further, the conditional “would have playd” suggests that the domestic scene that would have disclosed the immanent “concords of order in order” and the “contrapuntal communion of all things” has been disrupted. Yet, the music Duncan hoped for (this time Schubert), “is gone” and the domestic tranquility of the earlier poems “transported” into the more violent emotions of “rage, / grief, dismay” (78-79).

The “enchanting,” private mode of the first half of *Bending the Bow* has been slowly replaced by what Mackey calls a “public, more oratorical voice” (80). But Duncan does not want to give up what we might call the “domestic” mode entirely, for “rage, / grief, dismay” while negative, are still “themselves transports of beauty!” (80). The public war is threatening

the private, domestic space, and thus the “charge the poem is given,” Mackey argues, “is not one of abdicating the exalted mode but of bringing it to bear on more resistant matters” (80). The domestic space of the household, and by extension, *temenos*, is threatened by the expansion of space created by “men following self-interest” who have “betray[ed] all / good of self” (80). The hearth is the heart of the tribe, a communal space, returning us to that earlier anarchist tension between individual and community, and even between the smaller household and the larger community. Mackey explores this contradiction:

A mingling of vertical and horizontal inclinations inflates the words *commune* and *household*. The oracular mode, Duncan’s urge to become a mouthpiece for cosmic truth, is such that his “household of the folk” gives way to or turns out to be “the great household,” the cosmos itself. The “commune of communes” likewise inclines toward the “It”...What Duncan means by “It,” his introduction to *Bending the Bow* tells us, is the “striving to come into existence” of a cosmogonic Spirit, the sense of the world he roots his poetics in: “The configuration of It in travail: giving birth to Its Self, the Creator, in Its seeking to make real...this deepest myth of what is happening in Poetry moves us as it moves words” (*BB* vii). (81)

Duncan saw no clear distinction between cosmos and household nor the poet’s imagining of the two spaces:

The imagination of this cosmos is as immediate to me as the imagination of my household or my self, for I have taken my being in what I know of the sun and of the magnitude of the cosmos, as I have taken my being in what I know of domestic things. (“Towards,” 1)

If the poet lives up to his responsibility, immanence is recognizable in the largest, most magnificent aspects of the cosmos as it is in the most simple and “rude” elements of the “great household” (“Orders,” 79). In this sense, the household (and its attendant Eros) is a re-presentation of the cosmos, as *temenos* is both a presentation and re-presentation of “It” or “What Is,” a space constantly being created yet unable to “dissolve its orders at man’s evil” (79), no matter how many “armd men” attempted to invade it.

Chapter Five: “Nel Mezzo del Cammin di Nostra Vita”

“...the beauty of the poem is a configuration.”

-- Robert Duncan, “Towards an Open Universe,” 3

As briefly detailed in my introduction, “Nel Mezzo del Cammin di Nostra Vita” has been both my point of entry and departure in my ongoing readings of Duncan. It was there that I began to grasp the importance of poetics for Duncan, not just as a sort of litmus test for the most basic of poetic decisions like where to break a line or whether to use a particular sound, but as way of approaching the world, a theory of life rather than merely a theory of art. Later, I would find Burton Hatlen confirming my experience with “Nel Mezzo,” with his declaration of the poem as, “[p]erhaps Duncan’s most explicit statement of his conception of art” (“Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” 218). Having just “hit” upon the importance of “Nel Mezzo” for my reading of Duncan, Hatlen’s claim was encouraging and emboldening. Thus, the final full section of this paper will be an in-depth examination of the “explicit statement” of “Nel Mezzo,” most importantly, the aspects of Duncan’s spatial poetics, anarchism, law, and immanence. Ultimately, the tower complex described in the poem became the basis for my conception of *temenos*.

“Nel Mezzo” is a poem of praise for Sabato (also “Sam” or “Simon”) Rodia’s Watts Towers. Begun by Rodia, an Italian immigrant, in 1921, and constructed over the next 33 years in the Watts section of Los Angeles, the Watts Tower are actually a complex of buildings dominated by three conical towers. In a 1965 article for the *New Yorker* (and quoted in *Sublime Space & Visionary Worlds*), Calvin Trillin described the approach to the complex as seeing

an ornate, slightly leaning structure that seems to be a tower, and then, as one gets closer, two towers, and then three, and then, at the dead end where Sam Rodia lived, an entire garden of forms. A scalloped wall that is completely covered with mosaic runs along the street, and from outside it half a dozen spires are visible. Inside it, on the triangular piece of ground that was formerly Rodia's yard, a visitor can see three large towers, four smaller towers, two or three fountains, some bird baths and decorated pathways, a model of a ship, and an openwork gazebo.

Etched in awkward letters on the outside of the main gate in the wall – and repeated three or four times on the tallest tower – is Rodia's name of his garden, "Nuestro Pueblo." (74)

The towers and their attendant complex were, and remain, a marvel of individual artistic labor and engineering, withstanding multiple earthquakes and a load test from the city of Los Angeles that ended up bending "the steel beam that attached [the towers] to the hydraulic cylinder on the winch truck" (*Sublime*, 121). As an artist, Rodia remains an enigma, little being known of his past before ending up in Watts, or the reasons behind his abrupt leaving of the towers in 1955.

Rodia and his complex were almost ready-made for Duncan to use as poetic material. Rodia's, accretive style, use of unconventional materials, and conflicts with city authority must have resonated deeply with Duncan's artistic and political concerns. In the towers, Duncan finds space to discuss anarchism, law/Law, authority, the role of the poet, and the primacy of the artistic act in terms of cutting out space and disclosing the immanent. Put more simply, the artists' poetics share many similarities, with Duncan's poem reflecting the intersection of those various poetic elements.

Duncan saw in Rodia an artist whose art was not a vocation or a hobby, but a way of life. Duncan also saw in Rodia an artist whose work defied authority and convention, both in the artistic and political senses. Rodia's work challenged the "law." The collage and mosaic style of the towers must have immediately appealed to Duncan, who saw his own work in terms of what he called, in the introduction to *Bending the Bow*, the "grand collage" (vii). In that same vein, Rodia's choice of materials must have drawn Duncan to the towers. The complex was essentially made up of, as Duncan calls it in "Nel Mezzo," an "accretion of disregarded splendors" (23) – in other words, trash.

Likewise, the mundane quality of the materials for Rodia's towers, the fact that he works with the things most people regard as trash, and turns that "trash" into magical art, speaks to Duncan's own fascination with the everyday object. Though Duncan can often seem a poet more concerned with the occult (Hatlen), the mystical, and the supernatural, Duncan, as much as any poet, understands the powers that reside in the everyday object. As Hatlen says, "Duncan's...interest in vision will take the form not of a search for some 'mystical' realm beyond this world, but rather for the numinous within the concrete particulars of the world" (218). Thus, we see Duncan's fascination with Rodia's "concrete gardens" (23). Though it may not always be obvious, Duncan's poetry is grounded in the "things" of Williams' "No ideas but in things," however neo-Platonic he may sometimes seem. Hatlen continues that "the poets from whom Duncan saw himself as deriving all sought to honor the numinous reality of concrete particulars by refusing to subordinate such particulars to general ideas, in the manner that Western thought has agreed to see as logical" (219). What greater example of the "numinous reality of concrete particulars" than the towers, whose materials were the "particulars" of "particulars," objects deconstructed beyond their utilitarian originals and re-visioned as the

“inspired” towers. A few poems later, in “Apprehensions,” Duncan asks that his “awe be steady / in the rude elements of [his] household,” again, “rude” meaning “natural,” “simple,” or “elemental,” rather than “uncouth” or “crude” (33). A few pages later, the description of a room where “Love stands alone / and workt in whose timbers a rude poetry” (35), again shows Duncan’s affinity for the simple and everyday object, the kind of which Rodia uses to construct his “great mitred structure” (22). Rodia’s materials were considered “rude” in the negative sense by many of his critics, and no doubt the “city officials” who sought to condemn the towers similarly condemned the “scavenged” trash of which the towers were built. But Duncan appreciates the “splendors” of the “disregarded” object, finding the “beauty” in the trash found at the “city dump” (though not necessarily the actual case for Rodia).

Duncan’s “derivative” poet status meant he not only drew inspiration from other poets, but saw himself as part of an ongoing process of poetry, using the work of other poets (and artists) in his own, continuing a larger poetic work. This “inclusive” poetics, as Nathaniel Mackey calls it in “The World-Poem in Microcosm: Robert Duncan’s ‘The Continent,’” is most evident in the presence of so much of the poetry of other poets within Duncan’s own poems. In “Nel Mezzo” alone we have the voices of Dante, Simon Rodia, Charles Olson, Louis Christian Mullgardt, and Jacob Burckhardt, not to mention references to the Pan-Pacific Exposition of 1915, Gaudi, King Arthur, and even possible nods to Ezra Pound and H.D.

Duncan’s work, like the towers he describes, often builds by a process of “accretion,” here the accretion of references and allusions. It would be difficult to characterize Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as a “disregarded splendor,” but for the average, and even learned reader, many of Duncan’s references, allusions, and quotations can seem highly obscure. Duncan’s use of these “obscure materials” can give his poetry an esoteric or occult feeling, inasmuch as one feels

that in order to understand it they must be initiated, to have the secret knowledge of the sources. But it isn't Duncan's goal to be purposefully obscure or coy. For Duncan, these sources, these "disregarded splendors," are very much the "stuff" of daily life. Usually, the material that finds its way into the work is a text Duncan was reading at the time. They may seem "obscure" to us, but for him they are immediate and present, exemplified by the array of books in "The Architecture." Stephen Fredman points out in *A Concise Companion to Twentieth Century American Poetry* that these texts are "'keys' to a hidden mystical tradition," but these texts are anything but "hidden" in Duncan's work or life (200). They are as present and immediate to Duncan as they are present and immediate in the text. They may be "hidden" in the sense that they have been overlooked or dismissed in favor of texts that appeal to the "rationalist persuasion that we be protected by the magic of what reasonable men agree is right, against unreasonable or upsetting information" ("Ideas," 27), but they are in plain sight here and are vital to Duncan's understanding of reality. Here, Joll's false dichotomy between "rationalist" and "religious" is again debunked, the "magic" texts being used quite rationally.

In "Nel Mezzo," the tension between the volition of the individual and the will of a power-wielding group comes clear. Specifically, the individual volition of the artist in the face of an authoritative collective determining "order" is at the heart of the poem. First, the towers are constructed against the seeming "wishes" of the authorities, "thrown up against whatever / piety, city ordinance, plans" (23) the towers challenging the "law" of the land. Also, Rodia's choice of materials and style of construction also resonate with Duncan. The towers are made up basically of trash – seashells, soda bottles, Milk of Magnesia bottles, corncobs, broken down cars – "scavenged from the city dump," Duncan marvels. In "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," Duncan blasts "Miss Drew," the writer of book about poetic form, claiming, "Convention, anyway, in

these circles of literary critics and schoolmasters is a proper mode, and seldom rises to any height above the general conventionality, having its roots...in what other men think” (28). While Duncan is specifically discussing poetry in this quotation, the sentiment just as easily applies to Rodia’s art, and its highly unconventional elements. The tower complex, unlike the “conventional” art of artists whose “imagination[s have been] defeated” (22), “rises to [a]...height above the general conventionality [of]...what other men think.” It’s possible here to connect the defeat of the imagination to Duncan’s poetic dispute with Levertov, with Duncan seeing Levertov claiming her own imaginative defeat in “Advent 1966.”

One of Duncan’s major concerns as an artist, as epitomized by Olson’s language from “Against Wisdom as Such,” is the ability of an artist to stay “true” to himself, or, as Olson puts it, not “to traffick in any other ‘sign’ than his one” (260). There is great pressure on the artist to conform to the dictates of authority, of the “powers that be,” of artistic trends and vogues, of “piety, city ordinance, plans,” of “doctrine” and dogma. Duncan argues that the “base evil” inherent in Miss Drew’s statements about poetic form is not that she’s necessarily wrong, but that she insists that we “tak[e] its authority” (27). What appears as a simple disagreement about poetic form (Robert Frost’s tennis without the net quip is mentioned by Duncan), has much greater stakes, particularly for Duncan, since poetics is not a theory of art but instead a theory of living. Drew’s insistence on adhering to conventional notions of form is seen by Duncan as a further attempt by “authority” or “law” to assert its power over the individual. Thus, one of the most important conflicts in “Nel Mezzo” is between the artist and his ability to “traffick” in his own “sign” and the law’s desire to silence the artist, or have them conform to their own “doctrine,” here represented by the city officials who have “initiated condemnation hearings”

and the “church doctrine” which dictates to its architects their “signs.” The result of the “law” is embodied by the neighborhoods around the towers, the

squalid suburbs where the
mind is beaten back to the traffic, ground
down to the drugstore, the mean regular houses
straggling out of downtown sections
of imagination defeated. (22)

The law is in direct opposition to the imagination, and by extension, the artist. While the language of Duncan’s later Vietnam poems is much more violent and apocalyptic, the tension between individual and group authority is constant, that authority represented here by the atrophying powers of “convention,” the “base evil” of Miss Drew’s “doctrine.” Similar to the “cult” of homosexuality, Levertov’s anti-war “movement,” the *university*, and the State, Drew’s insistence on “conventions” seemingly argues for a spirit of community while in actuality limiting the individual, an act no less violent or destructive than the “absolute authority” imagined in “The Multiversity. In “Nel Mezzo” and “Ideas of the Meaning of Form,” this limiting is expressed in terms of defeat and lack of height, while the creativity of the individual is expressed in terms of height and rising.

“Nel Mezzo” is filled with rising imagery, Duncan’s language including “rising” twice, “taller” twice, “built up,” “soard,” “upraised,” “resurrected,” “thrown up,” “risking height,” “increases climb,” and “raised image.” This language is echoed in the argument against Drew, with the followers of convention rarely, like Rodia and his towers, “ris[ing] to any height above the general conventionality.” Convention is described in terms of violence, with it “beat[ing] back the mind,” recalling from “Night Scenes” the “police-cars cruising, / a part of the old divine

threat” (6), representing what Hatlen calls a “bureaucratization of the law, and Duncan, ever the anarchist, is suspicious of any codification of the Law” (213). In contrast to the violent “directives” of the law, the imagination rises above this “squalid” state (State) and searches out other “orders,” as described in “Apprehensions.” Towards the very end of the poem, Duncan declares, “There is no life that does not rise / melodic from the scales of the marvelous” (43). Again, rising imagery is employed to contrast the dis-orders of the law, the “unnatural restrictions” of Justinian or Moses discussed earlier, which are really just “nets to please Satan” (28). In the description of these nets quoted from “The Law” earlier, Duncan repeats the language from “Ideas of the Meaning of Form” in this passage, with the “roots...of what other men think” reappearing as the “old roots” of “visible defections” that ultimately result in “judgment” labeled as “acts of God” – the laws of men and their outcomes given false divine status. These are most definitely not the roots of the title poem, as those roots, like the flight of the monarch and the shapes of the towers, are “rising,” and “tracing out of air unseen roots and branches of sense / ...filaments woven and broken where the world might light” (“Roots and Branches,” 3).

In the introduction to *Bending the Bow*, Duncan admits to being “bound by laws,” but these are natural laws, outgrowths of “Law.” The move to “rising” remains, with Duncan arguing that the laws that “bound,” do so by binding him “into an aerial structure in which they are unbound as outlines of a prison unfolding” (v). It’s important to note though that the artistic act described in this rising imagery is not a transcendent act – the goal is not, through art to transcend to a higher plane. The controlling metaphor and image of the volume, roots and branches, must be considered. The “aerial structure” of the towers is not disconnected from the ground: “The ground is compounded of negative and positive areas in which we see shapes

defined.” Duncan is not degrading the “ground” here – any brief exploration of Duncan shows a great appreciation and concern with issues of “ground,” and it is my argument that ground in the form of *temenos* is of the utmost importance to him. The poem “Apprehensions” is one of Duncan’s most notable *literal* celebrations of ground, with its exploration of a “cave-in of the ground,/ hiding in showing, or showing in hiding,/ a glass or stone, most valuable” (31). Duncan later urges in the poem that one must “dig and come to see what I mean,” playing on the meaning of “dig” as in “to get” or “to understand.” But the digging is meant to reveal meaning, the “roots...of sense” from “Roots and Branches” eventually lifting themselves into “branches” – both roots and branches are essential to the discovery of “an inner view of things” (3). Duncan desires movement between these spaces – a passing through or passing between – that is essential to understanding the scales, measures, and orders of the world.

In “Night Scenes,” Duncan reveals all three spaces, the “deep element” and “treacherous leviathan,” the city, which is a “lion,” and the moon, climbing the “scale of souls” into the sky, all part of the “current/ which forth-flowing goes/ a wholeness green lovers know” (6). An image of dancers soon follows, creating what Duncan calls “an inner temple of durations” (7). Thus, the “ground” of “Nel Mezzo,” the neighborhoods surrounding Pueblo Nuestro are not “squalid” because of their nature as “ground,” but because of their inability to foster the “forth-flowing” that marks the tower complex, that marks the temple. The “mind” of the neighborhood around the complex has been “beaten back” and lacks inspiration, lacks “imagination,” cannot “risk height” as the towers do. This distinction between a fertile ground that contains both “roots and branches,” which cradles meaning and allows a “forth-flowing,” and the barren ground of the surrounding “squalid suburbs” echoes the Fisher King myth, a subject touched upon at the end of the second section of “Apprehensions” and referenced briefly in “The Law I Love” (“The

music restores/ health to the land”). Pueblo Nuestro thus becomes a “temple,” a sacred space that is a place of “forth-flowing,” out from the deep “roots” and up into an “aerial structure in which [laws] are unbound as outlines of a prison unfolding.” The neighborhood around the complex thus becomes a prison, and the complex itself an “unfolding” of those bounds put in place by the authority of the city officials.

The conventions of Miss Drew (and those of the city officials) hope to bind the imagination and tie it down with the dictates of “law,” and would have no place for the soaring towers rising “against the rules” (23), nor for the “filaments...broken” of “Roots and Branches.” Duncan opens “The Law” with the statement, “There are no / final orders,” and this sentiment of ongoing process, the kind of organic artistic process Duncan lays out in his letters to Denise Levertov, and the kind of process Rodia was engaged in on the towers, violates the conventional desire and doctrine of the artifact as completed and whole thing. Drew claims conventions that are “self-imposed,” hearkening to Olson’s claim about the poet trafficking in his own sign, but the bounds, the orders, the codes of Drew’s are not “self-imposed,” but imposed by “authority,” by poetic lawmakers and not poets. The “sign” of the poet is his poem, and when the orders of the poem are determined by human law, by an outside authority, the poet traffics in the sign of that authority. The Law says that the poet must be as Robin Hood, “who has the strength of his own / lawfulness” (29).

It’s not difficult to see how Duncan might see Rodia as an artist working outside of conventional artistic “law,” an “outlaw,” a “misfit” whose sign directly challenged the signs of authority embodied by “the Church” and by “the officials” of Watts who intend to tear down Rodia’s towers, and thus as a kind of anarchist Robin Hood-type figure. Duncan describes the towers as being “against the rules,” and as “misfitting” (23). Robin Hood, by acting outside of

the King's law, outside of the King's bounds and Crown-imposed conventions and orders, betrays the King and the State. Further, it could be argued that Hood, by creating his own space, his "greenwood," violates the King's space as created by monarchical law. Likewise, in "Nel Mezzo," Duncan invokes Jacob Burckhardt, who calls "Art...the most arrogant traitor of all" (23), since it attempts to usurp things (or spaces) worth "profounder worship," whether those be the State (as embodied by city officials, the Sheriff of Nottingham, the King), or the Church, represented by "church doctrine," above which Rodia's towers (and the "cathedral at Palma") "soard" (22).

Likewise, while the laws or orders that serve to restrict the artist and leave the "imagination defeated" appear as city "officials" who hope to destroy the towers through civic "condemnation hearings" (21), they also appear in the form of the "Holy Roman Catholic church steeples," which the towers literally rise higher than, "thrown up against whatever / piety, city ordinance, plans" (23). Duncan's contrast with the "Holy Roman Catholic church" brings Dante back into the poem, since the *Divine Comedy* was written against the backdrop of the early 14th century political and religious strife of the Guelph feud, in which Dante opposed Pope Boniface VIII. In "Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman," Duncan argues, "Dante was writing the monumental memorial of a perished hope, the mausoleum of Christendom" (64). Dante's opposition to papal rule, and the way in which that opposition manifests itself in the *Divine Comedy*, finds a similar artistic manifestation in the form of Rodia's towers. Rodia even declares that the towers are "taller than the Church," and, by extension, like Antoni Gaudí's works in La Seu in Palma, "church doctrine," signifying their direct challenge to the authority of the Church and State to dictate the boundaries of the artist's work.

Rodia's building process also appeals to Duncan's poetics. Rodia's towers were, by all accounts, planned as they were built, rather than beginning with a composed order, similar to Duncan's own focus on the continual creative process rather than "finished" product. In "Changing Perspectives," Duncan, commenting on Whitman's poetic process, says, "The *Leaves of Grass* in its nine editions grows, not toward a definitive architecture, but as a man grows, composed and recomposed, in each phase immediate and complete, but unsatisfied" (63). The towers, at each stage of building, have an "architecture," but aim towards no "final order," no "definitive" shape that implies a final or conclusive shape that would signal the closing of the imagination. Specifically, *The Structure of Rime* and *Passages* series best reflect this "open" architecture, Duncan describing the process of "building" in *Bending the Bow*: "Passages of a poem larger than the book in which they appear follow a sentence read out of Julian. I number the first to come *one*, but they belong to a series that extends in an area larger than my work in them. I enter the poem as I entered my own life, moving between an initiation and a terminus I cannot name" (v). Duncan's description of *Passages* as "extend[ing] in an area larger than my work in them" is interesting in that it continues the spatial language while also implying that the poems are both his and not his, occupying space that is of *and* beyond his making, the poetic space without "initiation and terminus." The spatial field has boundaries, but those boundaries are liminal, the space of the poem determined and indeterminate. Duncan continues in this spatial vein:

Olson in *Maximus*, "Letter, May 2, 1959," paces off boundary lines; and yet a poet has told me this ceases to be proper to poetry. But surely, everywhere, from whatever poem, choreographies extend into actual space. In my imagination I go through the steps the poet takes so that the area of a township appears in my

reading; were I to go to the place and enact the text, I would come into another dimension of the poetry in which Gloucester would speak to me. I am talking here about the fact that if a man set his heart against falling in love, he will find the poetry of falling in love empty and vain. Must I reiterate the fact that the boundary lines in the poem belong to the poem and not to the town? (v-vi)

Indeed, Olson's poem is a delineating of boundaries, of town, history, and sometimes of topography via typography. Yet the "boundaries" the poem creates are those of the poem, not of the actual space of Gloucester. This is not to say the poem does not create a space, but that Duncan is not concerned with the literal boundaries of a "township" as much as the more liminal boundaries of *temenos*. Olson's poem does not "enact" the literal space of Gloucester, but the poetic space of Gloucester, a literal space, but not literally Gloucester. Likewise, "Nel Mezzo," which also "paces off boundary lines" in a sense, does not "enact" the towers but creates "another dimension of the poetry," a new space: *temenos*.

The notion of boundaries is essential to Duncan's poetics; he describes the poem as "striving to come into existence," but not just any poem, "It," a poem that will be "a poetry of all poetries, grand collage" (*BB*, vii). Clement Oudart describes Duncan's work as a "palimpsest" ("Genreading and Underwriting"), collage and palimpsest both implying a layering of reiterated materials in order to create an intended effect. The palimpsestic view further reinforces Duncan's claims of being a "derivative" poet, since Duncan is working on top of the earlier works of others, such that their work remains in bits and pieces throughout Duncan's. The collage metaphor also implies that Duncan actively takes these quotations, allusions, forms, voices, and styles of other material and reiterates them into a collage or assemblage of poetic materials, while creating something entirely his own.

Rodia's towers, at least the decorative aspect, are stylistically a collage piece, built up from layers of various, and oftentimes disparate, materials. Discarded or waste pieces of pottery, broken bottles, salvaged rebar, and even a car, were used in the construction and decoration of the towers. The towers as Duncan describes them, are made up of "shells, fragments of tile, scavenged / from the city dump, from sea-wrack," and, unlike the towers of Church and State, are "inspired; built up from bits of beauty / sorted out" (22). The towers and their unconventional materials and style "risk height" and the wrath of those who seek to dictate the "rules" of art. Rodia's towers are, in the Romantic tradition, an "original accretion" of materials, but they are also made up of "disregarded splendors," just as Duncan's poetry is "derivative." "Form" is of great importance here; Rodia and Duncan are both dealing with pre-existing "forms" (the "disregarded splendors" of their materials and also the "tower" form), but their reiterations are "original" and "personal" (23). Duncan, again quoting Olson:

"There are only his own
 composed forms, and each one
 the issue of the time of the moment of its creation,
 not any ultimate except what he in his heat
 and that instant in its solidity yield" (23).

Though there are pre-existing forms inherent in the towers (as is the tower form itself), those forms, "broken bottles," "shells," and "colord dishes," accreted and reiterated by the artist, result in the Form, the towers, which are Rodia's "'sign'," not that of a doctrine-giving institution. There is no "ultimate" meaning as determined by doctrine or dogma, only the reiterated and "composed forms" of that "instant." Again, from "Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman," Duncan, describing his cosmological affinity with Whitman, says:

When Whitman thinks of the tradition his vision belongs to, he does not list Heraclitus, but here he is most Heraclitean, for the followers of Heraclitus were most accused of just this heresy, that they believed in a Universe in the process of its Self-Realization. This God does not learn His Self – his lesson – complete except in the totality of Creation, for his learning and his creating are one. The grand Maker or Poet makes his Self come real – realizes Himself – as he makes the field of the Real. We learn who we are by living – we are ourselves the mass of our individualities. (79)

Olson, with Whitehead in mind, argues against “any ultimate” and instead for a process of becoming. Similarly, Rodia, in constructing his towers, “makes his Self come real...as he makes the field of the Real”; the act is doubly creative – it “creates” the artist as the artist “creates” art. Here the artist is identified by his coming into a realization of, a becoming of his sign as revealed through the reiterations of his art. Form and Content are inextricable, even for the Self.

That process of becoming is linked with the collage and palimpsestic style, Duncan’s poem acting as part of the larger poetic field, the poem a kind of literary *temenos*. The use of accreted poetic materials, beyond mirroring Rodia’s style, creates a field of poetic and artistic relationships, further connecting the thematic and stylistic “roots” of the poem with its “aerial structure.” In “Rites of Participation,” Duncan lays out the role of the poem: “The art of the poem, like the mechanism of the dream or the intent of the tribal myth and dromena, is a cathexis: to keep present and immediate a variety of times and places, persons and events” (110). Duncan’s style of poetic collage or palimpsest, like Rodia’s, and his use of these varied texts, creates a space in which “a variety of times and places, persons and events” are immediately present with one another. This space is the scene of “cathexis,” a space invested with energy, the

poetic “field.” One is reminded of Olson: “So: how is the poet to accomplish same energy, how is he, what is the process by which a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place” (“Projective Verse,” 140). For Duncan, these texts are “disregarded splendors,” and they serve as poetic material and create an energized, poetic space, just as the “scavenged” detritus of Rodia serves as building material for his energized, architectural space.

It’s important then that these various texts are parsed out. The first allusion is to Dante, the title of the poem being the first line of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, roughly translating as: “midway on the road of life.” Duncan’s use of this line, which originally referred to Dante’s age at the writing of the *Divine Comedy*, can also apply to Rodia, and Duncan, who were at similar points when they began the towers and *Roots and Branches* respectively. Thus Duncan emphasizes the artistic relationships between these three, implying the intent, the poetics of each, is similar. Duncan will later include Olson and Gaudi in this group of artists.

Leaving aside the Olson material, Duncan’s next “clear” textual reiteration compares the Towers to another tower, the “Tower of Jewels” from San Francisco’s Panama-Pacific Exposition. The Panama-Pacific Expo celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 and marked San Francisco’s rebuilding after the earthquake and fires of 1906. In this rebuilt or “resurrected” sense, we can see the connection Duncan makes between the towers and their creative genesis, beyond their “bejewelled” appearance. The Tower of Jewels was the tallest structure at the Expo, and was literally its “crown jewel,” located in the center of the main Court of the Universe. Frank Todd, in *The Story of the Exposition*, described the tower in this way:

“Every salient object and decorative design of it sparkled with rays of ruby and emerald and sapphire and aqua marine from the thousands of brilliants swinging in the breeze. And through the pierced friezes of the flanking colonnades the sky shone in burning blue” (305).

The Tower of Jewels would have been a part of the collective memory of northern California and there’s no doubt that a young Duncan, raised in Bakersfield, would have either heard about the tower or seen photos of it, lodging itself in his imagination to be recalled by Rodia’s similarly “glittering” tower. A quotation from *The Architecture and Landscape Gardening of the Exposition* describes the expositions, in particular the tower, but by extension, Rodia’s towers, Gaudí’s work at La Seu, and Duncan’s own poetry, as creating “phantom kingdom[s] to symbolize man’s highest aims” (23). Once again, Duncan notes and Rodia boasts of the height of the towers, how they rise “out of squalid suburbs.” Todd similarly marvels at the height of the Tower of Jewels, saying that “when you crossed the Bay into Marin County and got on a level with the northerly ridge of San Francisco’s hills, you saw that it rose higher even than they did” (305). Duncan’s textual reiteration from *The Architecture and Landscape Gardening of the Exposition* is worth quoting more fully:

[International Expositions] are phantom kingdoms wherein the people do everything but sleep. They germinate and grow with phenomenal energy. Their existence is established without conquest and their magic growth is similar to the mushroom and the moonflower; they vanish like setting suns in their own radiance. Thousands of neophytes of every race, creed, and color come with willing hearts and hands to do homage and bear manna to nourish the sinews of a phantom kingdom...

If building Phantom Kingdoms symbolizes man’s highest aims on earth, then the same is true when building Real Kingdoms, reiterations of one another.

The “Phantom Kingdom” and the “Real Kingdom” seem to be different spaces here, but they cannot be separated, any more than the “eternal” and the “made” of “Often” can be separated – they are the same field. “Phantom Kingdoms” are fields of the imagination, and are not merely “record[s] [of] human thought,” but are generative spaces in which “human thought” is “nourish[ed]” and reiterated.

These “Phantom” kingdoms are also organic – they “germinate and grow” naturally without the heavy hand of “conquest.” They, like Whitman’s leaves of grass, have as their forms the ever-flowing, ever Self-creative ground of a process in which forces of awareness, Self-awareness, of declaration, and of longing, work and re-work in the evolution of what they are, the evolution of a creative intention that moves not toward the satisfaction of some prescribed form but towards the fulfillment of a multitude of possibilities and reiterations out of its seed. (“Changing Perspective,” 64-65)

The towers are now a “Self-creative ground,” and Duncan’s language speaks to the “generative” power of these spaces. Likewise, Louis Christian Mullgardt’s language speaks to the “germinative” nature of the “Phantom Kingdoms,” of the spaces created by architectures, and their power to bring people together. Duncan recognizes this power, himself drawn by these various structures, as the “cathedral at Palma” has “gatherd its children under one roof of the imagination” (22). Mullgardt argues that architecture is a “barometer” to measure “national progress,” and Rodia claims that he built his towers “to do something big for America” (21). But, Duncan isn’t arguing that there is a strong nationalistic sense to any of these creations. Rather, he probably has in mind a national identity similar to that of Whitman’s “Americans” in the sense of his phrase, “The Americans of all nations.” For Whitman the “United States of

America” wasn’t a “government” or institution per se, but “essentially the greatest poem,” what I call *temenos*. As Duncan’s poetry is “a poetry of all poetries” and the Tower of Jewels a “mingling of the architectural characteristics of the entire world,” the “Phantom Kingdom” looks toward a “universal approval” through a reiterative process of becoming.

A less obvious textual reiteration can be seen in Duncan’s use of “sea-wrack.” Both H.D. and Pound use the phrase in separate works – H.D. in “Hermonax,” one of the six poems of H.D.’s in *Des Imagistes*, edited by Pound, and Pound in Canto XVII. One must assume that, on some level, Duncan was aware of these uses, and going back to the original sources adds another layer of complexity to Duncan’s creation of a charged architectural (architextual?) space.

In H.D.’s poem, the speaker, Hermonax, arrives at the altar of the gods of the sea, Ino and Palemon. Hermonax is a poor fisherman who has nothing of real value to place at the altar of the gods, so instead gives something most people view as waste, something most people “disregard”: “sea wrack.” As in other early poems such as “Sea Rose,” H.D. imbues the sea wrack with a certain strength through travail, having been “torn from the hillocks” and “[b]roken by great waves.” Hermonax too, has shown great strength in reaching the altar, “[r]isking chance” to arrive much as Duncan says Rodia has “risk[ed] height.” For Hermonax, the sea wrack is not trash, is not detritus, but a great gift representing the strength to defy what appear to be overwhelming forces and the ability to see “splendors” in those things others “disregard.” The “sea wrack” can be seen in Mullgardt’s terms, as “manna to nourish the sinews of a phantom kingdom” (v). Rodia transforms trash from the “city dump” into “manna,” into a “phantom kingdom”; the towers are a gift as well: “Art, dedicated to itself!” as the sea wrack is the sea laid at the altar of the sea gods. The re-presentation of the sea wrack at the altar has transformed the sea wrack’s meaning, as Rodia’s re-presentation of trash has altered its meaning.

Pound's Canto XVII also deals with gods and the sea, though this time the god in question is "ZAGREUS" or Dionysus. The tale begun here is of Dionysus being abducted by sailors, but this Canto is a masterful description of light playing through and off a bizarre city- or island-scape, a "forest of marble" reminiscent of Venice:

And the waters richer than glass,
 Bronze gold, the blaze over the silver
 Dye-pots in the torch-light
 The flash of wave under prows,
 And the silver beaks rising and crossing.

Stone trees, white and rose-white in the darkness,
 Cypress there by the towers,
 Drift under the hulls in the night.

"In the gloom the gold
 Gathers the light about it..." (78)

Duncan uses similar language of light and "rising," describing the towers as "bejewelld with glass," "glittering," "an ecstasy / of...colord dishes," "glass beads of many colors," and finally, "a fairy citadel," evoking British mythology's "Enchanted Isle" of Avalon. The enchanted "grove" of marble, the "stone palace" described as a "splendour," rises out of the water much as Rodia's towers rise from the "squalid suburbs." Dionysus/Zagreus represents anything but the "expected mediocre," as evidenced by his rich surroundings in this Canto, which include the enchanted "forest of marble" and the exotic panthers that are his companions. Earlier, in Canto II, Dionysus' powers of transformation were revealed when he turned his abductors into

porpoises and rooted their ship to the ocean floor, vines overtaking it, a variation of “roots and branches.” Zagreus/Dionysus, like Rodia, is a transformative and creative figure. From the ocean, from the waters, from the “sea wrack / Salt-bright with foam,” rises the “stone palace,” the “fairy citadel”:

a fabulous construction out of
 Christianity where Morgan le Fay
 carries the King to her enchanted Isle
 —all glass beads of many colors. (“Nel Mezzo,” 23)

As with Rodia’s towers, Duncan’s poem is filled with “broken” bits, refit in such a way that “its genius / misfit[s] the expected mediocre” (23). Hermonax’s sacrifice at the altar of the sea gods seems “mediocre”; the boy Dionysus seems “mediocre” to his captors; Rodia seems like a “mediocre” man. Yet the strength and transformative power of the individual artist allows for acts of creation that recognize and disclose the immanent. Duncan’s poems often focus on quite “mediocre” subjects, but then create and disclose the spatial presence of the divine in terms of *temenos*.

We can also see how the figure of Morgan le Fay and the “enchanted Isle” of Avalon are connected to Robin Hood. Again, Hood creates, almost paradoxically, within the bounds of the State, within the King’s lands (thus the problem with him killing animals), an area outside of the bounds of the State. Sherwood Forest becomes a space both within and without the literal bounds of the law, a “greenwood” Duncan says, that is “outside / Christendom” but which is quite literally in the middle of it. This echoes Duncan’s description of Avalon and Morgan Le Fay, with Duncan comparing the complex of the towers (for Rodia constructed a whole complex, not just the towers) to Avalon, the fabled Blessed Isle, the tower complex “a fairy citadel, / a

fabulous construction out of / Christianity” (23). Duncan’s phrase, “out of / Christianity” can either mean, as it seems to in the lines about Robin Hood, that the construction, the “citadel” exists “outside” of the authority of “Christianity” and “Christendom,” or the phrase could mean that the “citadel” has grown from “Christianity,” but has now moved beyond the bounds of accepted Christian “doctrine.” Either way, the “citadel,” and its ruler, who we may also assume to be its “constructor,” Morgan Le Fay, exist in a now outside the bounds of Church authority, as Rodia’s tower complex acts as a space outside of city authority, outside of “city ordinance” (23). Morgan Le Fay continues the “misfit” or “outlaw” tradition of Robin Hood (or vice versa), as her character was slowly transformed from a fairy healer to antagonist of Camelot and its knights, and ultimately to “traitor” or betrayer (back to Burckhardt) of King Arthur and his State. Duncan restores Morgan back to her earlier role as healer, as an artist of sorts whose task of restoring the dying King to health is reminiscent of Duncan’s claim that the towers were “resurrected,” as if they were brought back to life, as Morgan will do with Arthur on the Blessed Isle.

Duncan returns to Morgan le Fay in “*Shadows, Passages II*,” Avalon described as “a land and time” that “tell the beads of that story again” (*Bending the Bow*, 32). The space (and time) of Avalon recall for Duncan his own poetic fellowship with Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer, and Gael Turnbull, with those poets also “tell[ing] / the beads of that story again” of the “land and time in which we were” (31). The “beads” of “*Shadows*” repeats the “glass beads of many colors” in “*Nel Mezzo*,” each space being charged with “fabulous” possibilities.

Both spaces, the tower complex and Avalon, like Robin Hood’s Sherwood Forest, are “enchanted” spaces, spaces that allow for those who dwell there to move beyond the “bound” thought of convention, the “squalid” spaces of the “suburbs,” the “knots” of “cold, hunger, and

disease” that represent the “defeated” and indoctrinated mind. These spaces are not just symbols of the artist, not just their sign, but are places of further creation, where “children” can gather “under one roof of the imagination” (22).

Temenos, like the sacred space of Avalon, acts also as a gate, portal, or “passage,” a key motif of movement. Duncan described the meadow in “Often I Am Permitted” as a “place where one enters the gate of otherness, other world” (Jarnot). The “Queen Under The Hill” from “Often” is analogous to Morgan Le Fay, such that the artist (Le Fay, Rodia, Duncan, Olson, Gaudi, et al) has the creative powers to cut out a sacred space (in Duncan’s case, the poem, in Rodia’s, his tower complex) that is a “sign” of the artist. But the artist must also gain “permission” to enter this field – it is not a field completely of the artist’s making. The field is both “made” by the artist but is also “eternal,” and requires “first permission” to enter. “Permission” is granted, but only to those who strive to “discover” the natural orders of the world, rather than determine their own order. Once again, “the order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him or upon his own language is trivial beside the divine order or natural order he may discover in them” (6). Johnson, in “Up Rising,” is hell-bent on “impos[ing]” his own order, of cutting out a space of his own in the name of America, of creating empire. This space of empire (*basileia*), akin to the space of the Sheriff of Nottingham and the King (“The Law”) or the city (“Nel Mezzo”) stands in stark contrast to the sacred spaces of Sherwood Forest and Nuestro Pueblo, spaces of *temenos* and the immanence revealed there (and through the creation of *temenos*). Johnson (as well as other presidents indicted in “Up Rising” and other places) believes that he is the law, and that his laws determine order – but as a poet he is “irresponsible” – he lacks the ability to respond to the natural orders of the world. The poet, Duncan urges, must strive towards “[b]ecoming conscious, becoming aware of the order of

what is happening”; this is the “full responsibility of the poet” (“Towards,” 7). The poet responds to this recognition of *temenos*, of measures, of bounds, of the divine and natural field, with *temenos* of his own, the poem, his “work”: “poetry reveals itself to us as we obey the orders that appear in our work.” Just as the poet works with the “materials of the poem,” Rodia works with his “scavenged” materials “resurrected against the rules” of authority, whether that authority be the city officials or prevailing artistic dogma, but according to “his self,” a self that is responding to the natural order he recognizes. Thus, the work of art is both a reflection of *temenos* and *temenos* itself, object and subject.

In *Poetry and Anarchism*, Read, criticizing Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, says that while “you will find in [their] works...a few vague (and even uneasy) references to art...there is no recognition of art as a primary factor in human experience, of art as a mode of knowledge or as a means of apprehending the meaning or quality of life” (14). Rodia’s towers are a space we can enter, a space of knowledge that allows us to apprehend “the meaning or quality of life.” Likewise, Rodia’s artistic process also allows this apprehension – the towers are created through an apprehension of the immanent while disclosing that immanence, as Duncan’s poems are. Read continues his criticism, turning his attention towards fascism and art, arguing that the fascists have used Hegel to “put into practice the notion of a supreme authoritarian state,” resulting in the reduction of “art to a subordinate and slavish role. Fascism has perhaps done more and worse than that: it has insisted on a purely rational and functional interpretation of art” (14-15). The Watts Towers, in the fascist sense, lack “rational and functional interpretation” – they serve the city no “official” purpose (“Art, dedicated to itself!”) and violate its zoning laws, its laws of spatial determination. The State must eliminate the “phantasy kingdom” of Rodia because it threatens the State’s own “supreme authoritarian” role as definer of boundaries. The

State determines purpose and function, rather than the individual, and Rodia's *temenos* is a direct challenge to that determinative role, as Duncan's poetry is a direct challenge to arbiters of poetic taste like Miss Drew.

The towers are also linked to the body, dance-ground, and household. Most obviously, the towers are undeniably a creation (and reflection) of Rodia's body, in ways in which poems might not be so readily recognized. In fact, oftentimes works like Rodia's are so fascinating because we cannot believe one man, one body, could have accomplished such a massive "body of work." The connection to the dance-ground is less clear, since there is no record of the space being used for dance, but if viewed in terms of fluid relations between objects determining space, similar to the ways in which the spatial relations between dancers determine the dance-ground, seeing the towers in this way is easier. The organic process of the complex's creation, the play between materials and aspects of the buildings give the tower an air of lightness akin to the dance and an unfolding "aerial structure." Finally, the complex was Rodia's home for thirty-three years and, more importantly, created as a kind of household space for the neighborhood – "Nuestro Pueblo" Rodia called it - "Our Town" or "Our Home." Though it didn't always appear that the surrounding neighborhood shared in Rodia's communal vision of the complex, they eventually came around. In fact, during the Watts riots of 1965, the rioters did no harm to the towers while the surrounding area was badly damaged.

The complex is a kind of "fathering force," a "greenwood," and an "Avalon." The opening third of "The Performance We Wait For" anticipates Rodia's own creative "performance":

A King – the one we call the Poet –
under the Crown of an Idea

seeks quiet of a garden
 even be it a single plant,
 tended in the evening. Prosper
 O green friend! for I have seen
 signature that is ground of all delight
 in the sight of you, that from seed
 has given stem, leaves, flower
 of your nature,
 that we may not depart from, but have there
 fathering force, a temenos,
 bounded by grandparents, that founds
 one field. (55-56)

Rodia is a sort of king in “Nel Mezzo,” mirrored by the “phantom kingdom” of the Tower of Jewels and King Arthur, carried to his own “fairy citadel, / a fabulous construction out of / Christianity” as Robin Hood’s “greenwood” is “outside / Christendom” and the towers violate “city ordinance,” and he is a poet, a maker. Duncan gives to the “Poet” a “Crown” which is an “Idea” – by “Nel Mezzo,” Rodia’s “crown” is his creation, which is full of “crowns”: “The rounds contain crowns. / The increases climb by bridges” (24). Further, his “quiet garden” is described in “Nel Mezzo” as “concrete gardens” that, although seem to lack the “life” of the green space described in “The Performance We Wait For,” are in actuality no less alive, though the structure appears to be a “skeletal remain” (24).

In fact, the complex is a “Self-creative ground,” a “germinative” ground from which the towers rise like living roots, then branches, then flowers, a metaphor used previously to describe

the body and which are a sort of “trinity upraised by himself” (22). The space of the complex is the “signature that is ground of all delight” – the towers are Rodia’s “sign” and “he is a tower” (22). Duncan’s language, “stem, leaves, flower,” in relation to a “ground” return us to the second poem in *The Opening of the Field*, “The Dance,” where Duncan describes the dancers as flowers: “root stem stamen petal.” In the end, there is no need to “depart from” the field, from the “green solid meadow” of the dance, from the body, from “Nuestro Pueblo,” from *temenos*, since it is a reflection and disclosing of the immanent all around us, the “one field” of the cosmos, the numinous present even in the “fragments of tile scavenged / from the city dump”:

Whitman was right. Our names are left
 like leaves of grass,
 likeness and liking, the human greenness

tough as grass that survives cruelest seasons. (“The Dance,” 9)

Conclusion

“I am given access in Duncan’s work to a richness of lore not previously part of my own experience, or I am turned by reading his poems to look in those directions, or to look from the angles not realized before; access, but returned at all points to this moment where I am: that is the active, going on, the outward into this world around -- that the objects around me may be, are, a part of other orders than I had sensed.”

-- Kenneth Irby, Unprinted Review of *Roots and Branches*, 4

As I noted in the introduction regarding Keith Newton’s piece, which he deemed a project of “recovery,” the fact of my writing a dissertation on Duncan clearly puts me in the camp also arguing for Duncan’s “continuing relevance.” I would offer up a different explanation though as to Duncan’s tenuous status in the world of poetry that moves beyond his “difficulty,” or, as Gioia and his fellow editors put it, his tendency to be “sometimes long-winded” (615). It’s my argument that Duncan is increasingly found farther outside the orbit of the discussion about contemporary poetry because commentators and critics have such a difficult time determining where in that universe his work belongs. Duncan, proudly and repeatedly referred to himself as a “derivative” poet, freely drawing from a wide range of sources, poetic and otherwise. He claimed affinities and “lineages” from Dante, Shakespeare, Whitman, Pound, H.D., and others, making it difficult to place him in a particular sphere of influence. Most often Duncan is associated with the Black Mountain poets or, as M.L. Rosenthal puts it in 1967’s *The New Poets*, “The ‘Projectivist’ Movement.” Yet Duncan’s time as a teacher at Black Mountain College was quite brief, and while Duncan maintained close relationships with many of those associated with the *Black Mountain Review*, including Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley, his

poetry diverges significantly from theirs. All may have been grounded in “projective verse” and open field poetics, but where each went from that foundation is quite different. The question remains: How do critics and commentators categorize Duncan?

One of the major obstacles in “placing” Duncan is what Albert Gelpi calls the “complicated dialectic between Neoromanticism and Postmodernism” that informs the “poetry of the second half of the [twentieth] century” (“The Genealogy of Postmodernism,” 541). Stephen Collis echoes this idea, positing a “trajectory [with] archival modernism of Pound at one end and the formal investigations of language poetry at the other,” with Duncan taking up “an interesting transition point and poetic middle ground” between the two ends (“Frayed,” 3). It may be this position in the “middle,” or what Gelpi calls “the tension...between Duncan’s organic and linguistic inclinations [that] makes [Duncan] a pivotal figure in the dialectic between Neoromanticism and Postmodernism” (“Poetic Language and Language Poetry,” 192). Duncan’s connections to “Neoromanticism” and the High Modernist Project of Pound, Williams, H.D., among others, has been explored, much by Duncan himself. But it is his connection to postmodernism that seems to beg exploration. Gelpi’s argument about Duncan’s “postmodern” affinities rests mainly on Duncan’s use of language, as it seems Collis’ does. But this connection seems to limit the definition of “postmodern” to language poetry, and such limitation is myopic.

Brian McHale notes in *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* the contentious definitions and conceptions of “postmodern,” particularly in poetry, noting that poetry “is one of the cultural forms where no consensus has emerged concerning postmodernism’s relevance” (2). McHale, in exploring the postmodernist “long poem,” must first establish a working definition of postmodernism, and then, more specifically, link that definition to a certain kind of contemporary poetics. The first half of that task is easier said than done, with McHale

confessing, “It’s not the putative death of postmodernism that I find threatening, but rather the possibility that it never existed in the first place” (ix). Citing Majorie Perloff, McHale puts forward the possibility that there is no definable difference between modernism and postmodernism.

Exploring some of the critical definitions of postmodernism, particularly poetry, doesn’t necessarily inspire confidence that McHale’s great fear isn’t a reality. Paul Hoover’s 1994 Norton anthology, *Postmodern American Poetry*, defines “postmodern” as “the historical period following World War II.” He goes on to say that the term “postmodern”:

[A]lso suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life in writing. Postmodernist poetry is the avant-garde poetry of our time... This anthology shows that avant-garde poetry endures in its resistance to mainstream ideology; it is the avant-garde that renews poetry as a whole through new, but initially shocking artistic strategies. (xxv)

It’s difficult here to understand how all poetry written post-World War II would automatically qualify as “avant-garde,” and how this declaration of faith in the “new” is any different than Pound’s famous Modernist dictum to “make it new.” Perloff earlier states in “Whose New American Poetry?: Anthologizing in the Nineties”: “The trouble with all of this talk of oppositionality to ‘mainstream ideology’ is that it doesn’t get down to cases” (“Diacritics,” 112). Perloff here, anticipating her argument from *21st Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*, essentially argues that the anthologizers of “postmodern” poetry have as vague a notion of what the term means as anyone. Albert Gelpi, in the aforementioned “The Genealogy of Postmodernism,” sets out this explanation:

The poetry of the Cold War period set out the defining measures of Postmodernism before critics introduced the term: a deepening sense of the mind's alienation from nature and of the world's alienation from reality; an intensified experience of material randomness and temporal flux, of moral relativity and psychological alienation, of epistemological confusion and metaphysical doubt; a drastic scaling down of expectations and aspirations; a questioning of language as a medium of perception and communication; a shift from hypostasizing poetry as a completed work to investigating it as an inconclusive process of provisional improvisation. (527)

Gelpi even says that "Duncan...represented the fracturing of Pound's...aesthetic...in ways that point to Postmodernism," yet without quite reaching that mode. Graça Capinha maintains that Duncan's is a "poetics that is looking for absolute freedom and possibility, an asystematic/nonclosed vision of reality, a discontinuous, fragmented, incomplete and decentered model" (19). This seems to be Capinha's own definition of "postmodernism" and the ideas of "flux" and "process" Gelpi points out are echoed in Capinha's language.

"Postmodernism" was a term with which Duncan was not entirely comfortable. In "The Self in Postmodern Poetry," Duncan argues, "I would not want, in any case to contend with what postmodern means or does not mean as a possible definition of a period in the history of ideas" (219). One could argue that Duncan's issue with the term "postmodern" being used to discuss his work has less to do with ideology or poetics and more to do with the term itself. For a poet so attuned to the nuances of language, "postmodern" would have been an empty term for Duncan. It immediately relegates "postmodern" work to a period owing its identity to the period preceding it, automatically privileging "modernism" over "postmodernism." As Duncan says in

the same essay, “‘Modern,’ for me is present in my work as a nostalgia for a world long gone” (219). Thus, “postmodern” isn’t an indication of a *kind* of work but of the *time* of work.

Further, Duncan would have resisted such facile reductions since they ignored his immense range of influences, literary and non-literary, and overlooked his self-proclaimed derivative qualities in that they limit his influences (both attractive and repulsive) to the Modernists. This just isn’t the case.

McHale, originally frightened by Perloff’s conclusion, comes to embrace it, if in a re-imagined way, employing a similar thought process as the privileging problem pointed out above. He argues:

[T]he relationship of postmodernism to modernism is not unique to the twentieth-century, but recurrent; that in the course of cultural history, successive ‘modernisms’ have been crystallized out, leaving behind residues available for recuperation by later generations of “postmodernists.” In other words, this is a general mechanism of cultural change. (x-xi)

For Duncan, postmodernism is just the extension of what some critics call the High Modernist Project. Yet this project is often seen as the continuation of the Romantic “project,” and so on, so that Duncan’s poetry is once more seen in a light of lineage and derivation – postmodern being just the latest name for Duncan’s search for a sort of “unified poetics of everything” to borrow and recast a phrase from the world of physics. Duncan is the ultimate “recuperat[or],” thus the ultimate “postmodernist” in McHale’s sense.

Charles Altieri and Michael Palmer both seem to argue that the “poetics of presence” which marked much of 20th century poetry, is lacking and that something needs to be done by the poet to account for that “lack,” especially in terms of a public poetry. *Temenos* could be

Duncan's answer to that problem, as Levertov's was the "notebook form" (Palmer says it's the serial long poem – *Passages* and *Structure of Rime*). While it isn't necessary to "place" him among other poets, particularly postmodern ones, it is helpful to see Duncan's work as a postmodern attempt to reconcile what he believed to be the strengths and weaknesses of the poetic trends before him.

Temenos then provides for a spatial model of viewing Duncan's work in terms of this kind of postmodernism. The three postmodern "applications" I will touch briefly on here are McHale's "architectural model" of the postmodernist long poem, Hakim Bey's "Temporary Autonomous Zone," and Gilles Deleuze's discussions of the fold.

The Architectural Model

Since McHale sees far fewer postmodern "models" in poetry, he turns to other models to think about the postmodernist long poem. While not discussing Duncan at length, McHale does point out *Passages* and *Structure of Rime* as being more than "eligible" to have been discussed. In fact, Duncan's entire oeuvre could be considered a "long poem," since for Duncan the poetic process was without end.

McHale chooses to view the postmodernist long poem through the lens of postmodern architecture, since postmodern architecture

is, after all, the form in which most people are apt to encounter postmodernist aesthetics...and the one that has occasioned the most public discussion and controversy. But it also has a special status in theories of postmodernism; it is, in a sense, the privileged model, to which all other manifestations of postmodernism are referred. (7)

McHale offers up two postmodern architectural models: the “‘semiotic’ or ‘historicist’ model,” which favors “merely functional buildings” paired with decorative aspects emphasizing the building’s “historicist allusions” (9-10), and the “deconstructivist” model, which aimed to “trouble and undo architectural form” (13). This latter model is dominated (haunted?) by the seeming contradictory nature of architecture and deconstruction, with McHale, echoing Derrida, asking, “[H]ow can one deconstruct and still have architecture?” and, “[H]ow can one build large-scale poetic structure and deconstruct it at the same time?” (14-15). Ultimately, McHale argues that approaching the postmodernist long poem is a confrontation of sorts, a struggle with language, like Jacob’s wrestling with the Angel Syntax in “The Law I Love”:

Confronted with such puzzles of inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, and such evidence of the permeability of textual boundaries, one is forced to acknowledge in all of these poems a compelling obligation toward the difficult whole. (17)

Temenos provides a solution to those puzzles, since the “boundaries” of *temenos* are, by definition, fluid and ever-changing. Textual boundaries almost fall away in Duncan, the boundaries between individual texts (poems) *and* between the works of others, as evidenced by both his “derivative” claim and the heavy use of (often uncited) the texts of others. In Duncan’s worldview, poetic structures were in a constant state of creation and destruction; thus, Duncan would have no problem answering McHale’s earlier question. The fluid structure of the poem and of the cosmos was always on Duncan’s mind:

What interests me here is that the picture of an intricately articulated structure, a form that maintains a disequilibrium or lifetime – whatever it means to the biophysicist – to the poet means that the life is by its nature orderly and that the

poem might follow the processes of thought and feeling, the immediate impulse of psychic life. (“Towards,” 3)

Duncan’s concern with the “structures” of “disequilibrium” and “order” ends up being what McHale believes to be a defining concern of postmodernism. This concern can be seen in the “spatial turn” McHale argues postmodern poetry has taken, a turn that, like *temenos*, emphasizes “the materiality of poetry itself” and foregrounds “the spaces of the worlds it projects.”

The Fold

Duncan was not an avid reader of French critics and theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari. In fact, in a letter to Chris Edwards, Duncan complained, “So I find my attention astray when I try out the *Anti-Oedipe* of Deleuze and Guattari or Lacan’s hermeneutics which have to do with being involved with psyche-analysis. They sit there on my shelf yet to be read” (“Letters”). Yet Duncan’s idea of the field as being “folded” seems to anticipate (or at least parallel) Deleuze’s own architectural discussions about folding architecture, particularly as envisioned in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Duncan’s open field poetics presents the poem not as an enclosed whole but a multiplicity, a vision central to the concept of the fold. Paul Harris, in “To See with the Mind and Think through the Eye,” notes that Greg Lynn “theorises folding architecture in terms of processes that, in a sense, represent the integration of ... multiplitious bodies. Here Deleuzian spatial concepts become dynamic techniques” (46). These “spatial concepts” can be seen in Duncan’s poetry and in his poetics, particularly in the repeated use of the image of the folded field and the integration of multiple fields within a larger poetic field. In fact, Harris argues for a viewing of the Watts Towers as folding architecture:

[T]he Towers change so much depending on what slice or segment of them you choose to frame and examine—they truly constitute a “whole” that undergoes qualitative “variation” as the parts are recombined in different ways. The interplay of light and shadow caught at that moment in the shot also underscores the specificity of each impression the Towers give off, and how they change as perception lingers over them.

Likewise, Deleuze speaks about “events,” asking, “What are the conditions that make an event possible?” and answering, “Events are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity” (*The Fold*, 76). Duncan echoes this sentiment in “The Structure of Rime VII,” with the “counsels of the Wood” declaring, “*The measures of Man are unfoldings of Chaos*” (8, 12-13). The poem, as “event,” as dance, “unfold[s]” or “unfolds,” which to Deleuze means an “increase” (*The Fold*, 8) – Duncan’s “Passages” is an “unfolding” “multiplicity,” a poetic “event.” Further, in a 1980 interview with Ekbert Faas, Duncan says of the “field folded” that, “time and space are interfolded like layers and it is in the folds that you have realms of being” (18). Clearly the concept of the “fold” plays a major role in Duncan’s poetics, and his conception of the field as a multi-dimensional space whose boundaries are constantly in flux shares many of the characteristics of Deleuze’s “folding architecture.” In another letter to Edwards, Duncan claimed that in his poetry he “strive[s] for an *assemblage* of positions” (“Letters”). Jacques Derrida’s definition of “assemblage” connects Duncan’s claim with the Deleuzian concept of folding architecture: “[Assemblage] seems more apt for suggesting that the kind of bringing together proposed here has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different lines to separate again” (“Différance,” 386). We return again to the metaphor of the

poem as mobile, as four-dimensional space, interconnected fields also able to “separate again,” and in a constant state of flux.

As stated earlier, some Duncan scholars, such as Johnson, argue against reading Duncan’s language as too literally spatial, suggesting “spatial form produces resolution and ‘Passages’ is by definition ‘without bounds’” (102). But does “spatial form” necessarily “produce resolutions”? It would seem that the mobile’s constant movement and changing resists “resolutions.” My argument is that *temenos* is not closed, and does not “produce resolutions” in this sense of product, but is always in a process of “becoming.” Duncan’s view of the universe is of a field constantly becoming rather than having become. This state of becoming means that the poem, the field, the assemblage, *temenos*, is a “properly permeable frame [which does] not demarcate a rigid boundary but open[s] an interval” (Harris 41).

Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)

The permeability and fluidity of *temenos* allows it to also be connected to Hakim Bey’s concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). In his long essay, Bey refuses to actually define the TAZ, but argues that the TAZ as space can only occur as an “uprising,” rather than a “revolution,” reminiscent of Duncan’s poem “Up Rising.” An idea germinating out of research of pirate “utopias,” Bey’s discussion of these spaces considers anarchist spaces and the strategies for carving out areas of “freedom” when the State not only dictates issues of space but of time.

The argument goes:

If History IS "Time," as it claims to be, then the uprising is a moment that springs up and out of Time, violates the "law" of History. If the State IS History, as it claims to be, then the insurrection is the forbidden moment, an unforgivable

denial of the dialectic--shimmying up the pole and out of the smokehole, a shaman's maneuver carried out at an "impossible angle" to the universe. History says the Revolution attains "permanence," or at least duration, while the uprising is "temporary." In this sense an uprising is like a "peak experience" as opposed to the standard of "ordinary" consciousness and experience. Like festivals, uprisings cannot happen every day--otherwise they would not be "nonordinary." But such moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life. The shaman returns--you can't stay up on the roof forever-- but things have changed, shifts and integrations have occurred--a *difference* is made.

Temenos is the site of these "shifts and integrations," a "greenwood" outside of the State's control.

Jose Rodriguez Herrera argues in "Revolution or Death," that "Duncan's radical anarchism made him see revolution as opposed to individual freedom – for the poet, destructive of his creative, imaginative faculties" (157). Bey echoes this sentiment, claiming, "The vision comes to life in the moment of uprising--but as soon as 'the Revolution' triumphs and the State returns, the dream and the ideal are *already* betrayed. I have not given up hope or even expectation of change--but I distrust the word *Revolution*." This is reminiscent of Duncan's lament about the "Lenins and Castros" whose revolutions quickly turn into the kinds of authoritarian states they had revolted against.

Further, Bey equates the TAZ with a festal event, arguing that "such moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life. The shaman returns--you can't stay up on the roof forever-- but things have changed, shifts and integrations have occurred--a *difference* is made." Here we can equate the fluidity and impermanence of the TAZ with Duncan's

postmodern *temenos*, a “momentous // inconclusion” yet also a “locus of creation” (“Where It Appears, *Passages 4*” 9-10, 14). The internet, or what Bey calls the “counter-Net” is a promising area for the TAZ to rise up in, but Bey argues, “The TAZ must now exist within a world of pure space, the world of the senses. Liminal, even evanescent, the TAZ must combine information and desire in order to fulfill its adventure (its “happening”), in order to fill itself to the borders of its destiny, to saturate itself with its own becoming.” This could very well be Duncan holding forth on the poetic event.

And we return to the paradox of “Often.” The field of the poem is temporary, like the TAZ it is “made,” while the field of the Poem, is “eternal”; one must gain permission to enter through the “uprising” or “Up Rising” of the poetic act. Once again we can see the poetic act as a physical one – of upward movement, either of the poet or shaman upward, or the breath up from the bowels and out of the mouth, the *muthos*, the “story told of what cannot be told” (“The Truth & Life of Myth,” 7). The “uprising” of poetry finds the poet “beside himself with the excitement of the dancers [and] sucks in the inspiring breath and moans, muttering against his willful lips.” The poetic event, the creation of *temenos* is also the creation of the TAZ, a “‘peak experience’ as opposed to the standard of ‘ordinary’ consciousness and experience” that “liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen.” The poetic act “irrupts...[and] creates its own space and time” (Rajchman 16), that of the TAZ, of *temenos*.

Capinha notes, of the seeming “crisis” in finding acceptable modes of language to approach postmodern poetry, that

Things are changing and we are all aware that a paradigmatic transition is happening (Bachelard; Santos). But it will take a long time to develop

“acceptable” models of language and of subject that will include discontinuity, fragmentation, incompleteness, and decentering – and still be able to provide meaning and knowledge (Deleuze and Guattari; Bernstein; Lecerle). (19)

Could Duncan’s poetics of space as manifested by *temenos* provide that “model”?

Temenos then is more than just architectural space or sacred space or dance space or bodily space or poetic space, made place or eternal place, closed space or open space, it is all of these things: it is the space endlessly being created and endlessly creative, it is the space where poetics are enacted, and it is the space created by the enactment of poetics.

The creative act as a creator of space isn’t a terribly original idea, nor is it unique to Duncan. Science fiction and fantasy tales, among others, are often described as “creating worlds” which readers/viewers/listeners can “enter.” Yet, for me, Duncan’s use of space forces us to consider what is at stake in creating and/or entering such spaces, in terms of politics, spirituality, sense of Self, and more. Creating or entering a space such as Duncan’s *temenos* is not a sort of “losing” oneself in the world, but a participatory act. One does not enter *temenos* yet have no effect on the space, as one might consider “entering” Middle Earth by reading Tolkien while having no effect on the “field” of Middle Earth. In this sense, we must always be aware of the creative possibilities of our entering into any space, including the spaces we create (and enter and re-enter) through our own creations. Even those moments that may be deemed “cute or babyish” (“Rites,” 101) must be considered much more carefully as revelations of past, present, and future meaning. The complex relationship between space and self is a part of the larger relationship between self and cosmos:

And in the ecology of forms we begin to see, as we have held in faith, the fittingness, the tellingness of events – their truth – lies in their belonging to the

evolution of forms. They cannot *not* belong. Our responsibility as artists is to recognize as fully and as deeply as we can what that belongingness consists of; to quicken our responses in what we are doing in the poem. (“Truth,” 51)

Ultimately, those responses, whether bodily or mental, dance, poem, or other act, take place in and create a “structure,” an “ecology of forms,” that is *temenos*.

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