ROBERT DUNCAN: THE POEM AS PROCESS

by

PAULINE WAH
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Department of English

The University of British Columbia,
Vancouver 8, Canada

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Abstract

It is the argument of this thesis that Robert Duncan's poetry arises out of a conviction that the poem is a vital process, depending on an active interaction or interplay between the poet and language, his medium. The argument rests on the assumption that Duncan's poetry as a whole, is a testimony of a spiritual process, with each individual poem being in some way a mystery and a revelation and, therefore, an instrument in the process of the spirit. The aesthetics underlying this concept of art are examined in the introductory chapter.

In the next four chapters, the elements that contribute to the poetic process - generally defined as the work of the poem and the work of the poet - are analyzed, through an examination of selected poem and prose statements.
A division is made of Duncan's work into two periods, in Chapter 2, with the rest of the study being focused on the second (later) period of writing, where Duncan's increased attention to language process is found to be instrumental in creating a poetry that is truly a vital process. The early work is briefly discussed in Chapter 2, as an exploration of the subject of love, that being its distinguishing characteristic, and also as a foundation for the later work. Germs of later developments are noted in Duncan's attention to psychological, magical, and musical processes in the poem, and are discussed in "Towards an African Elegy," "Medieval Scenes," and "The Venice Poem," respectively. Chapter 3 turns to the later work, Letters, The Opening of the Field and Roots and Branches. Duncan's evolving concept of language as the source and place of revelation, and as the instrument, also, of approaching a transcendent communal reality, is traced through Letters to its full definition in the first poem of The Field, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow." Preparatory to discussing the other half of the process - the poet's actual workings in the poem - Chapter 4 considers the poet's place in the poem, and his general function in its process. Duncan's two major poems of the later work, "The Poem Beginning with
a Line by Pindar," and "Apprehensions" are discussed here to demonstrate the claim that Duncan assumes no omniscience in the poem; his position is one of limited awareness. It is found that he functions in the poem through an interplay or interaction between the creation of the poem and his consciousness. Finally, the precise nature of his participation, his working of the language toward a possible music through tone leading of vowels and thematic composition, is examined in Chapter 5.

The concluding chapter summarizes Duncan's concept of process and then gives a brief sketch of areas not covered in this study. Duncan's major subjects and sources are outlined, with possible approaches to a study of his subject matter being suggested. Finally, it is claimed that however his work is approached, the spiritual centre of Duncan's art emerges as primary.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The base and centre of Robert Duncan's work is an unequivocal faith in the independent power of poetry, a poem being, for Duncan, essentially a process that is to a large extent dependent on the operation of forces beyond the poet's direction or control. Poet and poem exist in "a world of thought and feeling in which we may participate but not dominate"; his art consistently derives from "a vision of life where information and intelligence invade us, where what we know shapes us and we become creations, not rulers, of what is. Where more, we are part of the creative process, not its goal." Duncan's work cannot be properly understood unless this fact is clearly established - that is, that he proceeds not from an aesthetic or rationale of art (as 'imitation of nature,' or 'fusion

1Duncan, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," Kulchur 4(1961), p.70
of sensibility, thought, and feeling,' or a 'fusion of form and content - all of which depend on the artist being more or less in control of the artifact), but from a faith in the revelatory possibilities of art. The artist is not master but VATES - seer prophet. "The end of masterpieces, the beginning of testimony," Duncan declares in a discussion on "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," recognizing that the poet who fulfills his vatic function can have no mastery in the poem; his work is rather a testimony of an event. Like Blake, he views the poet as a 'secretary,' in the conviction that, as Blake says, 'the authors are in eternity.' With Blake or Dante before him, or Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and H(Hilda) D.(Doolittle) earlier in this century, or contemporaries Charles Olson, Robert Creâley, Jack Spicer and others, Duncan shares the view that whatever its content or form, the poem is in some way a mystery and a revelation. However this power of the poem be named, or the function of the poet be described (and the terms do vary considerably), the work of these writers depends on the recognition that the poem has its own powers, that inspiration (from whatever source) is the basis of art. Basic, yes, and also primary; that is, the inspiration is not simply a raw energy ultimately subsumed in the artist's mastery. It determines the poem. Duncan summarizes this position in a letter:

In the ugliness and bore of current proprieties of mind in which Poetry is considered to be a cultural device "to enrich our lives" or a personal expression and ability,
it is indiscrete to speak as if an Other spoke, to insist upon the instinctual and inspired. But in this confusion of the personality and the Poet, the humility that has its social virtues in the person corrupts the Poetic voice from its vatic responsibility. If we must go beyond ourselves (where self is thought of as that socially useful personality as against the Self), we must "pretend" and even dare what we know well enough will be found "pretentious" speech. In my own sense, I must write without certainty, as best I can, what is more than I am certain of. The ground of my art is a kept faith with that which would speak. What I make at all, my craft, is to open a way in the language for that speech that comes only in song. "A Gate," Olson calls it. (3) (italics mine)

It should be clear that a Duncan poem cannot be viewed as an act of ordering, shaping and controlling inspirational or experiential chaos. The usual measure that a poet is 'successful' insofar as he creates coherence and order does not apply here. Thus, the criticism that his work is formless and disorganized is irrelevant, since he does not seek 'order' and 'form' in the usual sense. In fact Duncan explicitly states, in some "Notes Midway on my Faust," "I do not seek a synthesis, but a melee," presumably because to seek out a synthesis reduces the possibility of discovery, shuts out the independent powers of the poem. To look for a deliberate formalization of experience, or a logically pre-arranged pattern and structure would be as pointless as trying to discuss Blake with Pope's criteria, or,

3 "A Projection for 1963: in applying for a Guggenheim Fellowship in Creative Writing in Poetry."
in contemporary terms to measure Duncan against say Robert Lowell. That is not to say that one or the other is "right"; as Duncan cautions in his "Notes on Poetics regarding Olson's Maximus," "It is in point here to remind any reader who may be partisan to my argument that I am sketching out "a" way of poetry, not "the" way of poetry." It is a question simply of basically different aesthetics. Duncan's "way" does not involve a concern for mastery and control (where "Beauty is conceived as the imposed order visible in the pruned hedge-row"). Rather:

In this aesthetic, conception cannot be abstracted from doing; beauty is related to the beauty of an archer hitting the mark. Referred to its source in the act, the intellect actually manifest as energy, as presence in doing, is the measure of our arête (as vision, claritas, light, illumination, was the measure of Medieval arête). The process itself, the melee, the workings - where the intellect does not control, but is "manifest as...a presence in doing" - becomes the focus of attention. In view of Duncan's unequivocal commitment to this position, it is along these lines that I propose to examine his work.

5 Black Mountain Review #6(Spring,1956), p.204.
6 "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," p.70
Chapter 2: Some Basic Distinctions

It seems useful to first propose a division of Duncan's work into roughly two periods. The first period includes the work from "Toward an African Elegy" (1942), which Duncan calls his 'first satisfactory poem,' up to Caesar's Gate: Poems 1949-50. Then "The Book of Resemblances" (1950-1953), Writing Writing (1953) and Letters: Poems 1953-1956, I see as transitional work, leading into a second period of writing which, though clearly having roots in the earlier work, stands as a distinct unit by virtue of a significant expansion in content together with a much enlarged and more precise concept of the poetic process. The Opening of the Field (1956-1959) and Roots and Branches (1959-1963), together with Duncan's prose study of H.D. collect the work of this period.
That is not to suggest that there is any essential change in Duncan's basic concept of the poem; what happens is that the focus of attention shifts. In the 1942-50 work, Duncan seems largely centered on a subject (Love), while language and process are the focus of attention in the later work. That is, Duncan comes to view the language itself (not 'Love,' or any such 'subject') as a concrete, tangible realm, as that "world of thought and feeling in which we may participate but not dominate." In short, language becomes, literally, the locus of the poem, and the medium through which, and in which the poem's revelations occur. This recognition, in turn, leads him to a more precise understanding of the nature of the poetic process. In the "Preface" for Caesar's Gate, for example, he had written of what happens in the poem:

These mere poems, contrived however they were, responded to the whispering angels of the language. 8

In The Day Book, on the same subject, the terms are much more precise:

The spark lies in, is, the word wherever it is spoken direct, directs what we are then, for we involve our selves in saying. In poetry we make things real by working with every word as directive, as the immediate condition of or presence of the poem itself. 9

7 "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," p.70 (See fn. 1 above)
9 "from The Day Book: excerpts from an extended study of H.D.'s poetry," Origin 10 (July, 1963), 2nd series, p.4 - hereafter cited as "The Day Book."
The terms used to describe what happens in the poem are here significantly expanded.

It should be further noted that Duncan's shift to a focus on language leads him out of a comparatively restricted world of love - the experience there being largely 'psychological' - into the wider world of language, where the entire physical, psychological and spiritual experience of man can enter. In other words, the expansion in senses of form and technique which the focus on language brings, is inextricably bound up with an expansion in the content of Duncan's experience. As Duncan comments in some "Biographical notes" written during the period of The Opening of the Field: "...my life has come round to dwell in the problematic, to seek those forms that allow for the most various fellings in one, so that a book is more than a poem, and a life-work is more than a book, yet they have no other instance that a word. A multiphasic experience sought a multiphasic form. It was Charles Olson who brought me to read Whitehead, where I found principles that paralleled those of the art I longed for: that 'we may not neglect the multifariouslyness of the world'...." (italics mine) The emphasis is clearly on plurality, multiplicity - the multiphasic. Which is certainly a much broader 'content' than that acknowledged

\[10\] The New American Poetry; p.435
in "I Tell of Love":

So that I have sense or glow with Reason's fire;
I give myself over to Love's praise.
    Craft does not avail for this song;
I do not desire pleasures of mere
ornamentation but strive only to sing
Love's song wherein is a light
worthy of faith. (11)

or in "Good-Bye to Youth" wherein the central statement becomes:

All facts deny I love. Only I
remain to say I love.

Surrounded by echoes as I speak,
I say I love. (12)

"If I live, I live for love," Duncan declares at another point in this poem. Singularity, rather than multiplicity, is clearly the keynote of this work. In the later writing, love continues to be significant, but it is not such an immediate and single focus of attention. It becomes simply one element in a 'multiphasic experience,' a part of the larger reality that includes "fairies, Christs, saints and the Present." 

These significant differences between the two periods of Duncan's poetry make it difficult to talk about his work as a whole, except in terms of very basic and general concerns. Since I feel Duncan's later work constitutes his major

11 Poems 1948-49 (Berkeley Miscellany Editions, 1949), p. 17
12 Caesar's Gate: Poems 1949-50
achievement, the bulk of this study will be focused on \textit{Letters}, \textit{The Opening of the Field}, and \textit{Roots and Branches}. Some discussion of the earlier work seems useful, however, for the germs of many later developments are to be found there. And too, a perspective of the entire work serves to more clearly indicate the nature and extent of Duncan's achievement in the later writing.

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I TELL OF LOVE. This is the animation, "a world of moving energies"; I think of a clear stream; I seem to be so containd in this element; giving up my wit, my essence, into the light of it.

("I Tell of Love," Poems 1948-49)

I take this (and the poem as a whole) to be a basic statement in the 1942-50 work, defining the centre and focus of Duncan's poetry at this time. Poet and poem are 'contained in this element' - love. That there is such a definable "world" and extricable "content" in these early poems, however, does not prevent the poem from being a process by which experience is revealed. For the poems derive not from some generalized, abstract notion of love, but from Duncan's particular experiences in, and out, of love. Love is the "animation,"
the activating force, creating "a world of moving energies," not a static condition, in the poems. The conscious and unconscious forces of Duncan's psychic condition are what give the poem its energy and direction: "no greater marvellous know I than the minds natural jungle," Duncan declares in "Towards an African Elegy." That is, the locus of the poem is the 'jungle' of his own nature, and its process one of psychological discovery and revelation. In Duncan's words, "the poem work is like the dream work," or "there is something in the unfolding of the poem that corresponds to the unfolding of the psyche."

That the poem is an enactment of this sort can be witnessed in "Towards an African Elegy." The poem moves through sexually charged images and visions toward clarification (revelation) of Duncan's personal attitudes and feelings. At first the images and persons of the poem are 'objective.'

The wives of the Congo distil there their red and the husbands hunt lion with spear and paint Death-spore on their shields, wear his teeth claws and hair on ordinary occasions.

(Selected Poems, p. 5)

Then Duncan's own feelings enter more directly:

I am waiting this winter in the black of love 
for the Negro armies in the eucalyptus, 
for the cities laid open and the cold in the love-light, 
for hounds, women and birds to go back to their forests 
and leave us our solitude.

and are enacted:

Negroes, negroes, all those princes 
holding cups of rhinoceros bone, make 
magic with my blood. Where beautiful Marijuana 
towers taller than the eucalyptus, turns 
within the lips of night and falls, 
falls downward, where as giant Kings we gatherd 
and devourd her burning hands and feet.

In this manner, poet and poem move toward the closing recognition 
that the 'African jungle' is no escapist distant thing; the 
'primitive,' the unacknowledged is within:

The halls of Africa we seek in dreams 
as barriers of dream against the deep, and seas 
disturbed turn back upon their tides 
into the rooms deserted at the roots of love. 
There is no end. ....

Here, as throughout the poem, the experience is immediate, 
is in process; we witness Duncan's actual involvement with 
unassimilated or uncontrolled forces (the forces coming out 
of "this dark continent of my breast" that he speaks of in the 
poem). One feels he is compelled to speak, with both poet 
and poem being open to the "darkness of possibility that 
control cannot manage, the world of thought and feeling in 
which we may participate but not dominate."

16"Ideas of the Meaning of Form," p. 62 (see fn. 1 above).
In other words, a fluid and flexible form and content, characteristic of all of Duncan's work, is manifest here, with the poem taking its direction and shape from the free movement of material. The faith in free association that Duncan speaks of twenty years later is evident here, at the start of Duncan's work:

a free association of living things then - for my longing moves beyond governments to a cooperation; that may have seeds of being in free verse or free thought, or in that other free association where Freud led men to re-member their lives, admitting into the light of the acknowledged and then of meaning what had been sins and guilts, heresies, shames and wounds. (17)

A further dimension of the nature of the poetic process unfolds in the period between 1946 and 1950 when, with poet Jack Spicer and others in Berkeley, Duncan was actively engaged in exploring senses of the "magic" of poetry; he writes of this period: "through early years of common exploration he [Jack Spicer] and I share certain methods in poetry that have to do with the art as "magic"; drawing the sorts, evoking of and from the cult or care of powers in the poem, cultivating the metaphorical ground in life, taking, and, in this testing what we believed to be "poetry" as directive or key from reality in the sense of a lasting doctrine."

With Jack Spicer I learned that the poem that might be fantastic life, that might be insight into the real, was a rite. The poem was a ritual referring to divine orders."

To take some poems of that period: in *The Medieval Scenes* Duncan would seem to be "evoking of and from the cult or care of powers in the poem." In the first place he was, as he says, "challenging the poem" in proposing to write a poem a day for ten days out of whatever was present to him at the given time. And in the poems we see that he listens to the voices of the poem, watches images interweave:

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The helmet sings.
Cry woe upon the sleeping land.
A revolution works unknowing there.  
('The Helmet of Goliath')
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In this instance, a crystallization occurs, as further on in the same poem he perceives:

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Cry woe upon the sleeping land.
It grows alive with an increasing weight.
There is a secret wooing in the night,
a fine adultery of voices talking.
I saw the sleight-of-look, the moment's quick avowals. It vanishd.
wraith-like elegance
of a forbidden swan.
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Whether or not the results are this definite, a "magic" is insistently present, from the start of the first poem of the

series, "The Dreamers"; here the keynote is given:

The magic in convolutions of our company winks its lights. Its touch is slight and vital. But we are bearish magickers, makers of lightnings in a half-sleep of furry storm. It is the magic of not-touching, not-looking sharpenings of the eye, dim thunders of imaginings.

....
It flashes in the air.
....

The daemon swins and glitters in each face.

Throughout all, Duncan attends to the present visions, as in "The Festivals":

The poet sees his foolish Muse bestir herself as if to shake off foolishness.

or "The Mirror":

The woman with the fiery hair plays on a lute the plaint of some erotic melody. "I have within my heart of hearts a tree," she sings, "that bears no fruit but misery."

and generally observes the event of the poem, viewing himself as agent or instrument:

Created by the poets to sing my song,
or created by my song to sing.
("The Reaper")

What happens is, as in "Toward an African Elegy," in the course of the poem insights come, the fullness of his own feeling is revealed. At the start of the sequence, for example, a feeling of despair is implicit in the account of the lack of love in (and around) him:
And we are unawakened dreamers,
sleep-talking miseries of animal despair.

I have within my heart a tree, a fir
of shadows, Hibernia of dreams.
"The speech," I said, "is sexual.
It tells our lovers what we are, excites
the hesitating ear of an animal mind."
"But beasts," poor Curran said, "at least
would nudge each other."

("The Dreamers")

At this point a longing to break out of this somnabulent
("unawakened dreamers") states is clearly implied. But in
the course of the poems, he discovers what, presumably, he
did not know for 6 poems later (6 days later) this feeling
is contradicted:

Sweep not upon the strings of my dark lyre,
my body, music. Make mute
the tree within the heart, for I desire
to come unto my Lord unsung

("The Reapers")

The poem discloses an anti-live-love feeling, which reaches
its climax in the final poem of the sequence with the lines
"I would come into the source of light unsung," and the
insistent refrain "O let me die, but if you love me, let me die."

"The Venice Poem," too, works in a similar fashion.
Though the basic material is in this case "given" in the sense
that a particular event - an act of adultery - is the 'activating
circumstance,' there is no pre-ordering of the shape and content
which follows. The poem arises out of Duncan's living with
that fact and gaining insight into it through the process of
the poem. His understanding of it all occurs during the writing,
in the step by step movement:

Why is the house so still?
Where have you gone?

My knowing now will never be still
My loving now will never be still.
I am like an empty shell
tortured with voices.

Alone, I know not where I am.
I cry out.
My voices answer.

(Poems 48-49, p.24)

Equally, his emotions are not static; the full statement of
feeling - grief, jealousy etc, - comes gradually, "unfolds"
as Duncan observes in the "Coda" section:

Between the sapphire and the sound
unfurls the rose of vision;
tears from a stone
unlock the stone;
months have passed like days of pain
now the most bewildering of all pains
these images like great tears swim.
I am barely able to go on.

... Adultery began like the unfolding rose
showing the cruelest passionate facts.
...
Who has waited in Love's cave
watching the shadows of real things
when the reality of lust has gone
knows the most bewildering of all pains,
knows the longing for tears in the stone.
I am barely able to go on.
...

How deep the violation goes,
unfolds, petal by petal, rooted,
and yet so multiplied,
inflorescent

(pp.44-45)
The very fact that the poem is written over an 8 month period points to its evolving character. Even at the end, in the "Coda" where Duncan is to some extent recapitulating, the experience remains immediate and in process: "I am barely able to go on," he tells us at the end of each of the first five stanzas.

But though this poem is, like The Medieval Scenes, an event, the method here is not entirely to simply let things happen as they will. "In 'The Venice Poem' I turned from a concept of dramatic form in poetry to a concept of musical form," Duncan tells us, a move which permits him a more active participation in the poem's process. Duncan begins, that is, to explore and work with the themes that occur (as a composer might) and uses a form similar to the nineteenth century symphony as a loose, skeletal shape for the whole. Hence the division into 5 movements plus a Coda. Equally, Duncan's participation in the line to line movement of the poem is of a musical order; Duncan not only follows but also begins to work with the possibilities implicit in a given image, or statement, or theme. At the beginning of the poem, for example, he envisions his love in a frozen condition, "forming a central saphire,/cruel and absolute." Then he proceeds to

work with the possibilities, the 'melodies' of that statement:

This jewel,
from which proceeds,
as if rays,
a melody....
(p.21)

Or at the beginning of the "Recorso" section, he moves

into the long, slow cadence, the anticipating,
rapt, attentive, climbing
neither upward nor downward,
but hovering: dream of sea-surge.
the tide, the tide of event.
(p.36)

The exact nature of the parallel between Duncan's writing
and musical composition is a complex subject, however, and will
be discussed in detail later, in relation to the later work
where it is more fully operative. At this point, suffice it
to say that the discovery (and successful use) of a musical
structure in "The Venice Poem" is one of the major events in
Duncan's writing life, the concept of the poet as composer
being crucial to Duncan's understanding of the ways the poet
works with language (one of the primary activities in the
later work.)

In any case, it is clear that the germs of later concerns
lie here, in the 1940-50 work: the poem as psychic - dream -
enactment, as a magical process, and finally also as an
act of music, are the keystones that are laid in this period.
Yet at the same time, these poems do stand as a separate unit
by the fact that poet and poem exist in a world of love, and
are de-limited by that.
Chapter 3: Poetic Process and The Nature of Language.

In the later work; Writing Writing, Letters, The Opening of the Field, and Roots and Branches (as the titles somewhat suggest), Duncan's first concern is with process. Whether at the level of form or content, or in the realm of psychological, magical, musical or mystical experience, it is always process that is primary. And further, Duncan has come to realize that whatever 'kinds' of process there may be, they are all in some way part of the language (for that is, after all, all that a poem is made of). He therefore directs his energies toward observing and understanding the specific processes operating in language at any given moment of writing. There can be no simple summary, however, of what exactly does happen, for with each book, or
even with each poem, Duncan's awareness of what a poem is, or can be, expands. We witness an art that is constantly evolving; the work itself is in process.

What underlies this interest in processes is Duncan's belief that all things (himself or a poem included), have an inherent organic potential and, if allowed to go free, will of their own accord grow toward their natural wholeness, will be constantly in a process of becoming. Any attempt by the poet to direct the course of the poem will simply stunt the growth; his work is rather to cultivate the ground of language, attend to the movements therein, in an effort to promote the fullest growth. "The volition of the artist," Duncan writes, "is to fulfill the form or law or will that he feels or discovers in the thing he is making." Or, put another way:

The force that words obey in song
the rose and artichoke obey
in their unfolding towards their form.

Which "force" is manifest in language:

you will suffer the sentence
a law of words moving
seeking their right period.
("Structure of Rime I, O.F., p.12"

And therefore he attends to process.

22 "The Day Book," p.5
23 "Yes, As a Look Springs to its Face," The Opening of The Field (Grove, 1960), p.61
Also relevant here is Duncan's belief that art can reflect, and contribute to, the process of the poet's spirit. That the 'natural' and 'spiritual' processes in the poem are interdependent, Duncan makes quite clear: "We know that an idea, a novel or a poem, may begin at some point or germ, grow, finding its being and necessary form, rhythm and life as the germ evolves in relation to its environment of language and experience in life. This is an art that rises from a deep belief in the universe as a medium of forms, in man's quest as a spiritual evolution. ("The Day Book," p.6) Clearly a free-moving form is demanded if the art is to be part of man's spiritual evolution. That Duncan himself values this function of art can be seen in a comment of his on the work of H.D. Pound and Williams:

It is not their exemplary character-structure but their fullness of life, the ripeness in what they are, that moves us in H.D. Pound and Williams as poets. They move in their work thru phases of growth towards a poetry that spreads in scope as an aged tree spreads its roots and foliage. The late Cantos, Journey to Love, or Helen in Egypt have their art in the language to convey scars and information of age as a man may gather in his face and form accumulations of what he is in cooperation with the universe about him. ("The Day Book," p.8)

It is the evidence of a life lived, of the process of the
spirit that Duncan seeks in their work.

In discussing Duncan's focus on process, it is important to bear in mind this belief in the underlying spiritual function of art, for it gives his care for the workings of the poem far deeper meaning. His is not simply the concern of a technician or aesthetician; he attends to specific processes (as a gardener might) that the poem may flourish fully and naturally, and thereby become truly a "vital process of the spirit."

But I shall leave spiritual matters aside for the moment, to look at precisely what Duncan finds out about language processes. We find first, in the Preface to Letters, the statement "Here I declare a mood, a mode in writing, conceived as a tuning of the language, as the ear, hand & eye, brain are tuned, towards a possible music." Language is conceived as a kind of sense organ through which the universe, the unknown ("a possible music") can be apprehended. From the beginning, Duncan has felt the poem to be an event in which things are revealed. Here he sees that it is through a power in language, through a "tuning of the language" that he achieves vision.

In this process of tuning in to what is going on in the universe, there are two elements to be considered: the poem's independent reality (one 'tunes in' to something that is already in existence) together with the poet's place and function in relation to that reality. Or, put another way, the process includes both the work of the poem and the work of the poet. First to be considered is the independent nature of the poem, that phenomena which Duncan calls the Otherness of the poem. In Letters, for instance, in a poem which postulates a woman reading the poem as he is writing, Duncan writes:

The poem she is reading reaches her, reaches out to her - just so it reached out to me; or we, writing I but she is reading, listened and saw in hearing a larger murmuring existence of its own in the coils of the completed work. A shell then. And a sea. This was one of the earliest mysteries - to listen for the roar of the ocean in a shell.
(xi: "At the End of a Period)

As earlier in the same poem, he had felt:

we are there, as the poem comes into existence - she and I - losing ourselves in the otherness of what is written.

Throughout the book Letters, Duncan works toward a more precise perception of the poem's 'Otherness.' At first he can perceive it only in metaphorical terms: writing a poem is like 'listening for the roar of the ocean in a shell' or driving along a road in the dark:
the conversation unrolls beneath my pen in a silence as the road unrolls beneath the car....

This is the immediacy of which I speak, or the co-inherence as Charles Williams called it. A strangeness, a more than real which I picture as layer and layer seen as one and many. As one might hear a great host, distinguishing all the varieties of its voices and so, a stillness of utter hearing. The pen breaking the stillness - this is the automobile speeding on toward the destination of its own going.

(xvi:"Riding")

Convinced that the poem exists in and derives from an external environment or element, Duncan struggles to articulate his vision of that Other. To the point where:

The image of what I am talking about begins to come: It is a fair land, a life, a language. And we poets, are made up by it - it is a maker - and we in turn making ourselves up are of it.

(viii:"With Bells Shaking")

The notion is complex: Duncan feels that though in one sense he "tunes the language," language also has a vitality of its own "and we poets, are made up by it." It is both instrument and object; "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" as Yeats so aptly puts it. In any case, Duncan certainly views language as having a life of its own, as he partially explains further on in Letters:

When I was about twelve - I suppose about the age of Narcissus - I fell in love with a mountain stream. There, most intensely for a summer, staring into its limpid cold rush, I knew the fullest pain of longing. To be of it, entirely, to be out of my

26 "Among School Children"
being and enter the Other clear impossible element. The imagination, old shape-shifter, stretchd itself painfully to comprehend the beloved form.

Then all windings and pools, all rushings on, constant inconstancy, all streams out of springs we do not know where, all rush of senses and intellect thru time of being - lifts me up; as if out of the pulse of my bloody flesh, the gasp of breath upon breath (like a fish out of water) there were another continuum, an even-purling stream, crystal and deep, down there, but a flow of waters.

I write this only to explain some of the old ache of longing that revives when I apprehend again the currents of language - rushing upon their way, or in pools, vacant energies below meaning, hidden to our purposes. Often, reading or writing, the fullest pain returns, and I see or hear or almost know a pure element of clearness, an utter movement, an absolute rush along its own way, that makes of even the words under my pen a foreign element that I may crave - as for kingdom or salvation or freedom - but never know.

(xxvi: "Source")

Then, in the poem which follows the above statement, we see the currents of language actually at work:

A cross leaves marks the tree we fancy.
         Regular art rules.
         Under hand beauty demands
the secret howl to cross the table
         on bloody stumps
         were wings added later to mar
the 17th century flying style.

......

("Am Owl is an Only Bird of Poetry")

What is evident here is that in the coming together of words, in the flow of language, potentials or currents of meaning emerge, which we, as he, observe, as in the first line "a cross leaves marks the tree we fancy." At all points in the
statement, a force of language is felt to be propelling the line along. That the language has such a power is made more evident here by the presence of puns: "cross," "leaves," "marks," and possibly "fancy" all have double meanings in the context. But any statement is capable of disclosing or unfolding meanings that one did not "know." In Duncan's words, "the poet does not give meaning to the word but draws meaning, touches meaning or participates in meaning there." Which, by logical extension, brings him to recognize that the language can direct the course of the poem, and thus is that "Otherness."

Language also has physical reality, being literally sound. And patterns or currents of sound occur together with currents of meaning which influence or even determine the course of the statement. As in "a cross leaves marks the tree we fancy," "tree" comes in not only on the current of meaning, through its relationship with "leaves," but also on the current of sound pattern, which in turn is one of the forces that carries the line to "we." The actual patterns of sound later become much more intricate, and will be discussed as such further on, but the principle remains the same: the language is as much "maker" as the poet.

Recognizing that the creative powers operating in the poem are in language opens the way for Duncan to enter, and explore fully, the world of language. Following the currents of language, he glimpses more and more of that 'Other clear impossible element.' Thus The Opening of The Field (his next book) is, as I see it, essentially an opening of a language field; is a record of Duncan's expanding vision of what the language contains.

That the 'field is in language is clear from the first poem in the book. Here Duncan envisions the source or place from whence the field opens as a meadow, that is also the locus or place of poetry - language in its totality:

OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN  
TO A MEADOW

äs if it were a scene made-up by the mind,  
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,  
an eternal pasture folded in all thought  
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light  
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am  
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved  
whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under The Hill  
whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words  
that is a field folded.
It is only a dream of the grass blowing
east against the source of the sun
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game
of ring a round of roses told.

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is. (28)

It is a poem that cannot be easily summarized, since it
moves by constant re-qualification of each 'statement';
the meadow is clearly many things at once: a man-mind made,
personal thing, yet also an "eternal pasture" and realm of
permanent forms. The apparent contradictions are, to my
mind, resolved, however, in the fifth stanza where the
place becomes a condition of language, or at least a place
that can only be apprehended through language, it being
a "field folded," "whose hosts are a disturbance of words
within words." The meadow then seems a kind of metaphor
depicting language in its full potential - a place where
all of human experience is contained, as in a folded field.
Thus, through language, one comes in contact with things
beyond individual reality, for it is the locus of place
where the personal and universal intersect, being both in

28 The Opening of the Field (Grove, 1960), p.7, hereafter cited as O.F.
in the individual's possession ("it is so near to the heart") and yet extending far beyond him ("an eternal pasture folded in all thought"). At the point of intersection, it cannot be other than immediate, but at the same time it extends into the distance of communal reality; is both 'strange' (that is, not 'one's own') and yet immediate, "one and many," as Duncan had written earlier, in *Letters*:

This is the immediacy of which I speak....
A strangeness, a more than real which I picture as layer and layer seen as one and many.

(xvi:"Riding")

A communal reality, in which the individual participates:

Wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am.

A communal reality where men's experiences become actual (objective) and can therefore be shared. This Duncan points out, even the supposed unconscious of man has, in fact, an objective actuality in language:

The images and utterances that Jung attributes to a Collective Unconscious were all gathered by him, not from the unconscious but from the ground of man's adventures in consciousness, from works of art... and are creations of man's conscious life in the community of language.

("The Day Book," p.5)

An account Duncan gives in the "Preface" to *Letters* of his own experience clarifies the point. Through the works (language)
of others, his own experience is extended:

I stood with Dante where he stood alone and
with all mankind before the Rose of God; I saw
with Lawrence how the night came through her
eyes, the young wife's, and exclaimed: 'the pain
of loving you is almost more than I can bear';
I suffered with Shakespeare and asked of all men
Grace that I have life upon my stage; I with
Ezra Pound sought the orders in history and heard
the great bell-notes ring between the work and
the self that gave intimations of the creation, the
continuum in chaos.

("Preface,"p.v)

Language is our shared reality.

One is not always easily in touch with 'the community
of language' though. The return to the meadow, Duncan
pictures as an occasionally realized, idyllic state:

It is only a dream of the grass blowing
east against the source of the sun
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game
of ring a round of roses told.

Perceiving the unity and 'wholeness' of language brings a
momentary vision of a coherence in multiplicity and diversity,
29
of "layer and layer seen as one and many." The world is
perceived as unitary: "the grass blowing/ east against the
sun's going down," an apparent diversity, is held in a single
vision of wholeness. As in the "ring a round of roses," the

29Letters, see p. 28 above.
children, caught up in a shared motion, display the possibility of a communal reality that includes, yet transcends, the individual.

Only a dream? The vision of the communal transcendent reality of language is, like the soul, like the poem, like the language itself, a wraith of mind, an 'unreality.' But also the highest reality in the sense that "Mental things alone are real," as Duncan quotes from Blake. For, as Duncan tells us at another point, "they can never be destroyed": "The body is real and all real things perish. But realities give birth to unrealities. As Plato discovered, or St Augustine discovered in the City of God, unrealities, fantasies, mere ideas, can never be destroyed." The community of language consists of such 'unrealities, fantasies, mere ideas,' that 'can never be destroyed'; contains that which is permanent and most real. And poetry, being "the very life of the soul: the body's discovery that it can dream" brings one into this realm. Through poetry, the poet enters a medium where the shared forms in the universe can be discovered.

30."Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake," Roots and Branches (Scribners, 1964), p. 50
32.loc cit.
That is, individual being is transcended in the apprehension of one's common humanity in the community of language. In Duncan's words: "In our work we lose our selves, our independence, the Jesus of each one, or it is fused, enters into the radiance of another power of the same being, another person we find in the community of language and our work there that we call poet. ("The Day Book," P.43)

The title poem of *Roots and Branches* further clarifies the nature of this experience:

Sail, Monarchs, rising and falling orange merchants in spring's flowery markets!
messeengers of March in warm currents of news floating,
flitting into areas of aroma,
tracing out of air unseen roots and branches of sense
I share in thought,
filaments woven and broken where the world might light casual certainties of me. There are

echoes of what I am in what you perform this morning. How you perfect my spirit!
almost restore
an imaginary tree of the living in all its doctrines by fluttering about,
intent and easy as you are, the profusion of you!
awakening transports of an inner view of things. (R.&B.p.3)

The waves, though literal, are also the "rising and falling" of language bringing "warm currents of news floating" and "tracing out of air unseen roots and branches of sense/
I share in thought." Duncan is again in that intangible world where "filaments woven and broken," wraiths of mind,
predominate; he has entered the community of language, and finds there, a correspondence between his own rhythms and the movement of the language (waves):

There are echoes of what I am in what you perform this morning.

Recognition of this correspondence, in turn, brings an expansion in vision ("Awakening transports of an inner view of things"), an 'opening of the field.' In responding to the rhythms of language, Duncan experiences that intersection of personal and universal which discloses a vision of the transcendent communal reality,

whose secret we see in a children's game of ring a round of roses told.

This is the secret of language.
Chapter 4: The Poet's Place...

"Writing is first a search in obedience"
(Structure of Rime 1," O.F.)

This I take to be Duncan's other major concern: he seeks clarification of the poet's relationship to the language. For there is that other half of the poem-process always, Duncan's working or "tuning of the language," which demands a definition of the poet's place and function.

The key here is to be found in Duncan's concept of the Office of poet. He feels that the poet serves a divine power, and thus that he "writes in the office of poet."

Like the priest or medium, who similarly perform an Office, the poet achieves vision of the transcendent reality, only if he knows his place and recognizes that he has an Office with definite limits. Duncan cites Dante and Blake as models:

Dante's sense of his own place is the foundation of the Dream, the locus of its Truth. "Thou art my master and my author," he addresses Virgil.... The glory is to be universal, not personal. The poet must not - it is the commandment of vision - usurp authority in his Office. This is what Blake in turn means when he tells us "The authors are in eternity." ....These things, the poet testifies, I did not see by my own virtues, but they were revealed to me. ("The Day Book," p.35, italics mine)

By the same token, he praises H.D. and Williams for "having their mastery obedient to the play of forms that makes a path between what is in the language and what is in their lives." ("Ideas of the Meaning of Form," Kulchur, p.61)

The poet's place is first to obey, to serve:

I ask the unyielding Sentence that shows Itself forth in the language as I make it,

Speak! For I name myself your master, who come to serve.
Writing is first a search in obedience.
("Structure of Rime I," O.F.,p.12)

Further, the capacity for obedience depends on one's ability to recognize and accept one's own limits, which, in the poet's case, is to recognize the limits of individual intelligence. As Dante and Blake testify, the visionary
poet has no claim to omnipotence or omniscience: "these things... I did not see by my own virtues...." Individual intellection and individual perception have very real boundaries. Yet, paradoxically, recognizing those boundaries opens the doors of perception and makes revelation possible. For the personal and universal intersect there (in the intellectual or perceptual realm as much as in the physical).

A shore, Duncan calls it, in "The Structure of Rime I":

There is a woman who resembles the sentence. She has a place in memory that moves language. Her voice comes across the waters from a shore I don't know to a shore I know, and is translated into words belonging to the poem.

(O.F., p.12)

He perceives that though poem extends into an unknown distance, he himself is bounded by "the shore I know."

For Duncan, a "voice comes across the waters from a shore I don't know," just as for Blake "the authors are in Eternity." Both recognize that vision comes to those who keep within their limits.

It should be noted that Dante and Blake are not Duncan's only models. He also finds corroboration of his convictions in the work of Ezra Pound, H.D. and William Carlos Williams, and finally, in his contemporary, Charles Olson. Pound's later Cantos, H.D.'s War Trilogy or Williams' Journey to Love derive from a similar view of the poet's
place and function. Here, as in Danté, the emphasis is on the poet's journey toward clarity of vision, with the individual poet's limits being kept in clear view. As Williams writes in "Asphodel":

All appears as if seen wavering through water We start awake with a cry of recognition but soon the outlines become again vague . . . . the words made solely of air or less, that come to me out of air and insisted on being written down. (34)

Williams, in an essentially subordinate position, achieves vision. Similarly, in "The Desert Music," he claims to take his stance as a poet "in my nature/ beside nature." Charles Olson, in defining the position necessary for an "open," or "projective verse, likewise emphasizes the poet's limits: "if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within

his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share." "Secrets" discoveries, revelations, come to those who keep within their limits.

In Duncan's poems, a similar position is evident. At the beginning of the poem "Apprehensions," for instance, his relation to the material at hand is clearly given:

To open Night's eye that sleeps in what we know by Day.

"If the Earth were animate
it should not experience pleasure when grottoes and caves are dug out of its back"

From which argument my mind fell away or disclosed a falling-away, and I saw a cave-in of the ground, hiding in showing, or showing in hiding, a glass or stone, most valuable.

(roots and branches, p.30-31)

The poem moves on, with Duncan keeping his place:

Ficino had the idea
life circulates from the earth to the stars
"in order to constitute the uninterrupted tissue of the whole of nature."

You've to dig and come to see what I mean.

Eidos, Idea,
"is something to which we gain access through sight."

This defines the borderlines of the meaning.

For what I saw was only a gleam.

I did not bring the matter to light.

Here is no presumption of authority or omniscience: "I did not bring the matter to light," he admits. The "borderlines 36 "Projective Verse," The New American Poetry (Grove, 1960), p. 395.
of meaning" are clearly drawn, while Duncan obeys the course the poem declares, writing from within the limits of his 'knowing':

What I saw was only a gleam
It might have been a living thing
for it moved in the muck.
I did not search it out.
the look was enough.

(My mind had slipt again, could not keep its place in the sentence.)

As Dante keeps always his human size and must follow first Virgil and then Beatrice to arrive at the final vision, without knowing how or when that will come, so Duncan follows the material that is before him, to arrive finally at a brief glimpse of the interrelationships and coherence of the entire experience:

March 27th: We found after the rains a cave-in along the path near the rosemary and thyme, disclosing the pit of an abandon cess pool. Because of the dream fragment 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.

From the living apprehension, the given and giving melos, melodies thereof -

(\textit{Roots and Branches}, p.42)

The parts cohere, and the poem comes naturally to rest. But I would emphasize at this point not the discovery
itself, but what permits it - which is the poet's recognition of his limits. To repeat: "Dante's sense of his own place is the foundation of the Dream, the locus of its Truth."

* 

The poet who assumes such a position necessarily must depend on guides of some sort; he seeks out psychopomps, in mythological terms, Mercury, Hermes, Gabriel, Thoth, Hecate (the guides of the soul and messengers of the Gods): Dante's Virgil, or Blake's angels function in this capacity. In Duncan's work, however, the guide or agency is not as literal or as simply defineable. The persons of his poems are multiple and, in fact, any thing is also capable of becoming a guiding presence: image, event, voice, myth, persona are variously the agencies of vision. "Two Dicta of William Blake," for example ("the authors are in eternity" and "mental things alone are real") release or reveal meaning in Duncan's own experience:

The Authors are in eternity.
Our eyes reflect
prospects of the whole radiance
between you and me.
("Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake," R&B,p.48)
Similarly, in "Two Presentations," a school girls chatter, overheard on a bus, becomes message:

"It's this poem I wrote and call'd it my Soul." Was she talking to me? Her voice carries above the din of high-school girls chattering, crowding the bus with shrill bird voices.

How did I hear her voice if not directed in the crowd to me?

Duncan comments, at the beginning of the poem:

I had begun a poem address'd to my mother, when the hysterical talk of a school-girl broke in, dictating fragments of a message that seem'd meant for me and at the same time to direct the poem.

(From Roots & Branches, p.75,74)

Equally, Ariel's song ("Night Scenes"), Fucino's text (Apprehensions"), "the counsels of the Wood" ("Structure of Rime VII"), "The Messenger in guise of a Lion"("Structure of Rime II"), or "The Great Sun Himself"(Four Pictures of the Real Universe") instruct and guide the poet-soul in his journey through the poem.

It is in this capacity, too, that the figures and stories of mythology enter Duncan's writing; he finds meanings in the actions of mythic figures that guide him toward knowledge, illuminate his own experience. In following the story of Psyche and Cupid, for example, as it enters the "Poem Beginning with a line by Pindar," he perceives parallels between his own experience in the
poem and Psyche's journey through life:

    Psyche travels
    life after life, my life, station
    after station,
    to be tried

    without break, without
    news, knowing only - but what did she know?
    The oracle at Miletus had spoken
    truth surely: that he was Serpent-Desire
    that flies thru the air,
    a monster-husband. But she saw him fair

    whom Apollo's mouthpiece said spread
    pain
    beyond cure to those
    wounded by his arrows.

(Opening of the Field, p.67)

Whatever his powers of intellection and perception, the poet must often continue on "without news" being, like Psyche, 'in the dark,' or with a knowledge only of very specific and contradictory things.

Psyche's position in the story, too, sheds, light on Duncan's position in the poem. She is present as simply one element in a complex action, the meaning and interrelations of which she only partially comprehends:

    The wind spreading the sail serves them.
    The two jealous sisters eager for her ruin
    serve them.
    That she is ignorant, ignorant of what Love will be,
    serves them.
    The dark serves them.
    The oil scalding his shoulder serves them,
    serves their story, Fate, spinning,
    knots the threads for Love.

Jealousy, ignorance, the hurt...serve them.

(O.F., p.62)
All these things combined constitute the whole 'story.' And while the various threads all come through Psyche or touch her in some way, she herself occupies a position of limited awareness; thus she

must obey the counsels of the green reed;
saved from suicide by a tower speaking,
must follow to the letter
freakish instructions.

(O.F., p.65)

Duncan, in writing a poem, likewise only partially comprehends what is going on at any given moment, as we have seen in, for example, "Apprehensions." Like Psyche, he is simply one element in a complex process.

Thus the myth acts as a vehicle which carries the poem, which opens out ways of seeing and understanding and thereby guides the poet. It is a means to recognition and illumination.

By keeping within the limits of the Office of poet, then, Duncan is "given" guides of various kinds which lead to illumination. Not that he ever has full knowledge; the journey, the process is continuous. An account that Duncan gives of his view of the present, accurately describes the extent of his awareness while writing a poem: "The weaving... of the design is so close, so immediate, and intertwined, with so many undiscovered threads, that
I must trust the figures as they emerge, have faith that there is a wholeness of form (have the constant feeling of present form then). There is a wholeness of what we are that we will never know; we are always, as the line or the phrase or the word is, the moment of that wholeness. He stands always in a position of limited awareness, being involved with only the immediate and present particulars at any given moment.

* ...

...and Function

Such a view of his place and limits necessarily restricts Duncan's activities in the poem. He does not, however, become simply a passive instrument more or less unconsciously recording what is 'given.' Duncan's concept of poetic process will not be properly understood until one realizes that while recognizing his limits, he is still very much present and active. His is no 'automatic' writing. It is rather an interaction or interplay between his consciousness and the directives in the language, that brings a poem into being. A dance:

Lovely
join we to dance green to the meadow
(O.F., p.9)

Duncan writes in "The Dance" recognizing that the poem dance, as any dance, demands an **active** response to its measures. The interplay depends on his being consciously involved with what is happening in the poem. Though the language calls the tune, the poet must join in, for there to be a dance.

It is an assumption of our time that a primary function of consciousness is to control and direct - the unconscious, or the flux of experience, or whatever it has contact with. Which makes it difficult to understand how Duncan can view consciousness as an essential element in a process which also demands obedience to 'unknowns,' a process where there is no controlling or directing the course of events. We must understand that Duncan views consciousness as simply one of man's faculties, as a functioning sense organ - which creates a field of consciousness (in much the same way as there is, through the eye, a field of vision at any given moment). Psychologist William James, one of Duncan's acknowledged sources, describes this phenomena:

> The field is composed at all times of a mass of present sensation, in a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts etc. Yet these ingredients, which have to be named separately, are not separate, as the conscious field contains them. **Its form is**
that of a much-at-once, in the unity of which the sensations, memories, concepts, impulses, etc., coalesce and are dissolved. The present field as a whole came continuously out of its predecessor and will melt into its successor as continuously again, one sensation-mass passing into another sensation-mass and giving the character of a gradually changing present to the experience. (38)  
(first italics mine)

From this point of view, consciousness is essentially a state of awareness. The business of selecting, synthesizing, categorizing etc. the content of the field is another matter altogether, and certainly not the measure of an active consciousness. (That concern, in fact, reduces awareness, for one shuts out what doesn't fit). Duncan, as we know seeks an 'opening of the field,' of language and of his own consciousness, which is at least partially achieved by viewing the function of consciousness as simply to be aware. He can be present in the poem simply by interacting with whatever is before him (and not trying to control and direct).

The process can be observed in the opening of the "Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar."

The light foot hears you and the brightness begins god-step at the margins of thought, quick adulterous tread at the heart. Who is it that goes there? Where I see your quick face notes of an old music pace the air, torso reverberations of a Grecian lyre.

(0.F., p.62)

The line by Pindar invades his consciousness; he experiences it as an actual presence, stepping at the margins of thought, treading at the heart. (It is not just the line, of course, that is the presence felt - there is also the "God," but I feel the statement can first be taken literally as Duncan's experience of coming in contact with the Pindar line). And the poem is set in motion by the interaction between the line and his consciousness; the growth, the movement of the poem depends on that interplay. Duncan first recognizes possible meanings of the line: that the "foot hears you and the brightness begins" is similar to the quickening of mind and heart that occurs at the start of a poem - as the language (through the 'poetic foot') is 'tuned in' to the universe; that a divine presence is felt in the poem ("who is it that goes there?") which draws the full man (mind, heart, torso) into the poem-dance. Even the air is affected, as a brightness of illumination begins to permeate everything:

notes of an old music pace the air,
torso reverberations of a Grecian lyre.

Duncan's recognition here of various presences in the poem, in turn leads into the central event of the poem - his experiencing Cupid and Psyche as presences, as realities, and thereby coming to realize 'truths' of their story.
The way the Cupid and Psyche story enters the poem sheds further light on the process. For while it is material that Duncan in some way 'knew' beforehand, there is no arbitrary or hastily synthesized account. It enters the poem only as bits and pieces of it are brought to mind by what is taking place, that is, as part of the immediate interplay in the poem. And any realizations of the "meaning" of the story occur in the poem, growing out of the existing' melee. There is that openness of mind evident which comes from recognizing one's limits. Duncan remains open to invasion; he is, therefore, in a position where he can feel that "god-step at the margins of thought," be shaped by it, and let the poem be shaped by it.

But while Duncan in no way predetermines or orders the course of the poem, he does effect the poem's process and result through his conscious engagement with what is happening. For he arrives at recognitions - the flux crystallizes briefly. And his recognitions become significant events in the poem. They are, in fact, "peaks" of the poem and an essential part of its process.

To look at the poem: Duncan first sees Cupid and Psyche as demonstrating "the deprivations of desiring sight."
Psyche, the soul, gives in to mistrust, to human limitations ("carnal fate"). The state of grace regained is thus "bruised by redemption." But having recognized their deprivations, Duncan then perceives the gains. They acquire a fuller love ("their bodies yield out of strength") and a broader understanding ("the eyes... are soft"). This recognition, in turn, brings a vision of the fullness of the passion which humanizes them ("He is not wingd") and permeates their whole being:

A bronze of yearning, a rose that burns
the tips of their bodies, lips,
ends of fingers, nipples.

One sees a human passion firing the flesh and blood as the sun sets on a state of primal innocence, in the image:

His thighs are flesh, are clouds
lit by the sun in its going down,
hot luminescence at the loins of the visible.

Though the movement of the poem is, in one sense, produced by the given material and language conditions, Duncan's recognitions are clearly part of the process. They are a necessary and integral part of the interplay. The poem emerges out of a complex of poet and poem working together.

In the larger movements of the poem, too, this can be observed. Having perceived the fullness and strength of Cupid and Psyche's condition in the first section, for
example, Duncan is then able to recognize more clearly what
is lacking in the present, when that 'subject' comes up in
the second section:

Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower-
where among these did the power reside
that moves the heart? What flower of the nation
bride-sweet broke to the whole rapture?
(O.F. p.63)

The point is that, while recognizing meanings, structural
parallels etc., Duncan never clings to these perceived
orders - which would, of course, stop the interplay - but
rather deliberately, as he says, "pursues a process of
re-vision and disorganization to keep creation of the poem
and consciousness of the poem in interplay." (Letters,"Preface,"
p.ii) One view of Cupid and Psyche is immediately followed
be "re-vision"; meanings, significances, structures, are
recognized and acknowledged as such, but are not held
beyond their actual occurrence, are not clung to as a means
to secure the poem. The movement, the process, the dance,
the interplay, is continuous. As Duncan writes in a later
poem:

no sooner breaking from
what we understood
than breaking forth
abiding, we stand.

("The Law," Roots & Branches, p.30)

The only 'stable' thing, paradoxically, is the principle that
everything is in motion. In "The Law I Love is Major Mover," as the title suggests, Duncan pursues this subject:

THE LAW I LOVE IS MAJOR MOVER

from which flow destructions of the Constitution
no nation stands unstirred....
(0.F. p.10)

"Nations," "Constitutions" are not static or permanent orders, but are rather part of a process, a stage in the flow that is always going on from order to disorder. Thus "no nation stands unstirred"; the synthesis, Duncan recognizes, is not extricable from the melee. Or, to put it in classical terms, Aphrodite, the form - born of the foam(flux) is not then fixed, but returns always to the flux to be born and re-born.

But to isolate this statement, "true" as it is, is misleading, for that gives it a generalized significance, whereas it is a recognition specific to its context, and not held beyond that. This realization here, at the start of the poem, is not something Duncan then makes a centre or reference point around which to organize the poem. Immediately he becomes involved in qualifications, revisions, extensions. He follows the possibilities that issue from it. Thus, that statement engages his attention (as did the Pindar line) and an interplay begins.
We see the process in a subsequent portion of the poem:

The shaman sends himself
The universe is filled with eyes then, intensities, with intent,
outflowings of good or evil,
benemaledictions of the dead,
but,
the witness brings self up before the Law.
It is the Law before the witness that makes justice.

There is no touch that is not each
to each reciprocal.

There is, in the poem itself, a flow from orders (recognitions) toward disorders, as a result of the continuous interplay between Duncan's consciousness and what is before him. The first part here moves out, pushes beyond 'knowing' ("The Shaman sends himself"). Then the poem pulls back, with "but," to a statement. A disorder - "outflowings" - is experienced, followed by an involvement with orders - "the Law,"- out of which comes the further recognition "There is no touch that is not each/ to each reciprocal." Again Duncan perceives the interdependence of orders and disorders. But the poem again moves on, does not 'hold fast' here as it did not 'cling' to the opening statement. The process continues, with the result that, further on, the experience
becomes clearer and more decisive;

Hear! Beautiful damnd man that lays down his law lays down himself creates hell
a sentence unfolding healthy heaven.

What is stated more or less directly at the beginning, then actually experienced as reality in "the shaman sends himself..../but/ the witness brings self up before the Law," now reaches a kind of climax of fullest realization in the pun "lays down his law": simultaneously laws are established and abandoned, syntheses occur and dissolve. ("Lays down" has the double meaning of to establish and to abandon or give up). From this point, Duncan turns his attention inward, and sees his own struggle to 'lay down his law,' to accept the principle of permanent motion. Then he returns to again embrace "the Law," with the added recognition that it all comes down, finally, to a principle of language:

Thou wilt not allow the suns to move
nor man to mean desire move,
nor rage for war and wine,
here where the mind nibbles,
nor embrace the law under which you lie, that will not fall upon your face
or upon knees, all
but twisted out of shape, crippled by angelic Syntax.

Look! the Angel that made a man of Jacob
made Israel in His embrace

was the Law, was Syntax.

Him I love is major mover.
But again, it is not so much the conclusion, as the process, that I would emphasize. The process of this poem clearly involves the kind of movement that Duncan proposes in the "Preface" to Letters, where he speaks of "having in mind a process that sets self-creation and self-consciousness in constant inter-play." (p. ii) As here, "the shaman sends himself.../but/ the witness brings self up before the Law." In a later poem where the 'subject' of "laws" again comes up, the process of constant motion is similarly emphasized; Duncan writes at the start of the poem:

THE LAW

I

There are no final orders. But the Law constantly destroys the law

(Roots & Branches, p. 26)

Further on (part 5), he arrives at the fuller statement:

given over from "I" into "I",

law into law, no sooner breaking

from what we understood, than,

breaking forth, abiding,

we stand.

(p. 30)

The interplay of "self-creation and self-consciousness" is a continuous process.

What comes clear is that Duncan's recognition that the poem depends on forces beyond his "control" qualifies
the manner and extent of his own activity in the poem. But it does not prevent an active involvement on his part. Rather attention is directed (his and ours) to the interaction between the content the poem declares and his intelligence, to the Dance. The actual ways in which Duncan participates in this process are multiple, involving his alertness to sounds, syntax, themes etc., but it is always the interplay that is primary, that gives the poem its life, its energy, its form.
Chapter 5: The Work

I work at language as a spring of water works at a rock, to find a course, and so, blindly. In this I am not maker of things, but if maker, a maker of a way. For the way in itself.

(Letters, xxvi: "Source")

Duncan's activities in the poem have to do with working, as he says, "at language." Not as an end in itself, of course; he is always only a "maker of a way." But within those limits, there is plenty of work that can be done.

This working or making requires first a knowledge of the materials available for use. That is, language, generally speaking, consists of sound, shape and sense.
In any linguistic act, these three elements will be present. The value of this tripartite division in viewing poetry as a linguistic act is that it serves to point up the different things a poet can work with, without losing sight of the interdependence of these substances. The process of language can be approached and worked at, on any one of the three levels, but any attention to one area will necessarily involve a consideration of the others in some way.

Duncan's working takes place primarily at the phonological level, that being the point where he finds he can enter and participate in the language process, but he works always in conjunction with, and in co-operation with what is going on in the other areas. A structuring of vowels, consonants, stresses, pitches and junctures is his way of contributing to the growth of the poem's shape and meaning.

Specifically, the phonological patterning that Duncan finds most fruitful is of a musical order. He seeks a "tuning of the language," as we noted earlier, to create a musical condition in the poem, through which the "music of the spheres" will reverberate. To reiterate: Duncan's 39 intention noted earlier:

Here I declare a mood, a mode in language conceived as a tuning of the language toward a possible music.

(Letters, "Preface," p.iv)

39 see above Ch.3, p.21, fn.21.
His emphasis on music is not, however, a concern for the 'music of poetry' in the usual sense, that is, as simply a pleasing effect, or ornament. For Duncan, music is the necessary way into a poem, being the base and centre of poetry, by the fact that it is the essence of the universe itself. On this point, Duncan cites Carlyle's comments in "The Hero as Poet:"

All deep things are Song. It seems somehow the very central essence of us, Song; as if all the rest were but wrappages and hulls! The primal element of us; of us, and of all things. The Greek fabled of Sphere-Harmonies: it was the feeling they had of the inner structure of Nature; that the soul of all her voices and utterances was perfect music. Poetry, therefore, we call musical Thought. The poet is he who thinks in that manner. At bottom, it turns still on power of intellect; it is a man's sincerity and depth of vision that make him a Poet. See deep enough, and you see musically; the heart of Nature being everywhere music, if you can only reach it.

("Ideas of the Meaning of Form," Kulchur, p.63)

Duncan comments:

Carlyle's thought opens a vista towards what our own inspired science of linguistics has made part of our responsibility, if we are concerned with the nature of things. Carlyle's thought going towards the inner structure of Nature had intuitions of the inner structure of language.

Language, like nature, is at heart 'perfect music,' to Duncan. And thus the melodies of poetry are no ornament, but echoes of, or manifestations of the music at the heart of things.
Obviously such terms as 'musical device' are not inclusive enough here, where the poetry is itself musical thought, where Duncan works at 'tuning the language' in the conviction that he can thereby approach the essence of life. As, for example, in "The Structure of Rime XIII," he perceives the structure of the universe in musical terms:

For the melted Earth has gone up out of the Sun into a law that is of stone. And light melodies of the sun-beauty that has shadows, great rests of dark-cast caverns in the living - play thereon.

For the first law, the stone tables of Moses or of Kung, are instruments of a light music, a melody from celestial orbs out-swirled.

(O.F. p.83)

He seeks always to apprehend the music that is everywhere:

In noise the yearning goes toward tones because a world in melody appears increasing longing towards stations of fullness to release from memory a passionate order:

the inbinding, the return,
where certain vital spirits of an eternal act are bound to be present,
echoes there in octaves of suffering and joy

The inhabitants of Love, the inhabitants of Light, that were Eros and Psyche, that was Christ at the intersection of two lines, is each melos of the melody.

("The Inbinding," O.F., p.85)

I have quoted at length here, to give a brief indication of the ultimate extension of the musical terms. For Duncan's
specific workings need to be viewed as part of a general music to be properly understood. But I would now return to the phonology of the poems, for it is in the specific structuring of vowels, consonants, stresses etc. that the process of 'musical thought' begins.

Probably the most significant phonological structure in Duncan's poems is the vowel patterning. At least that is where Duncan's working most often takes place, one of his primary conscious activities in the poem being what he calls tone leading of vowels. He takes the combination of vowels in a word or phrase or line, and composes in a pattern which follows that melodic line, thereby using the tones to 'lead' the poem. Witness, for example, the opening of "Osiris and Set":

OSIRIS AND SET

members of one Life Boat are
that rides against Chaos,
or into the night goes, driving back
those darknesses within the dark,
as Harry Jacobus saw them on our mountain,
trolls of the underground.

(Roots and Branches, p.67)

The vowels of _Osiris_ and _Set_ lead the poem to "members of one Life Boat" in a pattern of o-a-i; a-i-o-. Then the sounds of "Life Boat" are again followed in the next two lines:
"rides... chaos" and "night goes" (chaos is obviously not an exact rime, but is, I think, close enough to be considered part of the pattern). Finally the 0 is carried through to the end of the stanza in "Jacobus" and "trolls." Duncan is clearly letting the vowel patterns, to some extent at least, lead the poem. To take another example:

**NIGHT SCENES**

I

The moon's up-riding makes a line
flowing out into lion's mane
of traffic, of speeding lights.

(Roots & Branches, p.5)

The sound of "Night" is repeated in each subsequent line; the vowels of "riding makes" lead the poem to "lion's mane," while the tonal sequence in "Night Scenes" recurs in reverse order in "speeding lights," which brings the stanza to a close.

Frequently, as in "Night Scenes," the vowel combinations act also like a tonic chord in a musical composition, providing a melodic base with which the composition begins and ends. A stanza or section, or occasionally a whole poem, will return to the chord of its beginning. In the poem "Roots and Branches," for example,
the opening chord recurs in the last line: "awakening transports of an inner view of things" echoes "Roots and Branches"(as "speeding lights" echoed "Night Scenes") providing, among other things, a satisfying completion of the poem's form. One feels the poem (or section) comes naturally to rest.

Vowels are by no means the only phonological feature that Duncan works with. Certainly in the opening of "Roots and Branches," for example, consonant and rhythmic patterns play an important part in determining the poem's movement:

Sail, Monarchs, rising and falling orange merchants in spring flowery markets! messengers of March in warm currents of news floating, flitting into areas of aroma, tracing out of air unseen roots and branches of sense I share in thought, filaments woven and broken where the world might light casual certainties of me. There are (Roots & Branches, p.3)

In the first three lines, the heavy stress occurring at the beginning of each line and reinforced by the repeat of initial (m) establishes a wave-like rhythm, a "rising and falling": from the peak or crest at the start, the line flows out. The rhythmic fluidity is increased by the phonic patterning of "rising... falling... spring... floating." Then a shift occurs at line 4 where the initial consonant and vowel features are patterned on the phonics of the end of the
of the preceding line ("floating, flitting") which together with the syntactic parallelism, indicates a continuity here. Junctures, too, are seen to be functional, to be part of a process. That is, line breaks - which are marked by terminal junctures - indicate stages in the progression of thought and feeling, either a completion or some sort of uncertainty (hesitation even). In the following instance:

casual certainties of me. There are

echoes of what I am in what you perform this morning. How you perfect my spirit!

the terminal juncture in "are," together with the stanza break, marks a hovering uncertainty in the poem's movement. Duncan waits, until "echoes" comes to mind (following the vowel of "There") which, together with "perform," forms a vowel-consonant sequence which leads him through to "restore."

It should be evident that I am pointing out only the more obvious patterns. Duncan is obviously acutely sensitive to all the subtleties of sound and rhythm so that, as he writes in "The Day Book," 'Each individual articulation of the poem plays its role in figuring and shadowing the life of the whole." (p. 7)
To varying extents, tone leading, and other kinds of patterning occur throughout the poems, but such structures are usually most evident at the start of a poem, or section. This substantiates the claim made earlier that music is a necessary element in Duncan's writing; it provides, that is, a way into the poem, in that it is a means to get the poem moving. His working with the immediate sounds brings Duncan into contact with the flow of language in the poem. As Duncan observes:

The poet's art is one of tact and guile, its boundary limitless only when it's done; elsewhere seeming almost to flounder helpless into meaning, by rime restricted. How are we to follow? ("After Reading Barely and Widely," O.F. p.91)

Thus at the start of a poem, and at points where it begins to slow down (stanza breaks, section breaks - points where there would naturally be more 'floundering'), the rime is more concentrated. ("Rime restricts' in the sense that it determines, and therefore limits, the direction.) It is at these points that Duncan relies heavily on whatever tones are present to lead him, and that he is most obviously working at the phonological level. One observes, for example, that a pattern of sounds often provides the means of transition from stanza to stanza, or from section to section,
or even from line to line. In the "Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," Duncan uses the tones of the last line of the first section as a base, or starting point, for the first line of the second section:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Jealousy, ignorance, the hurt... serve them} \\
\text{II} \\
\text{This is magic. It is passionate dispersion}
\end{align*}
\]

"This is magic..." is composed out of the phonological features of the preceding line: the (i) and (er) sounds recur, together with a preponderence of (s). Yet while still riding on these sounds, relying particularly heavily on the (i), Duncan also picks up on the (a) of "magic," which in turn leads him to "passionate dispersion."

Out of this intricate inter-weaving of sounds emerges a meaningful statement (Duncan flounders "helpless into meaning, by rime"), from whence the poem opens out, moves out:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{This is magic. It is passionate dispersion.} \\
\text{What if they grow old? The gods would not allow it.} \\
\text{Psyche is preserved.}
\end{align*}
\]

Then after the 'opening out,' it returns to the initial melodic line: "preserved" echoes the vowel, consonant and
stress features of "dispersion," while "Psyche is" repeats the (i) in conjunction with (k) and (s) consonants of the first line.

The move from this stanza to the next is again made by tone leading:

Psyche is preserved

In time we see a tragedy, a loss of beauty

In this instance, the statement that Duncan is led to proves more fruitful, and a larger movement ensues:

In time we see a tragedy, a loss of beauty
the glittering youth
of the god retains - but from this threshold
it is age
that is beautiful. It is toward the old poets
we go, to their faltering,
their unaltering wrongness that has style,
their variable truth,
the old faces,
words shed like tears from
a plenitude of powers time stores.

The movement at the level of rhythm and sound parallels the movement observed earlier at the meaning level in "the shaman sends himself.../ but / the witness brings self up before the law;" there is a constant flow from orders to disorders, known to unknown, "law" to chaos. As here, in its phonology, the poem flows from pattern into "disorder," or, to put it another way, moves along what Duncan calls the "scale of resemblance and disresemblance."(O.F., p.13)
That is not to suggest, however, that all phonological resemblance (pattern) ceases at any point; it is rather a matter of degree. In the body of the section beginning "In time we see a tragedy..." there are quite obvious phonic equivalences: "retains.../age"; "poets.../go"; "to their faltering,/ their unaltering wrongness"; "words shed.../ from a plenitude." But the patterns are not held and worked with to the same extent that they are at the start.

Probably the most illuminating piece of writing for this discussion is the next passage of the Pindar poem, where the process is slowed almost to a standstill, thus allowing a clear view of Duncan's manner of working:

A stroke. These little strokes. A chill.
The old man, feeble, does not recoil.
Recall. A phase so minute,
only a part of the word in-jerrd.

The Thundermakers descend,
demerging a nuv. A nerb.
The present dented of the Unighted stayd. States. The heavy clod?
Cloud. Invades the brain. What
if lilacs last in this dooryard bloomd?

Working with the very specific phonological characteristics of each word, Duncan struggles toward meaningful statement. "The heavy clod?/Cloud. Invades the brain"; there is a
heaviness in the movement during this virtual paralysis of the poem, an awkwardness, as he moves step by step; which effectively demonstrates that the working is Duncan's only way in the poem. The very fact that such an 'unsuccessful' passage is even present in the poem reveals another important aspect of the poetic process. Duncan works only with the immediate, the present particulars, records the actual process as it is going on, in the conviction that only by that process will the true music flow forth. In this connection he writes, in "The Day Book": "we cannot afford to fill a gap. Gaps must be acknowledged where they are, if: the music hold." (p.4) As in this portion of the Pindar poem, a dry spell is acknowledged, which Duncan subsequently works through; the cloud breaks with "What if lilacs last in this dooryard bloomd?" and poem moves into a full scale 'litany' on American presidents, in the passage beginning:

Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower - where among these did the power reside that moves the heart?

We can see here also how the working at the level of phonology is always in co-operation with what is going on at the sense level of the language. "Hoover," partially
brought to mind by a phonic equivalence with "bloomd," also comes in through an association of meanings; "lilacs last in this dooryard bloomd" recalls Whitman's praise of Lincoln, which brings Duncan to think of the presidents of his own time. Content and form, sound and meaning merge and complement each other.

The point is that "the heart of nature being everywhere music," (as Carlyle says) rime (phonic correspondence) can disclose meaningful correspondences, or lead one to an apprehension of meaning.

The authors of the look write with out eyes broken phrases of their book. ("Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake,"R&B.p.49)

Here the end rime parallels a "meaning rime": the "book" is in the look, as also, the "writing" is in the "eyes." Or, further on in the same poem:

Why could I not move my hand? Why could I not move my hand? waiting, a word in a moving sentence just at the point where the authors reveal (but their revelation is everywhere) the book. (my italics)

The rime of "sentence" and "revelation" is similarly a meaningful correspondence, the sentence being the place where the revelation occurs.

Rime is a meaningful order or structure, registering
the pattern that the poem takes on in its movement through language. In "The Structure of Rime XIII," Duncan articulates this view:

The structure of rime is in the rigorous trees repeated that take on the swirl visible of the coast winds and the outcroppings, the upraised and bared granites that define sentences of force and instrument.

(O.F. p.83)

As lines of force are registered in the pattern of trees ("that take on the swirl visible of the coast winds") and outcroppings on the sea coast, so rime registers the points of concentrated force in the poem, the points where semantic, phonic etc. movements combine and work together.

*  

The secret of the poetic art lies in the keeping of time, to keep time, discovering the line of melodic coherence. "Here," "there," what once was, what is now - this return in a new structure is the essence of rime - the return of a vowel tone, of a consonant formation, of a theme, of a contour, where rime is meaningful, corresponding to the poet's intuition of the real.

("The Day Book," p. 12)

The essence of rime being recurrence, it extends, finally into all areas of the poem: Duncan watches for the return of "themes," "meanings," as well as of sounds. At the level of theme and meaning, he becomes involved in what he calls
"thematic composition." Briefly stated, this demands an attention to recurring themes. These recurrences, in conjunction, of course, with the patterns of sounds, form another line of force that 'leads' the poem. Thus the shape of the poems, particularly of the longer ones, often derives from an interweaving and expansion of a few basic themes, in a manner which parallels musical composition (particularly the nineteenth century symphonic form).

"Apprehensions" has such a shape. Each of its five movements centres around the development of a theme, all of which are, in turn, related to the central theme of 'apprehensions.' The basic 'melodic line' is given at the start: "To open Night's eye that sleeps in what we know by Day." Out of this, the first movement is developed: Duncan observes different varieties of 'darknesses,' and of dark places, first recounting a dream-vision of his own:

...I saw an excavation - but a cave-in of the ground hiding or showing, or showing in hiding, a glass or stone, most valuable.

(ROots & Branches, p.31)

Gradually this theme expands:

Well, I saw... yes, that the earth is a great toad-mother; a fancy figure of Tiamat, pitted with young. But then I stood looking down into a chain of caves most real (that might have been washt out, gutted by rains from the shit-yellow clay),
What the 'night's eye' sees, acts as a base or organizational centre throughout the movement.

The question of directives, the theme of the second movement, is another dimension of 'apprehensions,' another aspect of what one experiences when 'night's eye' is opened. The third movement is similarly related, with its focus on "Dream or vision, the ancestors' adventure." (R.&B. p.35) From that opening line, this section moves into considerations of the past: "Troy," "the elemental man," and Duncan's own past:

But it was my grandfather who made that trek after the war into the Oregon Territory and my grandmother who entered the dragon West (R.& B. p. 36)

And then closes with a "reversion to First Movement."

The "reversion" fits in as a return to the more immediate past, to the dream-vision recounted at the start of the poem of a "stone," a "figure," a "chain of caves":

It was a place where a flood had passionately dug out his substance, leaving only his boundaries. And it seemed a grave to me,

for I thought he was dead. No., it seemed a series of caves as I said. Certainly, there were no arms or legs clearly defined.

It did occur to me that the hideous gleam of a crawling thing
there at the bottom
was in the mind -
that the figure was head downwards.

I have seen the jewel.
To open Night's eye that sleeps in what we know by Day.
In the grievous excavation he remains,
as if an empty place waited
body to my soul.

The parallels are obvious. Duncan modulates toward a close
by working with materials from the first movement, which
demonstrates that here, as throughout, the direction and
shape of the poem are at least partially determined by the
presence of certain given melodic lines.

The poem continues on in this manner through two more
movements, coming to a close only when Duncan experiences
a recurrence of the "cave," the "hidden thing" etc. — that
is, he finds an actual cave:

March 27: We found after the rains a cave-in along
the path near the rosemary and thyme, disclosing
the pit of an abandond cess pool. Because of the
dream fragment a month before, the event seems
to have been anticipated. A verification of the
caves seen in actual life after they had appeard
in the life of the poem.

(p.42)

A correspondence (a thematic rime) with the opening occurs,
which complete's the poem's form. Everthing draws
together:

Wherever we watch, concordances appear

From the living apprehension, the given and giving melos, melodies thereof - in what scale?

as the poem moves toward its natural end. (It should be noted that this recurrence at the end, is different from the "reversion to first movement" at the end of section 3. That "reversion" was a re-working of the opening material, whereas a parallel, but new experience enters at the end. It is "this return in a new structure," as Duncan says, that is "the essence of rime" (see p.69 above), that draws the themes together, and brings the poem to a close.)

So Duncan's search for the "line of melodic coherence" in a poem leads him to work with the musical possibilities of the language at all levels. In attending to the various musical processes, he achieves a poetry that is truly 'musical thought.'
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This focus on the processes and workings in Duncan's writing leaves much uncovered ground. I have not considered the content of the poems to any extent, except insofar as language and process is a subject. Research into Duncan's subjects and sources did not seem essential to an understanding of the conscious process of the poem. From the point of view of the poem's structure, it is necessary simply to recognize the presence of a 'voice,' as 'utterance' (from actual life) or 'quote' (from written work), which provides a further dimension of the poem's tone in that other eyes or other minds come into play. And, in any case, Duncan's work is not usually referential (one doesn't have to read Apuleius'
The Golden Ass, in order to understand the Cupid and Psyche material in the Pindar poem). To depend on outside reference would negate Duncan's basic concept of the poem; if the poem is to be, truly, a process, it cannot contain 'dead'(referential) material. Such things as the Cupid and Psyche story arise out of the immediate particulars in the poem and are usually, if one reads carefully enough, self-evident; certainly they have a life in the poem.

However, to return to contents: a comprehensive discussion of the poems' subject matter cannot be attempted here. But in order to give a complete picture of Duncan's work, it seems useful to briefly sketch in his major subjects and sources. From the point of view of subject matter, the base and centre of the poetry is Duncan's concern with the imagination of the nature of man. As he has written in a letter: "beginning definitely with my work in the book *Letters*, the scope, intent and character of my writing has risen from the study and imagination of what man is."

That study, in turn, leads him to many sources: to the psychologies of William James and Freud, to philosophy(with Whitehead and Plato being primary), to historical studies (Ernst Kantorowicz, with whom Duncan studied at Berkeley,

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Jane Harrison, Ernst Cassirer), to linguists (chiefly Whorf, Sapir, Traeger and Smith), to the work of contemporary scientists, such as Shrodinger, to mythology (Mermetic, Cabalistic and Gnostic as well as the more 'common' mythologies) and of course to poets with similar concerns (Marlow, Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Yeats, Dante, is one listing Duncan gives). Any detailed discussion of Duncan's ideas would require careful study of these primary sources.

Certainly, from "the study and imagination of what man is" come the subjects that run through Duncan's later work. These can be variously categorized; man's psychological, communal (social) and mystical experiences are major areas of concern. Quoting from Dante's De Vulgari Eloquentia, Duncan cites a similar delimitation of the subjects of poetry:

Wherefore these three things, namely, safety, love and virtue, appear to be those capital matters which ought to be treated supremely, I mean the things which are most important in respect of them, as prowess of arms, the fire of love, and the direction of the will.

("The Day Book," p.9)

Though the terms, as Duncan goes on to show, need re-qualifying (safety being now not a civic order, but more a psychological order and well being), the list is useful: Psychological 'safety,' love, and human relationships, and the 'directing

41 Guggenheim letter (see f.n.40)
of the will' to allow maximum fulfillment of the spirit, are recurrent themes. A study of Duncan's poetry along these lines would, I think, prove fruitful.

The significance of the subject of safety comes clear in light of Duncan's further comment - the psychological studies of James and Freud, he suggests, show that for the modern man, "our safety lay in our imagination of what man was, not in the defense but in the opening of our minds. Our prowess must lie now not in defeating the enemy but in the more problematic and longer effort to understand our common humanity with him." ("The Day Book," p. 11, my italics) And further:

James saw that man must cope with a more and more complicated picture of the real, if he desired fullness. His pluralistic philosophy imaged a manhood where ideal, practice, fiction and even aberration had each its individual role to play in the composition of realities. Freud saw that the unconscious activity of man, whatever he had not faced in himself, where arts, wars, rituals of flower worship and death orgy, forbidden sexual cravings and the highest ideals were mixed, must be part of his conscious engagement in life or else the old hubris threatened.

Ways and means of 'opening our minds' is certainly a recurrent topic in the poems: "Responsibility is to keep the ability to respond," Duncan writes in "The Law I Love is Major Mover." A major theme of the Pindar poem is that
modern man has lost that 'ability to respond':

Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower
where among these did the power reside
that moves the heart.

(O.F. p.63)

Likewise, Duncan's insistence on an open structure, a
structure that will allow maximum fullness is relevant
here, as is his constant concern to push to the limits
of his present knowledge and understanding.

The subject of love has, of course, been important
from the start. In the later work, Duncan continues
to seek an understanding of the complexities of love,
there being for him always a certain hesitation or fear,
even as he desires the fullness of love. In "Night
Scenes," for example, he writes:

for a moment
terror touches my heart, our hearts, all hearts
that have come in along these sexual avenues
seeking to release Eros from our mistrust.

Roots & Branches, p.6)

Or in "At Christmas": "spears.../ cut gashes of yearning into song"

From which opening of blood a woman
in the center of the field disturbs,
nakedness
we were afraid to touch but were drawn
into that lust
(for Love has orders within orders)
her breast redeeming milk to the hand's thirst,
her wombs heart's sheath
to the intellectual thrust,

(O.F. p.58)
In a "Set of Romantic Hymns," the subject again comes up:

I have suffered a loss.
I came into manhood estranged from men,

It was a dark way in the light of what was
It was a changing face.

to sing my Eros
my stranger in Love
I turned and caught his wandering glance.

It was a foreign way in a familiar house.

As if there'd been a woman
where I was.

(Roots & Branches, p. 112)

Duncan's italics

There is also the question of homosexual love, treated
directly, for example, in a sequence of sonnets:

Now there is a Love of which Dante does not speak unkindly
Tho it grieves his heart to think upon men
who lust after men.

(Roots & Branches, p. 122)

And finally the subject of relationships needs to be
examined, with particular attention to Duncan's concern with
feminine presences: mother, maiden, muse: Persephone, Demeter,
Isis - the White Goddess. The concluding section of "A
Sequence of Poems for H.D.'s Birthday" suggests the significant
aspects of this subject:

Lady, I have heard news of you once more.
Solovyev in his ninth year saw
suddenly the blue of the sky all around him
and his own soul the blue of the sky,
an eternal woman woven in blue
So the thought of you may permeate all thought. Life Eternal we may name the color and, moving from images of a nightmare, sink and mere of our making water, take Hell too as a mother.

That I acknowledge you are most there, when, tossing at night, head down, I watch (a witch's figure kept by old hatreds) the dark emerging from its stinking hole, you will lead me from despair.

Between the rose and the purple Solovyev saw intimations of viginal blue, an intellectual light. "Sophia," he called Her.

And in the Egyptian desert, an old man then, eyes full of that blue flame, "Show me Thy face once more," he prayed. It was a divine womanly radiance that came. (Roots and Branches, p.16)

Feminine presence is, for Duncan, a significant power. And he watches for accounts of experience with that presence. His own relationship to it is, however, problematic, being complicated by his homo-erotic nature. The mother figure appears often ("Two Presentations," "A Sequence of Poems for H.D's Birthday" etc.) but the maiden is not so clear.

This is partially explained in a chapter of the H.D. study where Duncan cites Heracles vision of Kore, then comments: "But in my life dream, I have not seen the Maiden, for I stand in her place or in her way."

42"The H.D.Book: Chapter 5," Aion #1(Spring, 1965), p.15
Finally there is the subject of man's spiritual nature and experience - an involved and complex subject that lies at the heart of Duncan's writing. The main thing to understand in approaching this area is that the god-head, in Duncan's view, is ever-present. Speaking of Christ, for example, he has this to say:

This god Christ will not rest in an historical identity, but again and again seeks incarnation anew in our lives. The religious will takes the Divine as given, "uncreated," and seeks to use the God as an authority against the full life of the stuff, drawing upon the spell of magic voice and action in which the Christ is real, yet working throughout to establish prohibition and dogma to limit the creative energy to the immediate purpose. ("The Day Book," p. 26)

Duncan seeks the present, incarnate God, not the authoritarian "uncreated" image. Divine presence of this order is found chiefly in works of art - poetry (and other forms) being a place where the gods may come to life, being, in Duncan's words, a 'vehicle of transformation.'

It is the mystery of poem and novel, picture and drama, that Helen and Christ emerge as eternal persons of our human spirit, and again and again must be drawn from their conventions into life. Here the high and independent selfhood of each work of art is the vehicle of transformation. (The Day Book," p. 27)

His art then, finally, has an ethical and religious function, and Duncan's ultimate concern in poetry is to attend to the spiritual processes that are manifest there. Thus a great
many of his poems deal directly with divine presence, with mystical experiences, with the life of man's spirit.

Deriving also from this concern with spiritual subjects is Duncan's commitment to poetry as a life's work. The work is meaningful in the fullest sense, being his way of participating in the community of mankind, his contribution to man's spiritual evolution, and his way of approaching the "Beloved."

The Beloved's face is gone.
In loneliness the lyre forms,
each string
the bracelet of a thousand charms.

He charms,
bringing accumulations of the sound to rime.

I sang in the orders of his rime.
I was most isolate in his charm.

0 song of the many changes,
Song of the one thing,

I have only this song to send
to take my place among the dancers.

("A Set of Romantic Hymns," R.&B. p. 115)
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