

**THE POETRY OF RONALD DUNCAN**

by

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## ABSTRACT

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### The Poetry of Ronald Duncan

This thesis is the first sustained critical analysis of the poetry of Ronald Duncan (1914-1982). As this is the first study of Duncan's poetry, a substantial part is exegesis and follows a chronological pattern. Duncan was a man of letters who wrote poetry, plays, librettos, songs, short stories, journals, autobiographies, biographies and novels. He was strongly influenced by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Their poetics and personal advice enabled Duncan to produce a series of publications that pursued some basic modernist tenets, such as an adherence to a European poetic tradition and the belief that poetry could induce cultural renewal, via an overtly subjectivised perspective.

A chapter of this thesis has been allocated for each of Duncan's poetry publications. The introduction explores the personal and ideological importance of Pound and Eliot for Duncan; Pound's input into Duncan's magazine Townsmen; and how Eliot, as Duncan's publisher, was able to offer a significant platform for his poetry. It also examines the position of the writer in relation to his writing, to show how the subjectivity of modernist authors compared with Duncan's belief that authorial presence was an essential part of any genuine poetic endeavour.

Duncan's poetic career spanned almost forty years, from 1939 to 1977. His first publication, Postcards to Pulcinella (c1939), exemplifies his early experimentation with form. His next, and first Faber publication, The Mongrel (1950), is notable for its diversity of form and theme, and develops a greater awareness of European poetic diversity than is present in Postcards to Pulcinella. The Solitudes (1960) introduces a reworking of love poem sequences, which is developed in Unpopular Poems (1969) and For The Few (1977), and concentrates increasingly on lost love and personal grief. Between Unpopular Poems and For the Few Duncan published the five parts of his epic narrative poem Man (1970-4). This major work charts the history of the universe and human development, and blends poetic with scientific discourse. Man exemplifies, above all else, Duncan's on-going belief that all things exist only in his conscious understanding.

The relationship between Duncan, the writing process and the resultant poetry, is a recurrent theme throughout the thesis. By drawing a distinction between author (writing subject) and the written representation of that author in the poetry (written subject) it explores the relationship between Duncan's own consciousness, the world it perceives, and the linguistic structures he uses in communicating their conjunction.

Each of Duncan's poetry publications develops themes of love, sex, nature, human nature, Christianity and subjective isolation. Employing a variety of verse forms and tropes these themes are teased out book by book, but conclude with his belief that conscious expansion and cultural development through poetry was a futile, but nevertheless necessary, endeavour.

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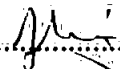
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## Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

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Signed..........

Date...20/12/196.....

## Introduction

### Ronald Duncan: The Poetics Of The Personal In The Modernist Mirror

This thesis is a study of the poetry of Ronald Duncan (1914-1982). To date there is no critical work which attempts to explore Duncan's poetic career from the self-published Postcards to Pulcinella, circa 1940, through his volumes published by Faber and Hart-Davis, his epic Man, to For the Few (Rebel Press, 1977).

Most of the writing that exists on Duncan's poetry is in the form of book reviews. A Tribute to Ronald Duncan (1974), a collection of essays written to celebrate Duncan's sixtieth birthday, offers slightly more detailed criticism. However, as the remit given to those asked to contribute by its editor Harold Lockyear was to write either about Duncan or on a subject that would interest him, and as the contributors ranged from scientists to singers, the subject matter of the essays is often anecdotal or irrelevant to this study. Of those that engage directly with Duncan's writing all weave together his poetry, dramas, biography and relationship to the author, with the dramas always receiving the most attention.

William Wahl's essay 'The Poetic Theories of Ronald Duncan' which appeared in Poetic Drama and Poetic Theory, University of Salzburg, 1974, No. 27, pp. 81-132, also offers little in the way of useful criticism for, as he declares:

When given this opportunity to write on Ronald Duncan's poetic theories, I was determined that I should make no attempt to examine any of his poetry critically. (p. 81)

In fact, Wahl's essay rewrites his interviews with Duncan which were similarly published by the University of Salzburg as 'Ronald Duncan: Verse

Dramatist and Poet Interviewed by William Wahl' in Poetic Drama No. 20, 1973.

Before and after Wahl there is no evidence to suggest that Duncan's poetry has been seen as worthy of analysis. This is all the more surprising when one considers that his poetic career ranged from 1939-77, included a 335 page modern epic, and that his writing developed first-hand from two of the most influential canonical writers of the twentieth century: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. This account, therefore, offers the first sustained criticism of Duncan's poetry and examines each of his publications in chronological order.

It begins by looking at the significance of his founding and editing of the magazine Townsmen which marked an important point of collaboration with Ezra Pound who, along with T. S. Eliot, was to significantly affect Duncan's writing. This is not to suggest that Duncan was a mere foil for Poundian or Eliotian ideologies, but to emphasise that Duncan's style of poetry owed much to the teachings of Anglo-American modernists. What Duncan's poetry reveals most is an appropriation of modernist practices into a poetic that is at once distinctly personal. This is most apparent in Duncan's major poem Man (1970-4) whose Epic intentions bind, in the latter part of the twentieth century, Duncan's desire for universal understanding to the modernist grand narratives - Ulysses (1922), The Cantos (1930-69), and 'The Waste Land' (1922) - that evolved from *fin de siècle* disenchantment and the determination for aesthetic renewal. In order to see how Duncan interprets and appropriates modernism it is first necessary to examine some aspects of what were then arguably its major texts.<sup>1</sup> From here it will be possible to see how Duncan invests the notion of cultural renewal with his own notion of subjective idealism.

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<sup>1</sup>The notion of the male centred modernist canon has recently been reassessed, notably in Bonnie Kime Scott's critical anthology The Gender of Modernism (1990) in which she writes:

After fifty years we may have enough distance and sedimentation time, along with adequate theoretical perspective, to take in more than was visible to the modernists themselves or to the early critics of modernism. If they followed Pound's dictum to "make it new," we still must work on identifying the process and the pronoun. (p. 16)

Ulysses, The Cantos and 'The Waste Land' have various levels of authorial presence. Ulysses is pre-empted by the largely autobiographical A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) which marked the appearance of Stephen Dedalus. It is the character Stephen who carries the weight of Joyce's aesthetic thinking in Ulysses, remaining slightly aloof and separate from his friends and associates. Stephen is the youthful artist, while Bloom is the counter-balance, the middle-aged character of realism bound to the endless details of life.<sup>2</sup> Bloom observes Dublin and draws a clear line of distinction between life and art:

Her stockings are loose over her ankles. I detest that: so tasteless. Those literary etherial people they are all. Dreamy, cloudy, symbolistic. Esthetes they are. I wouldn't be surprised if it was that kind of food you see produces the like waves of the brain the poetical. For example one of those policemen sweating Irish stew into their shirts; you couldn't squeeze a line of poetry out of him. Don't know what poetry is even. Must be in a certain mood.  
(Ulysses, p. 165-6)

But while autobiographical reference may never be far from the surface, Joyce does not dominate his characters in a way that would make them a simple reflection of himself. Fictionalisation enables Joyce to extend experience into patterns of mass behaviour and consciousness. The events are not necessarily true but they appear so; and their superabundance means that they are beyond the comprehension his characters seek. Similarly, Pound's entries into The Cantos, such as 'Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but the one "Sordello." / But Sordello, and my Sordello?' (Canto II, p. 6) and later, and perhaps more poignantly, in the Pisan Cantos, show a participation with a place and history while at the same time allowing the world to exist outside of subjective understanding. Indeed, it is essential that events exist prior to and separate from the poet's personal existence if the poem is to reveal Pound as a participant in history, rather than a constructor of it. On

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<sup>2</sup>In James Joyce Richard Ellmann equates Stephen Dedalus with Joyce and Bloom with Ulysses (p. 33). Bloom also carries the ancient character of the Wandering Jew.



occasion Pound steps out from his position as the marshal of events to write himself into the surface of the poem. This usually occurs in times of crisis, a point where he is most vulnerable and thus most self-aware:

Cassandra, your eyes are like tigers,  
with no word written in them  
You also have I carried to nowhere  
to an ill house and there is  
no end to the journey  
The chess board too lucid  
the squares are too even...theatre of war...  
"theatre" is good. There are those who did not want  
it to come to an end (Canto LXXVIII, p. 477)

To be the carrier is different from being the creator, the poetic construction is in the ordering. As it is with 'The Waste Land' where the range of different vocabularies implies that there is one person who sees, hears and organises them:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
(*'The Waste Land'*, Collected Poems, p. 71.)

In all three of these works the author is, in a more or less complex or teasing way, the 'seer' and his own experiences form part of that vision. It is the translation of experience into a visionary aesthetic and not an affirmation of the self which is the aesthetic goal of the writing. Joyce, Pound and Eliot remain close to the surface of their texts, their writing full of biography and memory, but their works are not dominated by their personal lives. With Duncan it is different. For him it is not the vision itself which is of importance but the visionary himself. Duncan dispenses with the artifice and polyvocal juxtapositions to create narrative passages that reflect his own

consciousness. The artifice is not of textual surface, but of the writing process and Duncan's consciousness of it:

(As I write a fly alights then trudges across this page)  
As I was saying: what does beginning mean, except that we have an  
end? (Canto Three, Man, p. 19.)<sup>3</sup>

In this way the epic journey of Man happens within the consciousness of its author; its hero is its author, and what is written is inextricably tied into his subjectivity. And because Duncan is the dominant character in his writing there is little room for empathy. The poetry is there to teach through hard experience and is relentlessly monolithic and liberally spread with "I"s which are not, as is the case with Pound, Joyce and Eliot, an indeterminate subject in which the author is inculcated, but the written proclamation of their singular author, the writing subject that brings them into being. It is his channelling of modernist sensibilities through an acutely exacting self-consciousness, that makes Duncan's writing distinctly different. The intrusion of Duncan as central presence represents a re-instatement of personal authority. It is this desire for overt control over poetry as means of cultural change that makes Duncan of particular interest in twentieth century literature.

Following the Second World War poetry was consolidated within English borders of provincial ordinariness and established as a deftly handled, now middle-brow craft. The scope of Movement poetry was narrow indeed. Duncan, however, continued to believe in the modernist dictum of the poet as the instrumentor of change. He was not interested in national boundaries, nor in disassembling them. He had no desire to use regional dialects to establish a poetic of the Celtic borderland of north-west Devon as Bunting had in Northumbria and MacDiarmid in Scotland. Similarly,

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<sup>3</sup>In the Pisan Cantos Pound uses insects to bind reality with the world of myth: 'The ant's a centaur in his dragon world' (The Cantos, 'LXXXI', p. 521) and the newly born wasp that 'has stuck its head or tip / out of Madame La Vespa's bottle' returns 'to them that dwell under the earth' to 'have speech with Tiresias, Thebae // Cristo Re, Dio Sole' (The Cantos, 'LXXXIII', p. 533). Duncan, however, rejects such allusions for the matter-of-fact spatial and temporal co-existence of man and insect, and in so doing reinforces the here-and now of the writing process.

Duncan refused to participate in the inward looking, traditional and reductive suburbanisation of poetry that was a characteristic of Movement writers, those poets and novelists who were typically reticent about claiming a group identity and yet never claimed individuality with the same stridence as Duncan.<sup>4</sup> Eschewing social, political and national concerns enabled Duncan to continue a project of all encompassing change. His collections Unpopular Poems (1969) and For the Few (1977), while far from showing innovative poetic practice, are nonetheless testament to his awareness that he was writing out of favour with common trends. They show instead his preference for reworking the European poetic forms and subject matter that he had established himself with in the 1940s. However, his experimentation with science and mathematics in Man, together with its wide ranging polyvocality, confirm his commitment to various hallmarks of modernism, namely those of experimentation and of the poet as a cultural visionary.<sup>5</sup>

Further poetic developments in the 60s included an increasingly active avant-garde as was demonstrated by the publication of the Penguin anthology Children of Albion (1969).<sup>6</sup> But Duncan seemed to be unaware of such developments and if he was he paid them no heed. This is not to suggest that he wrote from an idealisation of the 1920s and 30s. For example, the primeval cantos of Man show how Duncan worked with the rekindled interest in prehistoric caveman narratives as William Golding had in The Inheritors (1955) and Michael Carreras in the film One Million Years BC (1966), both of which allegorised the precarious balance of cultural

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<sup>4</sup>Blake Morrison (1980) writes:

A more serious problem for anyone writing about the Movement is the fact that the poets themselves have frequently denied the validity of the group label that was affixed to them (The Movement, p. 4).

<sup>5</sup>In his book Intertextual Dynamics Dennis Brown claims that English modernism was, to a large extent driven by a belief in the importance of literature in providing emotional, experiential and moral truths, so that the:

writers of the 'generation of 1914' were educated to believe that literature was a vital intellectual pursuit, on a par with scientific investigation - and even more relevant to the development of genuine civilisation (p. 12).

<sup>6</sup>The editor of Children of Albion, Michael Horovitz, presented for his anthology an agenda of a Blakean renaissance of radical and visionary poetry that integrated fully with the 'now-time' of the modern world. (See 'Afterwords', Children of Albion, pp. 316-377.)

development and owed more to Rousseau's 'noble savage' than the Lascaux cave paintings that interested Eliot. Similarly, Duncan was fascinated with space exploration, even to the extent of trying to persuade the physicist Herman Bondi to petition for him to be a travelling observer on an Apollo mission<sup>7</sup>. Canto Fifty, written in the persona of an astronaut, accounts for this:

They didn't want a guy like you  
Who might see some internal vision up there,  
then forget to fire the retro-rocket: no offence of course . . .  
(Part Four, Canto Fifty, p. 35)

And it is worth considering that while Duncan was writing Man, Ed Dorn was writing Gunslinger (1968), which Marjorie Perloff describes in her introduction to the 1989 edition as 'his dazzling anti-epic of the Wild West' (p. v-vi). To mention Gunslinger is to position Duncan's writings away from a poetics that engages with mass-media, critical theory, language games and the dismissal of subjectivity. Dorn's "I", for example, is deeply out of step with his other characters and is killed off, embalmed and then re-instated as the messenger of undiluted information: 'And I have brought the data / in this here night letta' (p. 131). While Dorn's poetry can be seen as a descendant from modernism, Duncan's poetry does not offer an evolution from modernism, but rather a particular continuation of modernism's revolutionary tendencies. Personal experience forms the backbone of Duncan's poetry and anecdotes about Pound and Eliot feature heavily. Rather than seeing himself as a participant in socio-political structures, it is above all through personal experience that Duncan makes his judgement of the world.

Modernism can be seen to consist of many poetic practices that in their turn examined a primarily urban modernity and its effects on individuality.

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<sup>7</sup>See Duncan's Diary of a poem that accompanied the writing of Man held in The Ronald Duncan Archive *The New Collection* at the University of Plymouth.

It was not, of course, a unified movement, but a shared desire to change the existing cultural order. The artist saw himself (and it is important to observe that the poets Duncan chose for his role models were male) as the one person in society who understood the cultural environment and it was to be through him as visionary that modernity would not only be comprehended, but also harnessed. In this scenario poets were to be, in Pound's words: 'antennae', 'litmus papers', 'barometers', 'thermometers', 'steam-gauges', 'seismographs'.<sup>8</sup> A new aesthetic spread through Europe that was predominantly masculine and violent.

In England modernism in poetry was most strongly represented by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, while James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis and Virginia Woolf amongst others, sought to develop the modernist novel. Approaches differed but, as has been indicated already, the major modernist works of Joyce, Pound and Eliot, respectively Ulysses, The Cantos, and 'The Waste Land', were to provide the spur for Duncan's own poetics which took the problem of a disordered world and attempted to reach some metaphysical absolute about its condition. Pound and Joyce used mythic stories to allegorise the reality of modernity, and Eliot, who began with ancient rituals and the origins of religion, developed a strong Christian ethic. Duncan, for his part, developed an interest in individual achievement and used the history of scientific knowledge and a peculiarly subjectified Christ figure as his cultural tropes. His early books worked towards capturing traditional verse forms, as had been done by Pound and Eliot before him. The allusive cultural fragments of Pound, Joyce and Eliot, became the world of narrative vignettes in Duncan's Man. And it was Pound, through his poetry and his commitment to Duncan's magazine Townsmen, who provided the poetical framework which Duncan was to assimilate.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>These terms from Pound's early criticisms are brought together by Dennis Brown (1990), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>In his essay on Henry James, Pound writes:

Poetry is the assertion of a positive, i.e. of desire. . . Most good poetry asserts something to be worthwhile, or damns a contrary; at any rate asserts emotional value . . . Poetry = Emotional Synthesis.' (Quoted by Louis Zukofsky [1981] in 'Ezra Pound', Prepositions, p. 71).

In the introductory chapter to his book *Modernisms*, Peter Nicholls, following Habermas (1985), returns to Baudelaire as a point of origin for modernism; a point at which, in Habermas' terms 'the spirit and discipline of aesthetic modernity assumed clear contours'.<sup>10</sup> Within the parameters of the urban metropolis that Raymond Williams (1992) describes in his essay 'The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism' as the site of immigration from the provinces, a place 'where new social and economic and cultural relations, beyond both city and nation in their older senses, were beginning to be formed' (p. 90), the artist and poet were compelled to engage with a new form of sensibility. In such metropolitan environments, this revolved around the search for an understanding of the self and of the world it inhabited.

What became clear to the *déclassé* modernists was that the condition of social organisation was no longer applicable in a modern industrial economy based on dehumanising factory working practices. The capitalist system was in full swing, most notably in the cities where the gap between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, was unmistakable.<sup>11</sup>

Nicholls cites Baudelaire's poem 'To a Red-haired Beggar Girl' for its departure from what he terms 'social romanticism' (as exemplified by Victor Hugo) and for how its objectification of the beggar-girl creates a new position for the poet. It is the voyeuristic presentation of the person and her transmutation into aesthetic object 'which ensures the poet's *separateness* from the social world of which he writes.' (p. 3) The importance in Baudelaire distancing himself from the object of his writing is that it creates a

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Desire, emotion, the assertion of value and condemnation underpin Duncan's poetry.

<sup>10</sup>Habermas, J (1985) 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project' in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Foster H, London, Pluto Press, (p. 5) and Nicholls, P (1995) *Modernisms* Houndmills, Macmillan.

<sup>11</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels describe the rise of the bourgeoisie in the following way: Modern industry has established the world-market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages. (Marx, K and Engels, F [1996] 'Bourgeois and Proletarians' in *From Modernism to Postmodernism* Ed. Cahoon, L, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 92-3.)

position whereby the writer is able to engage simultaneously with the subject matter while at the same time masking himself against it *through* writing. He is, in effect, securing a position *outside* of the event while simultaneously controlling the event by writing it. In Nicholls' words:

a second, more devious voice will force upon the reader the unsentimental and cruelly ironic recognition that in fact she is nothing without the artifice of his poem to commemorate her.  
(Modernisms, p. 2)

Positioning the poet at a distance from its subject begins to problematise authorial identity. The self is constructed on two planes of engagement: that of voyeur, and that of author. The result of this is a mask behind which the author hides (so to be distinct *from*) and reveals himself (as writer *of*). As Nicholls explains:

Ironic tonal play and the related interest, later in the period, in elaborate masks of the self, thus serve a kind of double function, obscuring the social location of the writer's voice at the same time as they cultivate an essential closed model of the self. (p.4)

The self becomes duplicitous and signals a progression of self-consciousness and aesthetic distance. Modernist aesthetic practice then develops an increasingly assiduous scrutinising of subjectivity, and an ever greater distancing of the object of writing. Central to these two endeavours is the significance of the art form itself which was then to challenge all notions of mimesis so as to engage with modernity and to debunk the authority of a then still pervading tradition. As Raymond Williams (1992) observes:

Although modernism can be clearly identified as a distinctive movement, in its deliberate distance from and challenge to more traditional forms of art and thought, it is also strongly characterised by its internal diversity of methods and emphases: a restless and often directly competitive sequence of innovations and experiments, always more immediately recognised by what they are breaking from than by what, in any simple way, they are breaking towards. (Modernism/Postmodernism, p. 89)

Experimentation and innovation, the means by which the artist could reclaim the aesthetic high ground, was accompanied by artists banding together under manifestos and polemics that attacked both traditional 'social realist' art which pretended to offer a clear picture of truth-in-art without drawing attention to its formal artifice; and their avant-garde competitors who, in putting forward an aesthetic different to their own, were committing a heresy.<sup>12</sup> However, this did not prevent movements with differing ideas about what art should be and do from embarking upon similar endeavours. For example, when the founder of Italian Futurism, F. T. Marinetti, visited London in 1912 and gave lectures and performances that, as his Futurist manifesto published in New Age in 1914 proclaimed, celebrated contemporaneity and sought from that contemporaneity a 'new beauty', both Pound and Lewis were quick to attack. Yet, as Levenson observes in A Genealogy of Modernism, although Futurism became an 'important polemical adversary' for English modernism, there was still an important point of agreement: 'the need for decisive literary rupture':

Thus in the midst of a violent repudiation of Marinetti, Lewis conceded that since in England "Futurist" implied only that a painter was "occupying himself with questions of a renovation of art, and showing a tendency to rebellion against the domination of the Past, it is not necessary to correct it." And Pound, even while opposing Futurist methods and Futurist preoccupations, acknowledged the force of Apollinaire's remark that "on ne peut pas porter *partout* avec soi le cadaver de son père." To that extent, he wrote, "we are all Futurists". (p. 77)

What is common to both is the temporal rupture with tradition: the importance that the work of art should be of its own time and for its own age. The debate over how this was to be achieved led to pamphleteering the

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<sup>12</sup>Eliot's usage for those who, in Ellmann's terms sought 'truth in the wrong place' and who fetishised 'substitutes and simulacra'. See Ellmann, M (1987) The Poetics of Impersonality Brighton, Harvester, (p. 47).



production of new journals that were accompanied by polemical arguments and aggressive repudiations.<sup>13</sup>

It was within this environment in 1908 that Pound arrived in London, joining the Poet's Club in 1909. Shortly after this Imagism materialised with its focus on the thing described over the person describing it. In Maud Ellmann's (1987) words, 'Imagism was one of his most rigorous attempts to chasten poetry of personality' (p. 143). Pound became the chief architect of Imagism, having labelled Richard Aldington and HD 'Imagistes'. But it was only when Pound linked with Lewis and Gaudier-Brzeska that the importance of the image, and a manoeuvring towards a prose style (which Pound had learned from Ford Madox Ford) became 'part of a general aesthetic programme'.<sup>14</sup> As Levenson observes in A Genealogy of Modernism (1984), in the first half of 1914 the polemics of English Modernism raged loud:

It was the period of Hulme's verbal assault on Ludovici and Fry, Pound's bitter denunciations of the reading public, the disrupting of Marinetti's lecture and, most notably, *Blast* itself. . . The provocation was deliberate and relentless, a desire to outrage that without question succeeded. (A Genealogy of Modernism, p. 138.)

Blast, with its music hall or pugilistic promotional billboard layout, arrogant and humorous condemnations and celebrations, puce cover and its ostentatious size (the size of a telephone directory) presented, via the pre-constructed ideas from Imagism, the manifesto of Vorticism:<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Nicholls notes Henri Meschonnic's list of fifty 'isms' that appeared between 1886 and 1924. 'Movements surfaced with a loud fanfare and then disappeared almost without trace' Modernisms (p. 76)

<sup>14</sup>Levenson's phrase. Levenson describes how Pound had been the true architect of Imagism, by willing it into being, supplying it with doctrine and publicising it into public prominence. (Genealogy of Modernism, p. 137).

<sup>15</sup>See Kenner, H (1971) The Pound Era London, Faber and Faber, p.246. Kenner records an anecdote from Pound in a radio interview where a copy of Blast is left in the rain as the First World War beckoned:

A new copy of *Blast*, puce, the size of a telephone directory lettered from corner to corner, lay on an aristocratic garden table. The summer day darkened. The rains commenced to fall. No one rescued it. Through a spattered pane wide aristocratic eyes saw in a sudden blazing lightning-flash the shocking pink cover start forth, the five fierce black letters, B L A S T. Darkness recomposed. The dull rain fell and fell.' (p. 246)

This story neatly conflates the high point of English modernism with the fading power of the

The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.<sup>16</sup>

Vorticism's intention was to diffuse subjective positioning by having the object become the locus for attention, thus taking from the individual its principle of control and organisation; constructing a new arena for both perceptual understanding and, consequently, formal presentation. These aspects of Vorticism disclaim any authority that does not stem from the object itself. There is, therefore, no innate authority of the subject, only an authority which arises out of an immediate interaction with the world, its objects, and its events.<sup>17</sup>

As the world exploded into the violence of the First World War, so did the Vorticist manifesto Blast. Both depersonalised their cannon-fodder through black and white ideological distinctions.<sup>18</sup> Intense polemical attacks among the avant-garde, that were intended to validate the rightful course of modernity, were initiated through group action. But group activities still depended upon the integrity and creation from individual writers and artists. Collaboration did not progress to the point of co-authorship.<sup>19</sup> This meant that groups remained collectives of individuals. As Levenson (1984)

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aristocracy and, most important of all, the impending horror of the First World War.

<sup>16</sup>Pound, E (1970) Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir New York, New Directions. Quoted in The Poetics of Impersonality.

<sup>17</sup>It is interesting to note that while the art works of modernism broke with traditional forms of authorial coherence, their polemical manifestos were confident and coherent. Duncan's demand for clarity in poetry meant that he often veered towards the polemical and didactic and excluded the possible weaving together of polyvocal fragments.

<sup>18</sup>In the event, nothing seemed adequate to the task. If anything triumphed it was technology. The First World War saw the implementation of the tank and the submarine - scientific and technical developments that would pave the way to the atomic bomb.

<sup>19</sup>Although Pound was to edit and amend 'The Waste Land' the poem was never considered to be co-authored. Artistic ownership remained, as it largely still does today (reader participation excluded), with the primacy of the intertextual subjectivity of individuals. Dada and some of the Surrealist stream-of-consciousness collaborations broke the mould, but individual authorship, even in the fledgling age of the internet, has remained pretty sacrosanct. This is, perhaps, all the more surprising since Wordsworth and Coleridge had broken down the strong barriers of individual ownership some one hundred and twenty years before 'The Waste Land' in 1798 with Lyrical Ballads.

observes, there remained a strong undercurrent of individualism which was potentially divisive:

this inclination to form schools, to start journals, to write manifestos, to *name* oneself and one's compeers, had to compete with another powerful ideal, namely the supremacy of individual genius. Romantic notions of the solitary creator continued to form a powerful undercurrent, and ever more insistent and aggressive egoism threatened the unity of the movement. In 1917 Pound wrote that "the last few years have seen the gradual shaping of a party of intelligence, a party not bound by any central doctrine or theory." He wants, in other words, the unity of a party without its constraints, a shaping intelligence without central doctrine. Such an arrangement can only be fragile, and when Pound announces that Vorticism is "a movement of individuals, for individuals, for the protection of individuality," one must wonder how long these individuals will move together. (p. 136)

Levenson identifies two significant threads which in themselves bind Ezra Pound to this study of Ronald Duncan: the emphasis on the individuality of the poet, and the importance of intelligence as a driving force for the poetry. Pound's scholarly activities, while moving away from his previous specific concerns for Provençal and Troubadour poets, intensified in economics, historical record and oriental philosophy. Duncan, as we shall see, follows Pound more closely than he does any other author. In spite of his affiliations with Eliot and verse drama, Duncan is driven by an acute belief that poetry should strive towards a universal pedagogic endeavour. This poetry would only be possible through an effective use of intellect, learning, a restoration of 'lost' tradition and, eventually, through the dissemination of scientific understanding. Before this, however, there is one further significance of Anglo-American modernism: Blast and the year 1914.

Blast was published on 20th June 1914, six weeks before the outbreak of the First World War. Ronald Duncan was born, two months premature, in Rhodesia, two days before the war began. His mother was English and his Father was German, a bastard son of the Crown Prince of Bavaria. Because of

his German name (Dunklesbühler), Duncan's father decided that his pregnant wife and young son should return to England. Soon after their departure he was interned as an 'alien' and died of influenza shortly before the end of the war.<sup>20</sup>

In 1938 Duncan started a journal under Pound's guidance called Townsman which ran for twenty-four numbers between 1938-45. When Duncan wrote to Pound in 1937 and subsequently visited him in Rapallo to discuss his ideas and gain advice, Pound responded positively and offered Blast as a model:

The Lewis gives you a chance to examine London as at moment of your own birth. Say the unknown London 1909 to 1914 or '17. *BLAST*, Lewis in *BLAST*. 1912, quarter of a century back. Books already there; about 1914, files of *Egoist*. *Dubliners* Lewis' *Tarr* (original version), *Portrait of Artist*. These three are known. But the *BLAST* stuff is not. Lewis' position, etc. You, Auden and D[ylan]. Thom[as] could all have a say re the *constructive* element or the pre-constructive destruction needed.<sup>21</sup>

The first issue of Townsman appeared in January 1938 under Duncan's editorship. It included poetry by e. e. cummings, Pound, and the Japanese Vou Club; music by Francesco da Milano; paintings by William Johnson; a brief essay by Olga Rudge; and a verse drama scene by Duncan himself. For Duncan Townsman was to be his chance to align himself with the figures of modernism and to attempt to effect cultural change. The confidence Pound showed in Duncan played a major role in shaping his belief that art focused reality in a way that could allow civilisation to be genuinely and universally advanced. But while this ambition stayed with Duncan for the rest of his poetic career, the magazine, as Blast had before it, became humbled by the

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<sup>20</sup>For Duncan's autobiographical accounts of his early life see Duncan, R (1964) All Men Are Islands, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, pp. 9-11.

<sup>21</sup>Pound, E (1950) The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, ed. D.D. Paige, London, Faber & Faber, (p. 290).

impact of world war and became more absorbed by its practical and political consequences than by any pure aesthetic.<sup>22</sup>

Pound's input into the magazine is clear. The Vou Club poetry was sent to Duncan by Pound, together with a brief commentary on its intentions.<sup>23</sup> Pound also wrote an introduction for the Francesco da Milano music as well as recommending other writers who ought to be invited to contribute to the magazine.<sup>24</sup> Pound's hope was that Townsmen would provide a new platform for writers who interested him, and as such progress an aesthetic that would be distinct, innovative and driven from an Imagist/Vorticist base:

How many of the writers whom I read with respect and/or interest are you *willing* to include? . . . Heaven knows there is *work* for a live monthly magazine. And also I wd. be willing to put a good deal of energy into the right one.' <sup>25</sup> (Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, p. 287.)

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<sup>22</sup>Townsmen would eventually shift its emphasis from art to agriculture to the point where the last four numbers were published as The Scythe.

<sup>23</sup>Duncan records in All Men Are Islands his visit to Pound in Rapallo and their discussion about Townsmen:

We dined downstairs, sitting at a table beside the Gaudier, and while we ate planned a new onslaught against the Philistines which was to do for the thirties what *Blast* had achieved twenty years before, Pound scribbling out lists of people whom he thought I should meet, know and perhaps persuade to contribute to the magazine (p. 160).

Michael Reck (1968) quotes from a history of the Vou Club sent to him by Kitasano, a passage from which reveals the path the Vou Club poetry took to its English publication and shows Pound as link through which poetries could receive an otherwise unobtainable audience:

In February 1937 I sent to Pound sixteen Vou poems with my notes, which were printed the next year in the first number of The Townsmen started by Ronald Duncan, with Pound's introductory notes for them. This was the first appearance of Vou poems to Europe, and the next year James Laughlin in America printed fourteen Vou poems with his notes in New Directions (Ezra Pound: A Close Up, p. 99).

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Duncan and his associate for the first edition of Townsmen, Montgomery Butchart, Pound suggests that Bunting and Zukofsky should be approached. His confidence in the magazine in its early stages is clear:

*Anybody* can be Asked, on evidence of first issue. Zukofsky and Bunting can't diminish the appeal. . . . As *noble* extinction faces us, may as well have all the living on the contents list. Includin olde Bull Wlms if he can do a ringer. (Selected Letters 1907-1941, p. 302.)

William Carlos Williams was approached, but he declined to contribute. There is no evidence to suggest that either Bunting or Zukofsky were asked to submit.

<sup>25</sup>Pound's belief in Duncan's ability to produce the magazine to good effect was strong enough for him to suggest in a letter to Wyndham Lewis that Townsmen may have been a contributing factor in the demise of Eliot's The Criterion which ended in January 1939, one year after Townsmen was launched. (See The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, p. 204.) Later, when Lewis questioned Duncan's usefulness (p. 245) Pound replied from Saint Elizabeth's in 1948:

The cross-media collection of art, music, prose and drama reflected the multivalency of Blast. Its editorial, without the screaming font size of Blast, was nevertheless written with a polemical weight intended to match that of its predecessor. Curt statements revealed the direction of the magazine in the mode of a manifesto and emphasised 'validity', 'the individual', 'tradition' and 'creative work as criticism'. In a direct style which Duncan was not to repeat, there is much to suggest a continuation of Vorticism and Imagism.

When Duncan writes in the editorial of Townsmen 'Mankind can stand little impact with reality; but the individual only IS when he contacts reality' he echoes not only the Eliot of 'Burnt Norton': 'human kind / Cannot bear very much reality' (Collected Poems 1909-1962, p. 190), but also the tenet of the vortex, where the individual is separated from the real, but 'becomes' at the point at which the real is articulated. However, there is one significant difference. Where vorticism focused on the *image* as a 'node or cluster', Duncan focuses upon the *individual* and its coming into being. This shift of emphasis from the point of contact with the world to the capacity of the artist to *absorb* the moment of impact, visibly elevates the writer into a position of creative power. The modernist concentration on form has been replaced by an inherent creator of the surface.

The division between the creator and the created may never have been particularly great, but Duncan signalled his intention to provide the *artist* with authority, and not the work itself. In Duncan's mind those who were not pursuing the ideals of an individual engagement with reality (and its subsequent distance from it - away from 'impact'); not emphasising the idea that traditional forms are only worthy so long as they were 'part of a social pattern'; and not working for the 'heightened intensity' of the artist (shamelessly enlisting the Romantic notion of genius) were 'philistines'.

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of course you may know more about young Dun/Can [Ronald Duncan] that I do / I occasionally like direct observation of active particles of the cosmos, by reporters capable of sd/ Direct observation. Certainly active. and partisan / sometimes puzzling. You yrself / once had a [Rebel Art] CENTRE in Ormand St/ feeling the use of such combined etc/ mebbe you wasted time on Bobbie [Roberts], but I dont believe you ever regretted it. (p. 246)

However, those who could follow his lead would do so in the desire to enliven the individual, and as a consequence re-launch the assault on the cultural malaise.

Duncan's own contribution to Townsmen was verse drama and was the medium with which he was to have his greatest fame. Duncan's verse drama reveals his desire to use poetic narratives as a framework for communicating meaning. It was a technique that would present its message in relation to concrete examples of events and character. In both his poetry and verse drama Duncan denied abstraction and disjunction. For him these methods promoted a confusion of meaning or, ironically, a self-indulgence characterised by 'emotional puff'. He sought continuity and clarity in his writing; to use art as a means of cultural development. Duncan's primary concern, therefore, as laid down in the introduction to Townsmen was the desire to produce 'valid work'. This validity would consist of a 'directness in the expression'. While this in itself formed the basis for Imagism- the direct presentation of the image - for Duncan it was not the image itself that needed clarifying, but the meaning of the poem as a whole, i.e. that with which the image, event, or drama intended to connect.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, it is stated that the individual 'is in so far as his experiences are personal' and that 'Personal evaluations may ultimately quicken an awareness of a hierarchy of values'. Validity, within the hierarchy of values, would then be driven by the individual and not by any social concomitant or 'ready-made literary standard'. What Duncan proposes is that through a direct engagement with the world (and note that the artist is seen as separate from it), it is possible to produce a work of art that is validated because it is a product of a heightened sensibility. The individual must stand apart from political and social activity in order to reach a new level of understanding whereby art would become

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<sup>26</sup>Duncan was fond of equating religion with its Latin root, religio, to connect. This enabled him to describe Pound as a 'deeply religious' man by alluding to how The Cantos was a series of interconnections. Although it is not stated within the essay, to describe Pound as religious may have been a ploy where Duncan could imply that Pound could somehow be seen as Eliot's moral and spiritual equal, and thus be re-admitted to the canon of Anglo-American modernism even though he had been condemned as a fascist and a traitor. See Agenda, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 56.

the explicit realisation of the hierarchy of values. However, having instigated a hierarchy Duncan does not question its validity, rather, he clearly intimates that where there are 'mass-produced moral values and best-selling political parties' there is also an art that is capable of reaching a higher level of consciousness. There is no mention of spirituality, only a reaction to the degradation of mass-production. In this sense, where modernity was seen as something with which and in which to work, in Duncan's editorial it is something to be worked *against*. The requirement is to produce a purified art in which the individual can 'produce in the reader a state of particular awareness which may stimulate a general wakefulness to his environment'.<sup>27</sup> The desire is to awaken a reactionary consciousness in which epistemological *and* ontological understanding can be realised: being happening at the moment of knowing. This presents a paradox, because in order for there to be a point at which *being* 'becomes' through *knowing*, there must first be the substance that can begin to know.<sup>28</sup> If the individual only 'is' when he contacts reality, then prior to that moment he must be something other, part of reality, but not an individual. Existence is then conditioned by a conscious awareness of one's contact with reality. Reality appears as an indifferent world, predetermined and passive and from which the individual is alienated. Against it individuality can be assessed. The individual must achieve a state of heightened consciousness in spite of reality (which remains continuous) if he is to be alive. Throughout Duncan's poetry he repeats the phrase, 'not all the dead are buried' with the insinuation that most people fail to achieve their conscious potential and remain a sort of inert substance. Apperception therefore, becomes of paramount importance. Duncan's claim is that it is the individuation of the author which makes him capable of articulating a conscious awareness and it is this conscious awareness which, in Duncan's view, becomes the essence of man.

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<sup>27</sup>This and the previous quotations are taken from Duncan's editorial in Townsmen Vol. One, No. One, January 1938, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup>The lack of resolution to this paradox would taunt Duncan for the rest of his life.



While Duncan was publishing Townsman and writing verse dramas he also published a small collection of poems titled Postcards to Pulcinella with the Fortune Press in 1939.<sup>29</sup> This book is an indication of the way in which Duncan understood Pound's formative poetry, and how he understood and utilised the modernist mask of deferred individuality.<sup>30</sup> Postcards to Pulcinella shows a mixed desire to engage with the facticity of the modern world ('I wake / worn to a torn up / poster-plastered day', 'The Imagist', p. 20), and to transcend it by metamorphosing and universalising its aesthetic qualities. Such Platonic forays into the realm of being are apparent in the poem "Unfinished Eulogy" where Duncan sees in his wife's rising on her birthday an immortal beauty, and not a twenty three year old woman. By immortalising and personifying beauty, Duncan is able to make the object of his gaze be the same as it was for Pound, Dante, Marlowe, Chaucer, Donne, and Villon, all great poets:

For Dante knew her and Villon loved her  
 (inside of Paris) and didn't Chaucer  
 See her and wink at her?  
 Donne's mistress proving her inconstancy;  
 She sneaks from Marlow's bed to bounce with me,  
 (Rousing Pound's jealousy). (p. 10)

These lovers of the aesthetic are then polarised against:

. . . all the slack terminology  
 Of Mr. Eliot's theology,  
 and Murry's apology  
 For Christ, and Leavis' crush on Lawrence.  
 Gawd! what a bum age do I sit in, since  
 dumbness has lost its silence. (p. 10)

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<sup>29</sup>The Fortune Press worked on a principle of consignment in which the author would buy a minimum of 120 copies. Several of the poems in Postcards to Pulcinella were previously published in unlisted journals. Many of the poems are songs and were, as the preamble describes, 'meant to be sung' and notes were set at the time of writing. The music itself is not included in the book and so actually singing the poems is not as important as the suggestion that they should be.

<sup>30</sup>Pulcinella, it should be noted, is a character from the *Commedia dell'arte*. In that form of ancient Italian comic theatre the actors would be masked. Common plots would be taken and then the actors would improvise around them in ways dictated by their character's often farcical inclination.

The distinctions appear as opposites in a hierarchical framework. While lovers of 'Beauty' are able to transcend the 'bum age', the rest are not. Duncan, while presenting himself within the former category, is locked into the problem of writing it:

Blast it! my pen sticks its heels in and won't budge  
at the word 'beauty'; (p. 10)

The problem of writing the eternal makes Duncan conscious of his own presence as writer. This is a self-consciousness that marks his affiliation to modernist practice as he becomes aware of the poem as form and artifice. However, Duncan attempts to escape from the problem of the eternal being manifest in an immediate present, by *denying* the real its own phenomenological status. The pen, for example, is personified as an antagonist, independent of him as writer. This relationship between author and the pen is crucial in understanding how Duncan relates to the artifice of production and the idea of the authority of the poet. Because it is the pen that refuses to write beyond the word 'beauty', so Duncan demands that attention remain there. Duncan, the nexus of 'man and poet', both attempts to go beyond the word, but must comply with the dictates (tradition) of poetry as written by Dante, Villon, Donne, etc. The tension of the relationship between Duncan as conscious subject and Duncan as poet becomes so taut that it is *the relationship itself* which becomes the subject of the poem. Duncan's self-consciousness in the writing process forces him to appear within the poem so he can qualify his position as writer. A dialectic develops between Duncan as writer (writing subject) and Duncan as the poet identified by the poem (written subject). The written subject is always other to the writing subject, and is the channel through which the desire for the eternal is expressed.

Where Pound and Eliot were championing a poetry in which personality must be removed so that experience becomes universal (the

modernist edict that art is a creation in the world and not a reflection of it) Duncan proclaimed that only a conscious understanding of the tension between conscious presence and the authorship of that presence would fulfil that desire. Furthermore, for the individual to be subjectively aware of his own consciousness, he must be able to distinguish between his 'clear-sightedness' and the myopia of the real world. This does not involve a dialectic in which the world is an essential and *equal* part, but a hierarchisation in which the world is an inferior series of regular practices. Only poetry and the individuated poet can make the world plain to the world, for it is only the poet's consciousness of his consciousness that produces the necessary objectivity. It is this consciousness *of* writing that forms the heart of Duncan's poetics.

But if consciousness is central, there has to be something of which consciousness is aware. Firstly, and most importantly, consciousness has to be aware of the self, hence, self-consciousness written into the poetry. Secondly, there needs to be consciousness of the world. But, because the world is centred on the individual's engagement with it, what is most immediate to the individual must form the main criteria of the subject matter. The poet writes through knowledge, and then assimilates that knowledge into his consciousness. So, when Duncan writes of the world, he does so *from* personal experience, *into which* he places metaphysical notions of eternal presence. All time becomes compressed into a series of events or instances that need to be recaptured and revealed via the consciousness of twentieth century man.

The question of self-consciousness is present within Pound's poetry too, but it is often masked and deferred. When Pound writes 'Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but the one "Sordello"', he directs us to another great and named poet. This sets up a relationship in which both he and Browning are equally present and yet Pound does not indulge this to the point where the poem only reflects that relationship. The pronoun 'I' rarely

appears in The Cantos and when it does, more often than not it is in reported speech; again, a subjective deferment.

The masks of poets Pound uses in his early poems collected in Personae (1952), create a slim but nevertheless apparent barrier between what is written and the author who writes it. By deferring authorial presence from the surface of the text, Pound ensures that what is said cannot be immediately reducible to personal opinion while at the same time emphasising the voice behind the mask. This it seems allows Pound to voice emotion in a way that would not have been possible if the voice was simply his own. Duncan, however, is not embarrassed to have his own ideas as coming from himself. Pound adopts the voice of an authority; Duncan makes *himself* the single authority.

In Personae Pound, persona, voice and text combine to create a totality that is not dependant upon the singularity of any one of its components. In this way, Pound seeks to impede the voice of personality. This voice cannot be the totality of the individual, but the articulation of chosen responses to event. Maud Ellmann (1987) quotes a letter from Pound to William Carlos Williams in which he states:

I catch the character I happen to be interested in at the moment he interests me, usually a moment of song, self-analysis, or sudden understanding or revelation. (p. 139).

Pound blends author and character, subsuming his own immediacy in favour of a response that is then given to the persona. While he is effaced behind the mask he remains present within the totality of the responses. As Nicholls observed with Baudelaire, Pound is objectively distanced from his subject matter; present, but ontologically unlocatable. Duncan, however, shuns the ambiguous mask for the unique mask of his own written image. Instead of subsuming personality, he commits himself to it completely. The self appears as part of a disunified whole in continual conflict with its



while distancing the event from the recognisably referential, yet maintaining its substance<sup>31</sup>. In the twentieth century myth could then be used to construct an aesthetic that would not be reduced to the mundanity of the everyday, and yet definitely arises from it. The contemporary world would then be visible as part of a socio-historic system and not simply the sum of its current ills.

Classical myth has two other important attributes. Firstly it and its authors, Homer and Virgil, were pre-Christian. This enabled myth to be used without religious tainting. Pound had achieved this with his translations of the fragments of Sappho. Here, scholarly thinking was combined with an aesthetic sensibility that served to validate the writing of the poet/translator. The importance of a specialist intellectual knowledge, coupled with the ability to use that knowledge to attune its material to the modern age was a key for modernist authority, and the intellect of the poet could be seen as a match for the greatness of Greek civilisation. Joyce's use of myth in Ulysses forms part of the psychology of the everyday. In Ulysses, as with most modernist narratives (Man included), very little happens that could be described as a unique event. Patterns repeat themselves. Indeed, there is little to suggest that the days either side of 16 June 1904 would be any different. The struggles of Ulysses remain within the psychological desires of Joyce's characters, whose 'uneventful' lives still seek resolution. Temporal linear progressions are forsaken for the atemporality of unrealisable desire. Molly Bloom's stream-of-consciousness climaxes with sexual memory:

and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (p. 704)

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<sup>31</sup>In The Divine Comedy Dante was able to conjure historical figures for political ends because they were relocated into mythical hell. While hell was plausible, the specificity of Dante's vision and his own written presence therein established a necessary disjunction between the real and the myth. Dante could only write of the fate of popes within an allegorical framework formed by the myth of hell.

At the outset of The Poetics of Impersonality Ellmann complains that in the Pisan Cantos (1949) Pound is unable to salvage identity through writing, in spite of a seeming desire to do so. Ellmann quotes from Canto LXXXVI:

As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill  
From the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor. (l 458)

She thus focuses on Pound's declaration of himself as writer, and how that 'flouts the ethic of impersonality' (p.1). However, by constructing himself in terms of a metaphor Pound is able to assert that it is not the personality that is represented, but the appearance of the subject through writing. The difference is in the distance from the pronoun 'I' that presents the writing subject in its fullness. Pound is able to stabilise the relationship between text production, the text itself and its reception by maintaining the separateness of each. All parts relate at the point of the text, but only the text is fully present. This in turn, and paradoxically, means that what is present *within* the text is not fully present. The relationship to referent and authority is tangential and stylised while remaining clear in the specificity of its uniqueness as statement, image, record, etc. It is the writing itself which forces this possible co-existence of positive assertion and negative presence. Therefore, when Ellmann states that 'By using Latin to declare himself, Pound vaunts his credentials as a European . . . and he resurrects his selfhood with the ancients' (p.1) what eludes her is that the selfhood is not the man, but the *writing of the man*, a dialectical engagement with text and author that is different from a selfhood that was at that time caged in air-strip steel at the United States Army Detention Training Centre, North of Pisa.<sup>32</sup> Personality *is* brought to bear upon the writing (how could it not?) but the 'I' that is written is always

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<sup>32</sup>Pound's cage in Pisa was distinct from the others in its row by its extra layer of air-strip steel. The added protection was meant, probably more symbolically than anything else, as a sign that the person within was extremely dangerous. Ellmann emphasises Pound's physical restrictions that had been caused by what the Americans perceived to be his ideological and political difference to the victorious powers.

different from the 'I' that is writing. This may appear to be a convoluted way of saying that there is an obvious distinction between person and persona, but it is crucial when written subjects are held to represent the author's view point. In other words, the declaration of the self in writing is contingent upon the author's relationship with the writing process. It is the writing process itself that most strongly conditions the presentation of the 'I' of the writer, and not the 'I' as it exists in any other sphere. Now, it could be argued that such a hierarchising of positions - textual production over situation - gives a false weighting, but it is within the text and nowhere else that the 'I' is written. The 'I' appears in its written guise first and never loses its written status. The significance of the writing process is that the 'I' is prescribed by it into the writing and as such contains a textual intention. That Pound's pronoun sees itself as participating in the historical process as well as the writing process echoes Pound's participation in global politics. But biography does not account for the ability of writing to advance beyond time and event into a conflation of time, event and idea. This is important when one considers the different approaches to subjectivity adopted by Pound and Duncan. Pound's positioning of the subject within history allows history to exist beyond his influence. While part of the process of history he remains the antennae that receives the thing, and not the thing itself. That the antennae is captured does not prevent it from functioning, although how its captivity affects it becomes important to the poem. In other words, the poetry written by Pound in the Pisan Cantos is written by a tortured man threatened with execution. Pound has the poetry encompass this crisis situation so as to make sense of the world, and his own participation in it, anew:

How soft the wind under Taishan  
    where the sea is remembered  
out of hell, the pit  
out of the dust and glare evil  
Zephyrus / Apeliota  
This liquid is certainly a  
    property of the mind  
nec accedens est but an element





and past are therefore bought into a textual presence in which the persona is conscious of his historical position. The 'we' that 'suffered' conflates the collective we of both the cavemen and the writer/reader. At this point historicity is marked by experience. However, when the 'I' writes itself, the group is consumed by it so that what follows is possessive; 'is me', 'is mine'. And because the written subject is actively and graphically preceded by its dominant writing subject the textual presence of the 'I' is also brought into ownership of its author. The stanza can be seen to move from temporal reality to textual presentation, to collectivity, to subjectivity (still within the text) and then finally to the person outside of the text who is in possession of its construction - effectively the God figure of Canto One: 'I am the miracle: man. / God I can become.' (p. 14) This is not the case in The Cantos, 'The Waste Land', nor Ulysses. In these works the writing subject is a grain within a poikilitic structure. What is essential for the writer is to tap into the metonymic potential of the image-scenarios by which we, in the Prufrockian sense, measure out our lives. From those moments come the possibility for understanding and development. The individual enters into and reacts with the world, sifting it and building it. The text remains the essential structure for psychological development, its existence is paramount.

In The Cantos Pound moves from the masks of Personae to a polyvocality in which he himself is written: 'ego scriptor'. In Man, Duncan has both mask and polyvocality, but all voices are governed by the metatextual author. When this authorial presence appears on the surface of the text it is not as a participant within the history he writes, but as its critic and arbiter. If Pound makes his poetry from his experience, Duncan makes his poetry justify his experience. His personality is then brought to bear upon his conclusions as a regular series of closures:

If I have memories of the future  
Is not that past, as past, imagination too? And is not she present  
Our only tense?  
For where did she ever live except in my mind to me?

And did she not take her life  
Knowing that was her way back to me,  
Into my mind where here life was, is, and will be?  
(*Man*, Part One, Canto Six, p. 42-3)

The rhetorical questioning conflates all things into the mind of the author. It does not open into a universal sense of autonomous subjects and instead it absorbs all things into the present tense of consciousness.<sup>33</sup>

Duncan insists that history is only present in the cognition of the writing subject. All time is compressed into the moment of realisation which is *then* written. For Duncan, for art to be a point of creation it must first concede to the consciousness and imagination of the author as the *place* of creation. The poetry, in this context, is established in the mind of the author as a secondary pursuit in which thoughts are transferred into writing. Duncan's primary pursuit is with a dialectic between the rational mind; what is brought into it, and what results from it. He seeks to unify the intelligible and the unintelligible so as to create an holistic self, who can then pass judgement on what remains outside the self. Yet Duncan's open speculation as to what the self might be falters at the point where this unresolved problem is enslaved by naming one half of the discourse 'I'. This half is his rational consciousness. The other half, simply the self that is not rational consciousness and that which necessarily participates in the immediacy of the real as substance, is subject to a series of gradations conditioned by its named interlocutor. Because all that is not the controlling 'I' is considered external rather than relational (necessary concomitants of the 'I') what the 'I' can at best desire is that the external becomes its servant or willing subject. The individual 'at the point of impact with reality' is then shown to be hierarchically superior to that with which it has impacted.

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<sup>33</sup>Levenson (1984) explains how Ford Madox Ford's idea of Impressionism was such that the dependence on the artistic response to the immediacy before them was capable of effacing the artist by the significance of the response, albeit one that is individualised: 'Ford's Impressionism, then, is a *subjectivity in which the subject has disappeared*' (p. 119). Duncan, however, emphasises the specificity of *his own subjectivity*, and thus denies the subject matter freedom from the confining context of his consciousness.

When the subject is centred in writing it can only be effectively removed when a different mask from that of the author's own persona is in place.<sup>34</sup> There are two important instances in Duncan's writing where such a mask is used: in the 'Auschwitz Canto' (Canto Fifty Four) in Man, and in Judas.<sup>35</sup>

The 'Auschwitz Canto' is written through the persona of an Italian Jew. It is a fictionalisation of Primo Levi's personal account of his internment in the camp, twisted to intensify an English perspective.<sup>36</sup> It is a

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<sup>34</sup>It should be stated at this point that writing an 'I' into the poem that alludes to the author does not necessarily lead to an over-bearing invasion by a domineering ego. In much late twentieth century avant-garde writing the subject is seen as complicit with the social and cultural context through which she/he writes. The interplay of subjective identity, phenomenon and language form a non-hierarchical matrix that is brought into being via the subject, who remains the only available point of entry into the matrix. The subject, however, only is within the presence of the writing and their participation in social, multi-textual habitat. For example see Tom Raworth's Ace (1977), John Wilkinson's Proud Flesh (1986) and Grace Lake's Viola Tricolor (1993) in which the poem 'madeira' has the lines: 'I don't know. You tell me. Did it matter to anyone personally? / Living is a cultural artefact. How could you accept / that this redactive round is an inbuilt power play'.

<sup>35</sup>The 'Auschwitz Canto' was later published by The Rebel Press in 1978 as a separate edition with illustrations by Felix Topolski who himself had been a prisoner in the death camp. Judas was published by Anthony Blond, London, in 1960 and was illustrated by John Piper. 1000 copies were printed. It was recorded by E. Martin Browne for BBC Radio, but never broadcast. Eliot refused to publish the poem, stating in a letter to Duncan (17th Oct. 1955) that he felt there was 'a good deal in it which would not seem particularly happy even to persons of a somewhat vague religious beliefs'. But E. Martin Browne and Edward Blacksell suggested otherwise. See Duncan, R (1968) How to Make Enemies London, Rupert Hart-Davis, p. 362-3. In the same chapter Duncan states that he had been 'fascinated by the character of Judas, especially the suggestion in the New Testament that of all of Jesus's disciples, Judas loved Him the most' (p. 344) Believing the motive for the betrayal was love and not money, Duncan goes on to describe how he wrote the poem from his imagination:

I got out a new notebook and without a line in my head sat down to write the entire Passion seen through the eyes of Judas. I had no books by me. I had no notes. But the entire poem seemed to be there. (p. 346).

While parts of the poem appeared in Lines Review No. 9, August 1955, Duncan had been working on an adaptation of Un Homme Nommé Judas by Claude Puget and Pierre Bost. This play 'gave a contemporary twist to the Judas legend' (How To Make Enemies, p. 382). On page 383 of How to Make Enemies Duncan tells how the play was performed at the Third Devon Festival before going on to the King's Theatre, Edinburgh in April 1956. However, a programme for the Fourth Devon Festival (stored in the Ronald Duncan Archive, The New Collection, University of Plymouth), has the play billed for 9-11th August 1956 in the Priory School Theatre, Exeter. It is extremely unlikely that the play would be produced in successive years which suggests that the accuracy of the dates in the autobiography is flawed. This example reveals the unreliability of Duncan's autobiographies as a sound source of information, so when Roland John (1979) writes when reviewing Duncan's Selected Poems that How to Make Enemies is a book 'that should be read in conjunction with his poetry' (p. 78) it would have to be with a high level of caution, if at all. The overlapping that most probably has occurred in the writing of Judas and his version of Un Homme Nommé Judas may have meant that the play informed the writing of the poem, which suggests that a further re-writing of the myth was in operation.

<sup>36</sup>See Levi, P (1987) If This is a Man, tr. Stuart Woolf, London, Abacus. 1st published by Orion, 1960.

poem in which the present tense of the narrative seeks to capture the immediacy of the event. The first person narrative, similarly seeks immediacy in the event, but because it is clear that Duncan is not the Italian Jew of the persona, the writing of the event transfers its temporality into the 'now-ness' of the poem. This, again is emphasised by the Anglicisation of the persona through the use of English colloquialisms and English reference points. The narrative remains Levi's, but the language is Duncan's and as such reorganises the temporal location of the event to the textual location of the poem.<sup>37</sup>

A similar displacement of event and time occurs in Judas, but while Auschwitz is a named place, the story of the crucifixion focuses on an allegorisation of individual betrayal and so does not rely upon historical specificity. Although the place of betrayal is named, its name does not form an integral part of the story. Judas is a reappraisal of the allegory of betrayal and not a temporal and literal refiguring of historical record. But unlike Pound, who removes the superfluous elements of drama from his dramatic monologues, Duncan narrates a sequence of events leading up to the crucifixion so that the reworking of the allegory is seen within its 'historical' context. The context itself, the event, is reassessed through the reassessment of its characters. The disciples are stripped of their aura, to become 'ordinary', 'real' men, who serve to heighten the relationship between Judas and Christ. In Duncan's interpretation Judas was the only man who truly loved Christ and was the main architect of the Passion. While the persona carries the narrative, Duncan writes himself in, self-consciously, as Judas's secretary, implicated in the event, but distinct from it. In a similar inexorable

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<sup>37</sup>On p. 72 is the phrase 'Not very encouraging'. As this is repeated at various stages in the course of Man in the service of Duncan's personal opinion, it draws the persona of the Italian Jew into Duncan's subject specific quest for a universal knowledge of the self. The ramifications of the appropriation of personal accounts of the horror of Auschwitz, a horror that lead Adorno to proclaim that 'since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death' (Quoted in 'Discussions, or phrasing "after Auschwitz"', Lyotard, J-F [1989] Lyotard Reader, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 363), will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

relationship to that of the jailer and the jailed, Duncan asks his Judas to free him from the tree on which they are hung:

He carried the burden so that we might dance on deathless feet  
And look how ours dangle, without even the weight of our arse  
To keep them on the ground . . .  
(But I see my amanuensis is impatient,  
And is anxious to get down, muttering something or other  
About my plagiarising Villon, and wanting to get on writing 'The  
Catalyst') (Judas, p. 34)

Because all events occur within his mind, Duncan feels able to conflate historical characters with his own situation. The effect is a play upon the surface of the text, a breaking of the presentation of the myth, and a realignment of time and event with the all pervasive consciousness of the individual.

The self in Duncan's poetry always remains close to the subject matter. He has no desire to escape from personality, for he sees personality as informing his imagination, and it is this which transforms his rationality into poetry. Objectification of the subject not only becomes impossible, but is actively denied. For Duncan, a failure to sustain a subjective presence would prevent heightened consciousness. This would result in invalid work and making the author no better than the 'Philistines' against which he attempts to drive his poetry forward.

Duncan's use of colloquial language helps bond him to the immediacy of his time, but when it is used for bathetic effect, bringing to earth the 'high ideas' of the poet, what results is a deliberate distancing of himself and those who are around him. In this way, the inescapability of the real world is a hindrance from which Duncan seeks to, but cannot escape. And yet, paradoxically, he does not wish to achieve the telos which one would expect to be purpose of his endeavour; it is within *seeking* to move beyond the real, to move towards the universal, that Duncan's poetry resides. Duncan himself perceives this as a failure, and yet it is a necessary failure. To reach

the universal would be to reach a point of anonymity in which the self - writing and written subject - could no longer be dialectically sustained as it would lose its point of impact with the world. To shore against such a possibility Duncan implants the 'I' into the poetry at frequent intervals so that the hierarchy of poet over that which he experiences may remain fixed.

Each chapter in this thesis will endeavour to reveal how Duncan draws upon the writing and ideas of Pound and Eliot and uses poetic forms to strengthen his contentions about the subject and his relation to the world. They will also consider the effect that Duncan's authorial presence has over his subject matter, and thus examine whether his poetry reaches its pedagogic target of cultural renewal.

## Chapter One

### The Mongrel: solipsism, complicity, craft and alliances

During the late 30s and early 40s Duncan had been collaborating with Pound to produce a political and aesthetic direction for Townsman. In the early years of the Second World War, Pound wrote and Duncan published articles such as 'The Indelible' (Townsman, Vol. 3, No. 10, February 1940), 'Utopia' (Townsman, Vol. 3, No. XI, June 1940) and 'The Central Problem' (Townsman, Vol. IV, No. XIII, March 1941), all of which attacked the economic configurations of Europe and America, and most especially the effect of the gold standard. As the war progressed, Pound's contributions ceased, but the polemic of the magazine remained strong. Essays by the Reverend Henry Swayby, Sir Albert Howard, William Patterson and, amongst others, Duncan himself, attacked a range of social ills from education, church funds, general economics and, increasingly, agrarian policy and practice. Agriculture became the main focus of the magazine and led Duncan to change its name to The Scythe in 1943. Alongside the informational and moralising essays of the contributors (many of whom were from the upper classes) were poems by Duncan that were in 1950 to form the backbone to his first major poetry publication The Mongrel, Faber & Faber.<sup>38</sup>

For Duncan The Mongrel was a collection that would openly reveal his kinship with Pound, his understanding of social problems and his knowledge of English and European poetry. For example, several poems were written in the Georgic pastoral tradition, blending classical conventions with an English medievalism to show an anachronistic, though experiential

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<sup>38</sup>These included: 'The Miller's Lament', 'Practical Ballads' (March 1941), 'The Mason's Epitaph' (August 1941), 'A Short History of Texas' (February 1942), 'Canzone' (September 1942), 'Spanish Song' (January 1943) and 'To Plough' in the re-named The Scythe (November 1944).



relationship with husbandry. These poems were written, not only during the Second World War, but also at a time when Duncan was experimenting with communal farming.<sup>39</sup> This farming experience is not to be underestimated as it provided him with the authority of personal experience. From this experiential base Duncan wrote and included in The Mongrel lyrics, canzoni, translations (of which one piece is verse drama) and an oratorio. His reworking of medieval forms from the medieval Spanish, English and French traditions was a deliberate continuation of the emphasis Pound had placed on upholding the European poetic lineage. This lineage was one which continually showed its classical roots. As Pound states in ABC of Reading:

European civilisation or, to use an abominated word 'culture', can be perhaps best understood as a mediaeval trunk with wash after wash of classicism going over it. That is not the whole story, but to understand it, you must think of that series of perceptions, as well as of anything that has existed or subsisted unbroken from antiquity. (p. 56)

Earlier in ABC of Reading Pound wrote of the texts he chose as examples of good poetic practice: 'YOU WILL NEVER KNOW either why I chose them, or why they were worth choosing, or why you approve or disapprove my choice, until you go to the TEXTS, the originals' (p. 45). Duncan had taken this dictum and applied it to his poetic writing of the 1940s.

The extent to which Duncan follows Pound's example is perhaps most apparent in the poem 'Canzone'. The poem had its origins in Pound giving Duncan Cavalcanti's 'Donna Mi Prega' to read when he visited Rapallo in 1937. The envoi of 'Canzone', adapted from Pound's rendering of Cavalcanti's poem, and the convention of the poet addressing his poem, succinctly explains Duncan's intentions for The Mongrel:

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<sup>39</sup>Duncan recorded this endeavour in Journal of a Husbandman London, Faber & Faber, 1946.

Now you can go, Canzone, in your new suit  
which I have made to your own strict measurement  
and precise arrangement  
making my impatient heart fit  
to your fixed limit;  
Those who dress to please the fashion  
may turn their arse to you: kick it with passion!<sup>40</sup>  
(The Mongrel, p. 25)

Duncan took the canzone form and not only 'made it new' but tells the reader he has done so. The metaphor of dress enables Duncan to show how the form or 'cut' remains traditional, but the material is new. The form applies a restriction on Duncan's emotional desires and the controlled articulation that ensues as a consequence marks him apart from his contemporaries: those 'fashionable' practitioners. Whether the fashion is for free verse or more readily recognisable verse forms such as the sonnet and the sestina is of no matter. What is important is that Duncan deliberately positions himself outside of a mainstream. The poem carries this authority as it is sent by its author into the world of transitory cultural fads. The strength of the canzone is in its order, control and its historicity. It can contend with modern trends because it already has an established success. Also, because Duncan's colloquial phrasing is not a parody of Cavalcanti but shares its language with the modern world, so his poem can confidently exist in the world it must inhabit. So too for the whole collection, where metrical constraints are coupled with a distinctly twentieth century language to encourage a precise contemporaneity of meaning. In short, The Mongrel is Duncan's attempt to continue Pound's desire to modernise the poetic lineage. For example, in 'Canzone' Duncan uses the form to narrate the birth of his child in a hospital maternity ward:

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<sup>40</sup>Pound's version runs:

Safe may'st thou go my conzon whither thee pleaseth  
Thou art so fair attired that every man and each  
Shall praise thy speech  
So he have sense or glow with reason's fire,  
To stand with other  
hast thou no desire. ('Donna Mi Prega', Collected Poems, p. 250)

Till a bell perforates the corridor,  
and a door  
opens and is shut on us,  
and brisk nurses without fuss  
bring bowls of water;  
she tugs at a towel: she groans like a heifer; (The Mongrel, p. 22)

The momentous event is told without ornament or mystical wonder. Short lines and rhyme are used to speak of the birth, such as it is, and the final simile enforces the natural process against the sanitary conditions of the hospital.

'Canzone' has a rough narrative structure that divides the poem into four parts and an envoi. The first part expresses sexual desire and the sexual act; the second meditates on the procreative act; the third describes the birth of the child; while the fourth meditates on birth. The envoi addresses the poem itself. The poem's conclusion is that life passes from one generation to another, with the conclusion that all generations can be present within its latest incarnation:

Whose birth is this and  
whose death is this, is this  
birth my death and she,  
the child, is she  
my shadow  
and I her son's embryo? (The Mongrel, p. 23)

The primal function of procreation must precede all else while the repetition of 'is this' in the interrogative lines focuses attention on the specificity of the birth. The repetitions of 'death', 'birth' and 'she', together with the internal and end rhymes neatly reflect both the vexation in Duncan's thinking, and the interconnectedness between father, daughter, and a prospective new generation. Within the attempt to understand the significance his daughter has upon the wider scheme of human existence, lies the uncomfortable certainty of mortality. This is then the underlying condition of mankind:

. . . like haphazard travellers  
who never  
know their way and are all fugitives  
from their objective,  
which is the womb and the grave (The Mongrel, p. 21)

The poem begins by comparing love to a dog; a mongrel born of dichotic parentage: male/female, mind/body, love/sex. These oppositions provide a series of paradoxes which cannot be resolved and so need to be incorporated within the totality of oneself. Furthermore, the poem examines the central Christian paradox of Christ being born so he could die, and he died so he could live again. Christ's division between God and humanity produces an ineluctable dependency which means that any human act is bound by an understanding of how this dichotomy functions:

This birth and any death makes an impromptu interview  
with God, apropos  
oneself; *quid pro quo*  
our terms, and His  
where our minds are not but our hearts loiter  
(The Mongrel, p. 23)

Again, Duncan uses half lines to mimic the staccato working out of his argument. The longer lines then indicate a level of confident resolution. In this example Duncan reaches an understanding that Christ's death is intelligible, but the emotion of the Passion has been lost. If the child conjures the parallel with Christ, then the role of the mother also needs to be considered. Within the poem she is metamorphosed from earth mother into religious icon. Her body becomes the inner sanctum of the church:

And here she lies like a graceful river,  
and now her  
hand moves and is restive,  
a restorative,  
and her thighs' sepulchre  
yield new relics for her breasts' cool cloister. (The Mongrel, p. 21)

The mother is shown to the reader as if by a tour guide. She becomes the site for worship. The motion of the hand reflects the standard iconography of the Virgin Mother while the term 'a restorative' indicates her miraculous quality, and the belief that touching the icon can itself produce a miracle. The sepulchre, the place within a church designed to receive the holy sacrament of the Resurrection, is the pregnant woman's womb. The child, while being the continuation of the ancestral line, becomes the embodiment of immortality. She is the locus of past and future to symbolise a continual now-time of repeated life-cycles.<sup>41</sup> This is why at birth she is already a relic, but a new one. All births are seen as a parallel for Christ, but as an on-going process of continual rejuvenation which seems to have no end:

And so we love, in order that we may live,  
and we give  
our life away (The Mongrel, p. 24)

Mindless but endless reproduction shows the transience of any individual while at the same time, placing him in an ancestral line. The assonance, rhymes and alliterative patterning in 'love', 'live', 'give' and 'life' reflect the shared qualities of the ancestral line, as do the repetition of 'we' and its possessive, 'our'. The passing on of life in 'away' is tied into living one's life by its rhyme with 'may'. This seemingly minor internal rhyme cleverly reinforces Duncan's argument that life, love, birth and death all form part of an endless and inescapable pattern. This pattern unfolds through time, but remains constant. As a poet Duncan sees himself to be in a similar position. He may be a mongrel by borrowing and mixing the

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<sup>41</sup>It is worth noting that 'Canzone' was first published in 1942, three years before the dropping of the atomic bomb. This may account for Duncan's confidence in the perpetual continuation of the life cycle. In his book Bomb Culture Jeff Nuttall draws an important line of consciousness that arises from the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. According to Nuttall these events divided the older members of society, those who still believed there was time for change, from the younger generation who saw the end of the world as potentially imminent: The people who had passed puberty at the time of the bomb found that they were incapable of conceiving of life *without* a future. . . . The people who had not yet reached puberty at the time of the bomb were incapable of conceiving of life *with* a future. (Bomb Culture London, Paladin [1970], p. 20).

traditions of the past, but he represents the modern end of the European literary tradition. Pound represents his living ancestor – needless to say, a literary father figure.

While formal conventions frame the poetry of The Mongrel, its subject matter ranges from homosexuality in Greek myth ('Hylas'); to a narrative of the American frontiers ('A Short History of Texas'); to sexual love ('Spanish Song') and spiritual love ('Mea Culpa'). Common to all is a grounding in the materiality of ordinary living. It is through experience of the world that the world becomes intelligible. Human suffering, as perceived by Duncan's understanding of his personal experiences, is its over arching theme. The metaphysical implications of myth and religion are both to be understood first and foremost from a human perspective:

How often lonely man begging God's pity  
waits for His mercy in vain; and wearily  
has to go on trailing his hand through the frigid seas  
homesick, exiled and tethered to destiny.

(*'Widsith'*, The Mongrel, p. 86)

Independence of action and destiny, the interiority of subjectivity, of emotion and experience, and the exteriority of the social and political world - again, the 'reality' against which the individual impacts - forms the basic dichotomy for Duncan's poetry. It is present at the outset of The Mongrel in the opening poem 'Hylas' and it is there in the last poem of his final collection For the Few (1977) in the mock self-eulogising poem 'Forgive' where he reflects upon his individual character in the face of the eventuality of death: an inescapable destiny:

Forgive  
my death  
so long delayed:  
I wished to inconvenience my friends;  
with relatives, played. (*'Forgive'*, For the Few, p. 63)

While Duncan's use of form was in part a redress against stream of consciousness writing (which he found abhorrent in the works of both James Joyce and Henry Miller) and what he saw as the self-indulgence of *vers libre* writers whose 'formless, maudlin confessions' were nothing more than 'subjective hosannahs', (the phrase he took from Pound's Mauberley), it was primarily to emphasise the necessity for an ordered consciousness.<sup>42</sup> The Mongrel is a pragmatic confirmation of Duncan's notion that the denial of structural order impeded the communication of an essential meaning. Without control, poetry would succumb to the chaotic release of emotion, and as such would communicate nothing but the unconscious psychological turmoil of the author. Loose confessional poetry and writing that refused to struggle towards a particular meaning failed, in Duncan's view, to reach the higher aims of cultural validation and conscious expansion; for him, the central task of poetry.<sup>43</sup> Without the mind ordering and rationalising the world and then striving to communicate that understanding through writing, the poet would only be a facet of the raw nature of blind reality.<sup>44</sup> So, to entertain the notion of a collective unconscious would have effectively undermined his belief in the special authority of the poet. If the poet's task was to reveal *shared* understanding then he would have to forgo his position

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<sup>42</sup>When discussing his attempts at experimental writing, Duncan writes:

In the most part I abandoned it all, partially in revulsion against the "stream of consciousness" diarrhoea of James Joyce and Henry Miller. Faced with their incoherence I reverted to clarity and order' (All Men Are Islands London, Hart-Davis, 1964, p.102).

Using Pound's phrase 'subjective hosannahs' in his unpublished essay 'The Poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot' Duncan shows his allegiance to him, while attacking lazy and self-centred writing:

I had read the imitators of Pound and Eliot and, disgusted with their formless, maudlin confessions and subjective hosannahs, had not been encouraged to seek the originals themselves. (Held in The Ronald Duncan Archive, The New Collection, University of Plymouth).

<sup>43</sup>In a lecture delivered at Exeter University in March 1966 entitled 'What is Poetry', Duncan put forward the following proposition on the use of poetry:

What is our individual purpose? My answer to that is *our purpose is to turn existence into being*. *Existence* is a state without consciousness. *Being* is a state of consciousness. The value of being is in the consciousness. If this is so then it is, I think, easier to answer the question: of what use is poetry? It is to extend our range of consciousness. . . . The purpose of poetry . . . is to enlarge our range of being. ('What is Poetry', p. 7).

<sup>44</sup>See introduction for Duncan's description of the poet and reality as set down in the first Townsman editorial.

as a cultural pedagogue at a time when he, and certainly many of the contributors to Townsman also, felt the need to secure a rational authority for post-war Britain.<sup>45</sup> In 1950 Duncan was showing himself to be against the Marxist socialism of the Auden group in the 30s, and against the similarly left-wing surrealists who were breaking down the suppressive codes that governed society. Duncan advocated suppression as a necessary action for producing valid poetry and pursued a neo-classical line intended to bind the modern world into an ordered, Apollonian tradition.<sup>46</sup>

To write effective poetry, it was, in Duncan's mind, necessary for the poet to be assiduous in his understanding of the history of poetry and to demonstrate a range of technical ability. The practicalities of the writing process, notably a conscious understanding of the self as poet in charge of language use (of which he was to have especial knowledge), would be supported by a control of the formal structure of the poem. Word units would be constructed in semantic blocks so as to reach beyond their metaphorical condition and towards the numenal world. Poetic control therefore meant a complicity with poetic tradition and linguistic etymology. The mastery of poetic technique enables what Pound terms 'that explicit rendering' of content. Poetry would then harness experience to tell the reader something of which he or she was unaware. As Pound again observes of Daniel and Cavalcanti: 'Their testimony is of the eyewitness, their

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<sup>45</sup>Viscount Lymington's essay 'The Utilisation of Straw' in Townsman, Vol. V No XVIII, Jan. 1943 offers an example of how the word 'possible' is used as a weak qualifier for the universal significance of his observation:

In a country which must be nameless there was a conference not long ago of some of the brightest, and a few of the best brains in farming to discuss means of overcoming crop failures and crop sickness on potash deficient land. Although it may never be recorded in History books, it is possible that it was one of the turning points in farming, and therefore in human, history. (Townsman, XVIII, p. 2)

The qualitative adjectives 'brightest' and 'best' single out those deemed capable of creating an historical 'turning point'. It is to be from those judged as special that advancement will be made, not just for farming, but for the entire human race. Also it is worth noting that farming is presented as an intellectual pursuit with the emphasis on 'best brains'.

<sup>46</sup>It is interesting to consider that while Eliot uses the androgynous Tiresias at the narrative centre of 'The Waste Land' he is not seen as on the edge of Dionysian orgy such as he appears in The Bacchae. His role is as seer, and a male seer, albeit with breasts. If the Tiresias figure was truly androgynous then she/he would be a non-hierarchical matrix. As it is, he is a 'man with wrinkled female breasts'(l. 219). My italics.



symptoms are first hand.' (A Retrospect', p. 11). In other words, by understanding the nuances of poetic technique, the poet would be able to present individual experience in a way that would be universally understood.

While personal experience is a starting point for both Pound and Eliot, Duncan develops it to a point where he is able to draw some absolute conclusions from the experience related, and he uses imperatives to clarify what that totality may be. The poem is, in effect, telling the reader that the poet knows what he is talking about. Examining a stanza from the title poem 'The Mongrel' will exemplify this position. The following stanza is one in which mock dialogue is used as a rhetorical device for self-presentation:

Precisely. All our conversations are soliloquies.  
We are talking in each other's sleep. Not very encouraging.  
No wonder this poem is so inarticulate.  
And you cannot tell whether you are coming or I'm going.  
No, it is not that I have nothing to communicate  
But that nobody will lift the receiver off the telephone  
(The Mongrel, p. 33)

By examining this stanza it is possible to see how Duncan's rhetoric enforces his posture of authority and how deductive reason is replaced by experiential knowledge. The first word 'Precisely' which responds to an irreconcilable, rhetorical question of the previous stanza 'And were we to remember / Would we not be remembered?' sets up what is to come as progressing from a self-confirmed truth. 'Precisely' claims an accuracy of statement and a confirmation of the poet's cognitive ability to judge it so. If what follows is considered as the category of 'conversations' then all conversations are addressed. The 'our' does not refer to the conversations of specific people, but is a generalisation. The clause 'All our conversations are soliloquies' is presented, therefore as an anachronistic truism.

The clause which follows 'We are talking in each other's sleep' does not qualify the previous line, rather it re-enforces it. 'Not very encouraging'

then adds to the truism an authoritative reflection which, like the authorial intrusion of 'precisely' enforces the supposed facticity of the first clause. From the defined category comes the instance of writing and a further authorial reflection upon it: 'No wonder this poem is so inarticulate'. Here the category 'poems' has its singular, demonstrative example 'this poem' which is then described, again self-referentially, as 'inarticulate'. By this stage in the stanza Duncan has begun to suggest that his poem is governed by more than individual agency, and that it is effectively 'fated' to be misunderstood. A game of paradoxes occurs in which generalisations, truths and maxims are presented as universal truths while at the same time deriving their existence from an overtly present and singular author. Yet Duncan produces these end stopped statements so he can deliberately disclaim power over them: 'no wonder' can therefore be read as 'inevitably'.

Having constructed and *written in* his own position regarding his statements, Duncan then pre-empts any readerly response: 'And you cannot tell whether you are coming or I'm going'. However, the closing two lines of the stanza develop the authorial stance of helplessness by stating, negatively, that there is a message to the poem. It is present within the 'inarticulate' poem: 'But that nobody will lift the receiver off the telephone'. The dialogue which the poem wishes to suggest is present but is nullified by Duncan needing to adopt both voices and turning them into a soliloquy (because 'all our conversations are soliloquies'). The dialogue is used, not because Duncan recognises a complicity with the reader, but because he wishes to suggest that nobody but himself will listen to what he has to say. In this way he is fated to be misunderstood, while inventing the parameters for that misunderstanding to take place.

That is how the stanza is presented. In truth, Duncan is not misunderstood, nor does he expect to be. The fated position he constructs is one that reveals the difficulty of his desire to communicate meaning in a generalised environment of deafness and inactivity. It is the stance of

heroism against the odds. Hypostatizing all the paradoxes, histories and truisms of 'The Mongrel' is the poet Duncan. The poem, as with Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' and Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', reflects upon poetic endeavour. Its self-reflexivity celebrates those two poems, and its title 'The Mongrel', not only refers to Duncan's half German, half English heritage, but his indebtedness to Pound and Eliot. Also, and perhaps more importantly still, the authorial interjections produce an internal textual dialogue between the writing and the written subject. Foregrounding the division of the writing self and the self that is written ensures for Duncan a focus centred on personal identity and its control of the subject matter in hand.

In De Vulgari Eloquentiâ Dante describes the canzone as 'the most excellent' form and therefore worthy of the most excellent . . . subjects'.<sup>47</sup> Canzoni were therefore 'the most excellent' and 'noblest' of poems so that: 'the utterances of the highest mental powers of illustrious poets are found in canzoni alone' (pp. 54-5).

The Canzone's origin in song and its complex internal rhyme and overall pattering of ABCCDDB / ABCCDDB / EEFFGG / EEFFGG, provided Duncan with a perfect opening for a collection of poems with tight structures adopted and adapted from previous generations, where, as Pound says in ABC of Reading, 'literature of a given country is in good working order, or when some particular branch of writing is healthy' (p. 39). In his introduction to the Rebel Press edition of De Vulgari Eloquentiâ Duncan states that he found in canzoni 'the opposite extreme [he] had been seeking as an antidote to the slush of Transition and New Direction free verse' (p. 8), going on to say that he was 'silenced for days by its density, the way it moved on the muscles of thought, and how the strictness of the Canzone form reinforced this musculinity [sic]' (p. 8).<sup>48</sup> Duncan's 'Canzone' which was first

<sup>47</sup>Dante Alighieri (1973) De Vulgari Eloquentiâ, trans. A.G. Ferrers Howell, The Rebel Press, p. 54). This translation was first published in 1904 in A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri London, Dent.

<sup>48</sup>Duncan had wanted to see this essay back in print as early as 1938 and that he remained keen

published in Townsmen, September 1942, is the second of two canzoni that open The Mongrel. Together with the first, 'Hylas', Duncan demonstrates his complicity with Pound's idea of the European Literary Tradition. The idea was to regain:

the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with a clean edge, a world of moving energies, . . . magnetisms that take form, that are seen, or that border the visible, . . . the glass under the water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror. ('Cavalcanti', Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, p. 154)

'Hylas', adds an extra dimension to the Canzone form by dramatising a fragment of the myth of the labours of Heracles. It uses for its story the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts in the quest for the golden fleece, and focuses on the homosexual love between Heracles and his page Hylas. Initially Benjamin Britten was to set 'Hylas' to music, but it was Stanley Glasser who eventually did so. The poem itself was written for Kathleen Ferrier who had made a success of her role as Lucretia in Britten's chamber opera The Rape of Lucretia (1946) for which Duncan had written the libretto. The musical intentions for the poem concur with Pound's citation in ABC of Reading of Dante's premise that poetry is a composition set to music<sup>49</sup>. For his own purposes Pound concludes that this simple statement is the best place to begin an examination of poetry.<sup>50</sup>

The musicality of poetry reverberates through The Mongrel as an important aspect of Duncan's poetic construction. To hear the music of the

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on the text being published so long after his initial impulse to do so, shows the enduring effect the piece had on his writing. As he states in the conclusion of his introductory essay: 'I know of no essay about poetry of greater interest to a poet than this brief thesis of Dante's.'

<sup>49</sup>Dante writes in De Vulgari Eloquentiâ that poetry is 'nothing else but a *rhetorical composition set to music*' (p. 56). Intriguingly, Dante also states the difference between canzoni and ballate; canzone being nobler because its whole effect is produced within the poem, while ballate requires the assistance of performers. 'Hylas' appears to demand the presence of performers as names are given to speeches within the text and a musical score was produced as an intended accompaniment. This would, according to Dante, liken Duncan's canzone more to ballate than to canzoni should the text require that it be performed. It is the titling of 'libretto for Britten' when the poem was printed in Duncan's Selected Poems that suggests such an intention. For Pound's citation of Dante see ABC of Reading, p. 31)

<sup>50</sup>See ABC of Reading, p. 31.

poetry adds to its semantic qualities, taking it into an aural dimension that uses and extends the poetry beyond its formal constraints. The poems are 'composed' in The Mongrel in two ways. Firstly, many pieces are songs or libretti written to be set to music. This provides an intentional musicality: that the poetry is written with music in mind. However, it is the nature of the verse itself that reveals this intention. The patterning of the language effectively scores the themes, adding to the drama and the mood. For example, in 'Hylas' the lines:

In out;  
In out,  
oars bending,  
Backs straining; (The Mongrel, p. 11)

are broken to reflect the physical effort of each stroke. This is further enhanced by its monosyllabic words while the trochaic 'bending' and 'straining' mimic the pulling and releasing of the oars. The action of the crew is then counter-poised by the progress of the boat: 'moving slowly over the unending waves as we row' (p.11). Slow progress is reflected in the long syllables. The carefully composed vowel patterns: 'ov' 'ow' 'ov' 'ow' 'wa' 'es' 'as' 'we' elaborate the alliterative quality of the line which also gives an extra sense of monotonous but deliberate progress. This type of scoring is typical of The Mongrel, where poetic patterning, cut or extended lines, refrain lines and alternating metres encourage the development of the tone of the poems, and where necessary enhance the dramatic qualities of the more narrative pieces. This is nowhere more apparent than in 'Hylas'.

'Hylas' is a tragedy. Having gone in search of water for the Argonauts, Hylas is drowned by water nymphs, the naiads. His death is used to show how physicality can be obfuscated by music. As Hylas exclaims of his own death: 'And as I drank, in music was I drowned!' (The Mongrel, p. 16). Heracles' dilemma is then to choose between his love and his duty to the

Argonauts.<sup>51</sup> Duncan does not set out to redress the balance between duty and love by supplanting one for the other, but complicates it through irreconcilable oppositions and an overall fatalistic denouement. Heracles foregoes his duty ('Not vows but your beauty binds me' p. 15) to indulge in his love for his page ('yet your love is my release' p. 15) who, following his death, has been transformed into an echo:

it was as if sweet Hylas was in my arms crying  
My own name. And thus I stayed and cheated grief of sorrow,  
For our love is as immortal as undying echo. . . Hylas! Hylas!  
(The Mongrel, p. 19)

Hylas is not present, but appears to be so through the immortalisation of memory in which physical absence can be sustained. The 'I' is able to cheat grief by its conscious assimilation and control of emotion. However, the scene is one of self-delusion whereby the reality of the world is replaced by whatever the mind wishes. This is evident when Heracles describes Hylas in a way that makes him the incarnation of a flower garden:

What falls more softly than the petals of a rose? These eyelids  
On Hylas' tired eyes.  
And where is there a violet  
Petalled as delicate  
As these frail veins set in his golden skin  
So cool, so smooth, sweeter than jasmin? (The Mongrel, p. 13)

The masculinity of the Argonauts is castrated by the femininity of nature. This gendering is then realised when Hylas climbs the cliffs (masculine) and slips into a crack in the rock (feminine) to find water (feminine) to quench the thirsts of the crew (masculine). Hylas occupies a mid-point between masculine and feminine as he reaches the 'ivy covered well'. Here he loses

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<sup>51</sup>The opposition between love and duty which the poem negotiates, tackles a question of special importance for 1950 as millions had so recently died in answering the call of national duty.

his bond with the masculinity of the crew as he dies and is transformed into the feminine Echo.

For the Argonauts, Heracles' love for Hylas weakens the collective cause of the crew. But Heracles pursues his love regardless even though his love can only exist within his own mind:

And thus was I caught  
Between his echo and my vow and in wild sorrow sought  
The secret well again, watching them row away as echo  
answered:

Hylas! Hylas! as I called.

So, as if to hear his voice, I cried my own name;

(The Mongrel p. 19)

Hylas and Heracles are self-interested. Hylas is drowned in the well by the song of the Naiads as they sing of his beauty. After his death his echo repeats the circumstances of his own death and repeats only his and Heracles' names. Hylas, like Heracles, has no concern beyond himself and Heracles:

Oh Heracles, it is better that I should die  
Of thirst than you should try  
to row the Argo all alone and set  
Yourself against the gods and fret  
Your strength, against their cruel will; for when  
The gods see we mortals love like gods, they are  
jealous, and punish us for that immortal sin.

(The Mongrel, p. 13)

Love is seen as all consuming. Heracles repeats his own name so that its echo will sound as if Hylas is calling him.

'Hylas' is organised as a series of binary oppositions which at the time of the departure of the Argonauts from the island are either synthesised or maintained. The first of these oppositions is love and duty. Heracles is able to fulfil his duty while his love for Hylas is strong. His physical strength is heightened by Hylas' weakness and because of this he is able to help the Argonauts in their pursuit over nature. The question that Duncan asks is which of the two activities, love or duty, goes against nature? The

homosexual love which stands against the authority of the gods as well as the moral majority of Britain in the 1940s is placed against the collective and individual acts of heroism that had liberated Europe. The drive to overcome dangerous and benevolent nature, to have dominion and control over it, is the intention of the Argonauts. Nature only threatens when it conflicts with man's desires. When it forms part of those desires, man succumbs to it wholly. Heracles breaks his vow of duty for love and remains in solitude. Duty can always be fulfilled by others, while love 'is as immortal as undying echo' (p. 19).

Traces of the problem of apperception and the drive to fulfil personal desires in the face of destiny appear in the title poem 'The Mongrel'. Lines such as 'Though lonely, we are not separate;' (p. 27) reflect the thoughts of Heracles in 'Hylas' as he clings to his Echo of Hylas, the trace of his love. The following stanza from 'The Mongrel' encapsulates this succinctly:

Is there a solitude which is not loneliness?  
And somewhere someone's company which is not  
interruption  
Of a meditation (mere observation or introspection)?  
Is there a love which is liberation?  
For our intimacy is all desperation  
For self-expression, self-oblivion. (The Mongrel, p. 31)

The focus here, as with the poem as a whole, is the question of what it is that forms an individual. 'The Mongrel', as mentioned earlier, provides a self-reflexive examination of the poet's intellectual quest to make poetic tradition in twentieth century currency. 'The Mongrel' despairs at the ignorance Duncan sees as resulting from easy access to information and the consequential shallowness of knowledge:

Why, yes, of course. And the time will come when Jesus Christ  
will be  
One of Robin Hood's good men. And his manger lie  
In an adjoining room to Nephathitis' golden spoon.  
For further reference see 'Myths Ancient and Modern'.  
*'How interesting! Now I know why they're called*



*Hot cross buns. . .'* (The Mongrel, p. 31)

The poem questions the potential for establishing a cultural renaissance in the face of the ordinary. Similarly, personal identity is scrutinised so as to understand the subjective perspective from which the world is to be assessed. The figure of Christ, which Duncan has as a constituent part of the written subject in the form of 'the beggar in my way' (p. 34), is placed literally alongside Duncan as a faithful dog. Christ forces the written subject to engage with his conscience and his desire to live only by intellect and not religion:

And the more I kick Him the closer to my heel He lies  
And the more terrible the tenderness of His eyes.  
(The Mongrel, p. 34)

By being swayed by conflicting influences the written subject becomes a mongrel. To achieve a subjective unity and become an holistic self then he must do so through the act of forgetting. And yet the paradox of the self only being through memory haunts any attempt at self identity:

Oh, do not ask me who I am,  
For only by remembering am I becoming  
(The Mongrel, p. 27)

By remembering, Duncan recalls experiences he never experienced, and dreams he never dreamt. The importance of traces which seem to be part of the self but clearly belong to others is an idea inherent within the title 'The Mongrel'. This helps to explain why 'The Mongrel' was chosen as the title for the whole collection, as it is the traces of cultural heritage that form a necessary part of Duncan's poetic. As he stresses within the poem: 'History is a diary I mislaid; tradition, the residuum of experience' (p. 29). All that has gone before is apparent within the consciousness of the self, unable to be forgotten but requiring active memory in order to bring it back into play. The line quoted above fits into a verse which quotes Pound, whose own writing

in The Cantos continually pulls from history transitory facts which connect and inter-connect and are presented in fragments as if half-remembered.

As the self continues to understand its own condition, harried as it is by the adhesive quality of the Christian faith (faithfulness being an important quality for a pet dog), it comes in conflict with *otherness*. This 'other' within the poem is a woman in whom he can forget his possible derivation and subsequent excommunication from his creator-God:

Made in his image? Perhaps, at any rate in desperation we  
clasp her to ourselves  
And from that brief oblivion wake holding a woman; the  
god escapes our paw (The Mongrel, p. 30)

Here, woman is a physical object to which man can direct his physical self and at the same time neglect his spiritual self. It is an instinctive, unthinking process that serves only as a means of perpetuating the species. It is a process which seeks only its own ends. It is in-itself, self-contained, and as a consequence, meaningless:

Having tasted of our death from which we clumsily withdraw  
Having reproduced ourselves, ourselves and nothing more.  
(The Mongrel, p. 31)

The first line of this couplet presents the sex act. 'Death' equates to the 'little death' metaphor for ejaculation common in Metaphysical poetry which similarly pitted physical reality against theological conditions of mind. The closed circle of human reproduction receives its poetic mirror through the repetition of 'Having' and the end rhyme on 'more'. The reproduction of sound and language mirrors the reproduction of humanity 'ourselves' which itself is repeated, showing the emptiness of physical reality as the word is denied an inter-text by which the *selves* can be appreciated.

The potential to reference something beyond existence is the poem's quest. Duncan spells it out in the question:

Must this roundabout revolve and this pattern persist and  
never alter? (The Mongrel, p. 30)

The desire is to reach a higher level of being, one that could outstrip the darkness of patterned existence. And yet it is a desire that is chimerical. The true quest is for self identity. As the poem nears its resolution Duncan declares his search to be a pretence in which the desire to search for an answer is nullified by the determination to avoid answers; in his words 'Pretending to seek what I am determined not to find' (p. 35). In resignation he returns to the world of experience and repetition, suppressing his ability to see beyond phenomena:

So let the black rose bleed till it is white,  
I will deny my eyes that see beyond their sight,  
(The Mongrel, p. 35)

His retreat is two-fold. Firstly, he retreats to the repetitions of nature and its reproductive cycles, and secondly to a poetic realisation of those cycles. From denying his eyes vision beyond what they can see, Duncan is forced to focus upon the sea in front of him. However, this he poetically transforms into cavalry men and their charges. Further still, he sexualises the metaphor so that the horses are female and the cavalry men. In this way blind nature is shown to be the underlying condition of the human race as it procreates lovelessly and with futility:

And watch the reckless cavalry of waves  
Ride with their white manes flying,  
And how they charge with lifted lance  
Then on the beach are broken lying  
In a fret of surf till the tide recedes  
And they form their futile ranks again. (The Mongrel, p. 35)

There is a distaste for ordinary humanity in this portrayal. The waves are observed from an ironic distance that separates Duncan from the futility he

constructs. This distance is emphasised still further by the constant interruptions of a lover who fails to understand Duncan's philosophical dilemma. The lover is introduced into the text as a corruption of the intellectual process which the poem is evolving. The lover, clearly shown to be a representative of her gender, is both foolish and a distraction to the male intellectual:

*'Yes, do. And give me a ring some time. I must be going. . .'*  
*'So soon? Good-bye!' As I was saying, must this roundabout . . .*  
*'What, back again? Forgotten anything?'*  
*'My breast. It's possible I might need it.' 'Where did you put it?'*  
*'It is in your hand.'*  
*'I beg your pardon. And so heavy too. . . . Do let me post it. . .'*  
(The Mongrel, p. 30)

This reduction to the everyday, made ludicrous by its surreal, though symbolic image, closes down the idea of cultural and moral resurrection:

*Is there nowhere where dust does not fall through the air*  
*Closing Helen's eyes? I am sick. I must die. Lord. . .*  
*'DAMAROIDS will give you new life.' 'All change for Charing*  
*Cross.'*  
*You see what I mean? What was I saying?*  
*'You were talking about some girl called Helen,*  
*Wasn't she the dame who rode through Paris naked on a horse?'*  
(The Mongrel, p. 31)

Cultural and religious tradition is obfuscated by modernity, where the cross of the crucifixion is a commuter destination, and all hope of resurrection, either religious or cultural, is reduced to anti-impotence pills.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the quest for poetic endeavour is thwarted by another vocal fragment:

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<sup>52</sup>Damaroids also appear in B.S. Johnson's novel Albert Angelo New York, New Directions, 1964:

So; waking again with this enormous tonk on, it ought to be relieved, too tired to last night, but anyway it seems to happen every night, every morning I wake with the most almighty jack. This is not good, I can think of better uses, still it's at least reassuring of my continued potence, no need to resort to Damaroids yet. (Albert Angelo, p. 102)

As the blind moon – is it the blind moon that beckons?  
'What? – Your shoe-lace is undone.' (The Mongrel, p. 35)

The poem is interrupted first by a self-conscious questioning. The image of the blind moon is given to the intruder, thus defining it as an unintelligent Diana figure; beautiful but lacking the vision of the poet. Her concern is for obvious and trivial observation. The undone shoe-lace, in spite of its warning to the poet that if he does not attend to such details he is liable to trip over himself (which the poem does) is a detail so far removed from what Duncan hopes to achieve that it forces the poem to an abrupt close. The triviality of everyday life had effectively silenced poetry. The blind moon then symbolises a dead and barren planet such as Duncan sees the Earth about to become. If there is hope it lies in the unanswered question posed by the final couplet, but for it to be answered in favour of mankind, the reader must first shake off his unconscious response to modernity.<sup>53</sup>

'Practical Ballads', which first appeared in Townsman, March 1941, can be seen as two poems that openly express the need for lived experience to form the basis of poetry and life. Duncan uses the pastoral poet Tusser (b. 1530) as his model for 'Practical Ballads'. In his essay 'An Introduction to a Practical Ballad re Tusser and Palladus', Townsman, Vol. IV, No. XIII, March 1941, Duncan explains why:

Tusser . . . is in the direct stream of the English PASTORAL tradition, that is to say his verse emerged direct from English country life, expressed in language which has been and is being continuously fashioned to fit the thing in hand. (Townsman, Vol. IV, No. XIII, p. 19.)

The appeal to Duncan of a writer who fits into the 'Pastoral tradition', stems from his distrust of an urban, and thus non-experiential perspective of the country. Tusser represented for Duncan the poet who was in physical contact

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<sup>53</sup>A recurring line in Duncan's work is 'not all the dead are buried', which may in turn be seen as a response to Eliot's famous line from 'The Waste Land': 'I had not thought death had undone so many' (Collected Poems, p. 65).

with his subject matter. His instructional poetry was the crafting into language of that which he knew to be true. It was the proximity to 'the thing in hand', in other words 'the impact with reality' as it preceded the writing that gave Tusser his poetic force. It was from that knowledge that he was then able to write. The form was a means of ordering truth. Imagination and craft did not invent the world, but rather revealed it through the poetry. The poem becomes a symbiosis of experience, experiencer and communicative practice and, in the Georgic tradition, teaches by instruction. All poetic ornament is removed by Tusser as it is superfluous to the practical meaning of his work. As Duncan states in 'An introduction to a Practical Ballad':

It is precisely this quality of highflown over-reaching which makes most pastoral verse just silly to a countryman. (Townsman, Vol. IV, No. XIII, p. 21)

But it is not so much that Duncan expects countrymen to read the poetry, rather it is the desire for an accurate rendering in the description that he wants. With this in mind the first of Duncan's 'Practical Ballads' speaks of two things. Firstly, the most desirable way to build a pig-sty, and secondly, how to write poetry. These two seemingly different endeavours are shown to require the same method, so that the one provides a model for the other:

Strength, not ornament, is necessary.  
And that goes for a pig-sty, and poetry. (The Mongrel, p. 90)

The pig-sty is a basic construction that exemplifies the practical concerns with no need for architectural ornamentation.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Duncan states that poetry must also reject unnecessary ornamentation. For this reason the

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<sup>54</sup>Duncan, a high-brow poet and playwright, was also, amongst other things, a pig farmer. His choice of building for his analogy could be seen as an ironic attempt to reconcile these two occupations. Farming may be seen as a duty to his dead father, while his desires lay in writing. In both cases there is the need to produce something of value. The poetry pig-sty equation, humorous in its polarity, can therefore be seen as an ironic statement on the paradoxes in his own life.

instruction is simple, both of what it describes and the language used to describe it:

The site: choose a dry site.  
Avoid building against a bank. (The Mongrel, p. 90)

The language is deliberately bereft of allusion or metaphor and the end stopped lines help to keep the instruction simple and to the point. The poem continues in this vein, explaining the floor dimensions, height, door construction etc., all that is deemed necessary to make the building functional. It is not until the last couplet 'Strength, not ornament, is necessary. / And that goes for a pig-sty, and poetry.' (p. 90), that the instructional language is shown also to be a protracted metaphor.

What Duncan seeks to achieve within the pastoral tradition is a synthesis of art, function and intellect. Nature is put at the service of humanity who are then able to utilise it for their own benefit. Art then communicates the intellectualisation of a functionalised nature. All ingredients are necessary if the poem is to communicate something of man's ontological status. The poem manoeuvres around Romantic synthesis with nature by stressing the importance of order and constraint. If a pig-sty or a poem is to 'serve' then it is necessary to understand its purpose and to structure it accordingly. If this is achieved then the poem may be considered effective, and effectiveness is that by which a poem and all functional things should be judged.<sup>55</sup>

The second of the 'Practical Ballads', numbered 5 in Townsmen, continues the notion of a poetic relationship with the natural world by describing the functional qualities a downpour of rain has for a farmer.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>In the unpublished 1966 essay, 'What Is Poetry', Duncan writes:

The poem can be judged good or bad, first by the content, the thing said, and secondly by the effectiveness of the statement. ('What is Poetry', p. 6. Typescript held in the Ronald Duncan Archive, *The New Collection*, University of Plymouth.)

<sup>56</sup>If the intermediate three poems were written, there is now no trace of them, only the appearance that 'Practical Ballads' was a project stretching beyond its two representative poems.

Duncan presents both the event and the meditation on the event. The rain is not a gift from God, 'I cannot say I prayed for this rain,' it is rather a natural phenomenon that can be harnessed for practical use:

I stand at the door watching it plop my pails full  
thinking: it is doing my work for me;  
now I shan't have to carry from the well this evening;  
it is washing the lime in on East Hill;  
The pig dung I spread for the barley, it is washing that in too  
(The Mongrel, p. 91)

The falling rain affords Duncan the time to reflect upon what is happening. The word 'thinking' sets the moment of writing apart from physical activity and orders it as a secondary process. The third process is that of imaginative thinking as the poem concludes with a simile:

And there's the wind driving it up the valley  
it falls like the skirt of a dancer. (The Mongrel, p. 91)

The image introduces sexual and artistic activity into the natural scene. The sexual allusion is a form of imaginative indulgence that is allowed because the primary task of physical labour has been accomplished.

Where 'Practical Ballads' employs the pastoral poetry of Tusser, 'Aubade' is suggested by a Provençal poem, 'Nereio' by Frederic Mistral. Its Provençal origins again confirm Duncan's complicity with Pound's claims of the importance of the European lyric. As Pound states in 'The Tradition':

The two great lyric traditions which most concern us are that of the Melic poets and that of Provence. From the first arose practically all the poetry of the 'ancient world', from the second practically all that of the modern. (Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, p. 91)

An aubade is a morning-after lyric sung in praise of a lover. Duncan's 'Aubade' is divided into quatrains which in turn are broken into a dialogue of response and counter-response. The suitor pursues his love through a



series of transformations until the girl (as she is titled) is convinced that he will love her until, and even beyond, her death. Neatly, Duncan chooses for his adaptation a lyric that alludes to a classical myth, namely Apollo's pursuit of the nymph Daphne. Daphne escapes Apollo by, at her own wish, being turned into a bay tree. In 'Aubade' the metamorphoses are playful and more varied: from fish to bird, to clover, to cloud, to sun, to moon, to rose, to oak, to nun and then finally to corpse. The classical allusion, together with its Provençal origin, means that 'Aubade' fulfils Pound's requirements for 'that which concerns us most'.

The poem suggests a message of integrity and eternity in love, coupled with a seeming desire to escape the transitory nature of sex. 'Seeming' because it is uncertain whether the lyric is only a conventional courtship game. What is certain, however, is that Duncan personalises the poem by using his wife's name, Rose-Marie, for that of the 'Girl'<sup>57</sup>. With this in mind it is possible that Duncan actually presented 'Aubade' to his wife as a courtship gift.

In comparison 'The Single Eye' is a simple song that, if not directly medieval, then is a pastiche of that style. It is a sexually euphemistic poem constructed in couplets. The second line of each couplet works as an integral refrain with the first half of the line repeated in the second, as in: 'He is dumb! He is dumb!' (p. 94). Although the words are not repeated in the next couplet, the formal structure remains, controlling the content of the poem, forcing its clarity, its order and lucidity, to be apparent.

The message of the poem is simple: men seek only sexual gratification:

And the sleeping man with his two blind eyes  
Sees beyond sight as his serpent tries  
To bite the sun! The sun! (The Mongrel, p. 94)

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<sup>57</sup>Ronald Duncan married Rose-Marie Hansom at Bideford Registry Office in 1941. They had two children, Briony and Roger.

As the 'blind eyes' suggest, this is someone aroused in their sleep. The age old serpent / penis euphemism is also suggestive of Eve's seduction in the Garden of Eden, the archetype of sin and desire, while the eye image emphasises the blindness of sexual lust.

'The Single Eye' is a song to be sung by women and its playfulness makes no attempt to moralise about the sexual appetites of their men. It represents one of several simple love lyrics in The Mongrel that use love to conjure not only a bygone time of unrepressed emotion, but also to suggest a real connection between song and social life. Again, Duncan follows Pound's writings. For example, in 'Troubadours – Their Sorts and Conditions' Pound writes of the medieval love lyric that:

these songs played a very real part in love intrigue and in the intrigue preceding warfare. The time had no press and no theatre. If you wish to make love to women in public, and out loud, you must resort to subterfuge; and Guillaume St Leider even went so far as to get the husband of his lady to do the seductive singing. (The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, p. 94)

Like 'The Single Eye' and 'Aubade', 'Spanish Song' continues this theme of courtship in song. Subtitled as coming from the fifteenth century, 'Spanish Song' is a short lyric sung by a woman to rouse her sleeping lover so he may make love to her. Her lure of providing him with a clean shirt in the morning as a reward is to confirm to her lover that she will ask no favours beyond this night and that no-one will know of their illicit love-making.

Duncan's frequent use of song in The Mongrel, shows an overt complicity not just with Pound, but also with Dante's argument that poetry 'is a rhetorical composition set to music'.<sup>58</sup> One of these songs is 'Mi Pensamento' which was published alongside 'Spanish Song' in Townsmen, Vol. V, No. XVIII, Jan 1943, where it appeared with its musical score.<sup>59</sup> 'Mi

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<sup>58</sup>Dante is another poet that Pound used to exemplify the European poetic tradition. The quotation is from De Vulgari Eloquentiâ, Rebel Press, p. 56.

<sup>59</sup>See Appendix.

Pensamento' (my thoughts), is of Portuguese origin and is the love-song of the voyeur:

With the slow eyes of the soul  
I gaze at you  
With the quick eyes of the mind  
I dissemble. (The Mongrel, p. 58)

In their appropriation of given forms from the Middle Ages into the middle twentieth century, these translations/adaptations reveal a simplicity in their expression of feelings. Their themes of love, lust, self-gratification and loss are punctuated by the occasional concession to spirituality. Always there is a direct engagement with elemental nature. For example:

Now the drowning sun burns on the thin horizon  
I will drown in the waves, in the tide. It is all done.  
My love's taken, and my heart is broken.  
('Song', The Mongrel, p. 68).

Both of these examples eschew specific details for the broader natural phenomena that impinge upon man's desires in a general way.

By including these songs within The Mongrel, Duncan celebrates the simple life, while acknowledging the harshness of the labour involved. This is also apparent in 'The Miller's Lament' and 'To Plough'. While 'The Miller's Lament' complains of hard labour and loss of love, 'To Plough' celebrates the successful harnessing of the land. Typically for a poem in this collection it has a sexual undercurrent:

And from the earth's renewing lust  
My rusty ploughshare takes its shine  
Riding the furrow and the year  
Taking its pleasure from the thighs of time. (The Mongrel, p. 89)

The drive to control and tame nature has its apotheosis in 'A Short History of Texas'. This poem narrates the domination of the unforgiving Texan

landscape by the early pioneers. It uses newspaper cuttings to exemplify the harshness of the environment in a style that is immediately Poundian. For example:

'The blizzard blew the tyres off my wagon, and our kit was buried in the running sand.' I quote Greeley, *New York Tribune*. THE Yankee Trumpet (The Mongrel, p. 36)

receives its style from The Cantos:

"Will there be war?" "no, Miss Wi'let,  
"on account of bizschniz relations."  
Said the soap and bones dealer in May 1914  
And Mr Gandhi thought:  
if we don't buy any cotton  
And at the same time don't buy any guns.....  
(Canto XXXVIII, The Cantos, p. 188)

'A Short History of Texas' shows the development of technology and enclosure policies in America and how nature, when ill managed, will harvest human disaster:

And if Texas is Hell, Man lit the fire  
  
by burning the watersheds and never  
planting a single sapling. And what's worse,  
mad with nickle greed he overgrazed the pasture  
  
and with prairie busters ripped the earth's  
belly, behind his plough a wake of birds  
squall incessantly over birth and death (The Mongrel, p. 47)

Overcoming nature for human benefit requires control, order, and, perhaps most importantly, an understanding of the way nature works. Human greed will not suffice. Finally using the terza rima form, Duncan is able to equate Texas with Hell as terza rima is the form used by Dante for his Divine Comedy. If these poems are a desire for previous idylls of simplistic living, then 'Widsith' has a more contemporary framework.

The original poem 'Widsith', on which Duncan's work is based, is widely agreed to be the oldest poem in the Anglo-Saxon. This shows Duncan to be pulling material from the roots of the English literary tradition, absorbing its inherent historicity and incorporating it within his aesthetic. It is a further example of the all encompassing nature of Duncan's aesthetic plan for 'right poetry' and the improvement of the cultural condition. Pound had also taken a lyric lament from the Anglo-Saxon, 'The Seafarer'. Duncan's use of the Anglo-Saxon helps to complete his picture of a European poetic tradition by using a further style that had developed from, but was distinctly different from, its Latin predecessors. As Pound states in 'How to Read':

We may count the *Seafarer*, the *Beowulf*, and the remaining Anglo-Saxon fragments as indigenous art; at least, they dealt with a native subject, and by an art not newly borrowed. Whether alliterative metre owes anything to Latin hexameter is a question open to debate (Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, p. 34).

Pound remains true to the Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre so as to enhance the melopoeia of the medieval lyric. Duncan loosens the metre and yet retains alliteration, assonance and rhyme as substantial traces:

When I alone awake I see  
the fallow waves' monotony,  
the sea gulls bathing, their wings spreading  
and there is a frost; snow falling, turning to hail.  
(The Mongrel, p. 86)

The effect is to produce a poem that maintains its Anglo-Saxon origin, while focusing more on the moral in its content than the reproduction of its form.

Where the original 'Widsith' has tales told of the great and the good throughout Europe by a traveller, Duncan's traveller persona has seen only suffering and the misery of war. The poem questions the futile nature of war

and the solitude of those left behind. Most of all the poem forces the persona to realise the temporal frailty of life itself:

I cannot think of the wide world  
without becoming miserable from meditating  
on life's brevity, thinking  
how my friends no longer stride the earth  
or sit beside their hearth.  
So do we all, day by day  
perish, fail, fall. It is that. That is it all. (The Mongrel, p. 87)

This pessimism deflates the optimism which rose from the Second World War, and from the awe of the story telling of the original, in a similar way that 'Hylas' deflates the classical idea of the heroic. Heroic poetry itself seems futile following the devastation such as that caused by the Second World War where so many 'brave soldiers/sag[ged] like sacks beside a hedge', where 'war took them on a journey. / Death their destination.' (p. 87) This direct message stems from the wisdom of experience and in the poem this is emphasised by the inclusion of a poet and an old man. That 'A poet knows how it will be/when all the wealth of the world lies waste' (p. 87), is a self-referencing of the writing subject who has brought from the ancient tongue a poet to proclaim lamentably on what is lost through the desolation and degeneration of 'this dreary life' (p. 87):

'Where is the horse and where is his rider  
where is the giver of treasure?  
Where is the guest at the banquet  
—where are the joys of the hall?  
Where is the bright cup? Where is the armed man?  
Where is the hero's glory? How time has passed  
like the shadow of a cloak into the night and  
disappeared. (The Mongrel, p. 87)

Of those things lost, 'the bright cup', while signalling the cheer of the drinking cup, can also be seen to represent the holy grail. Although it is mentioned in passing, and in a list, it can be seen to symbolise both the lost era of heraldry and to lament the death of Christ, the 'giver of treasure'

(p. 87). Such lamentations lead inexorably to the moral of the poem that advises the wearisome man to seek 'comfort from the Father in heaven in whom all grace resides' (p. 88). But even this sentiment seems hollow, following as it does the desolation that precedes it. What is presented is Duncan's understanding of the vacuity of post-war Britain.

Man-made desolation and Christian moral overtones recur in the oratorio libretto 'Mea Culpa', which Duncan wrote as a response to the dropping of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima.

'Mea Culpa' represents the Biblical myth of the fall of man, moving from the pre-lapsarian state to the post-lapsarian state, which reaches its terrible zenith in the dropping of the bomb, itself an emblem for the Second World War in general:

And every living thing both human and animal was  
seared  
to death; and for three days the city was hidden by  
a cloud of smoke. Not a woman or a child survived. (p. 82)

This description is sung by a chorus, providing an over-view of the 'story'. God's messenger, Satan, Man and Woman (perpetual Adam and Eve) are given their own voices so that the balance of forces may be directly addressed.

The oratorio addresses the central tenet of the Christian faith, namely that Christ died specifically to redeem all mankind. For this reason the maxim 'From His death, our life' is sung by a quartet presumably consisting of the voices that represent God, Satan, Man and Woman.

'Mea Culpa' is essentially a sermon. As with 'Practical Ballads' the language is freed from ornamentation so as to foreground its questioning of humanity and its hope for moral resolution:

Fear makes us eat  
For death is hungry.  
Fear makes us drink,  
For death is thirsty.  
Give us this fruit. How long, O Lord?

'Mea Culpa' aligns itself to the Morality Plays of the 15th Century, which Duncan claims to be the origin of modern drama:

The origins of the drama were: as soon as Man realised that there were forces over which he had no control, he felt the necessity to articulate and objectify this conflict between himself and nature. That realisation was a religious one, and that articulation was drama.

The drama moved from the altar to the Morality play, performed outside the church.<sup>60</sup>

The Mongrel, Duncan's first major poetry publication, explicitly lays down an agenda for what he sees to be the way forward for culture and poetry. As indicated, this direction closely resembles that of Pound's Personae as well as his polemical critical writings about poetic tradition. Poetry, as essence, the thing that expands the consciousness of being, would underpin a cultural reconstruction which would, in turn, run alongside the reconstruction of a Europe decimated by war. Duncan puts forward the argument that by building on the traditions of the past, contemporary Europe could regain a stable identity. Duncan presents The Mongrel as an example of how to utilise the poetic craft, the wisdom and the culture of past tradition. His hope, after Pound, was to raise post-war culture to new peaks of aesthetic excellence. As the first stage of Duncan's ambitious assault on tradition, The Mongrel demonstrates and deftly handles a range of poetic forms and subject matters that encompass technical development, religious conviction, subjective identity, literary tradition, and even farming practice. But perhaps most significantly of all, the collection begins to explore the problem of identity, origins and direction. Duncan's relationship to others, and the question of subjectivity were to have increasing significance for him. At the same time he continued to explore poetic tradition and to furnish it with a

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<sup>60</sup>Quotation from an unpublished essay: 'Poetry and the Contemporary Theatre', held in The Ronald Duncan Archive, *The New Collection*, held at the University of Plymouth.



style of his own making that always strove to show its inheritance from Pound and Eliot.

## Chapter Two

### The Solitudes: Developing the Love Sequence Tradition

If The Mongrel (1950) deliberately resurrected poetic models of the past, then The Solitudes published by Faber in 1960, participates in the tradition of the love poem sequence. There are striking parallels to be drawn between the sonnet sequences of the English and Italian Renaissance and with Duncan's sequence of love poems, The Solitudes. Although Duncan frees himself from the strict forms of the sonnet and canzone, The Solitudes address what Fuller in The Sonnet (1972) describes as the 'vagaries of love' (p. 37). Shakespeare's Sonnets and Dante's La Vita Nuova are enduring examples of the type of love poem sequencing that primarily address a specific lover or lovers. Similarly, Duncan re-draws the intricacies of love as he sees them in nineteen-fifties Britain. Compensating for the lack of a 'turn', a characteristic of the sonnet especially in the Italian form (the English or Shakespearean sonnet tending to use a philosophical conclusion in the final couplet), Duncan writes himself into the poems so as to provide a specific centre for the emotions experienced. In other words, the poems turn not primarily on what he is experiencing, but *that* he is experiencing. His love for the addressee, his own reactions to himself and the feelings and actions of others are considered and organised through this position so that a concluding lesson may be drawn from the events or emotions each individual poem contains.

Beginning with how The Solitudes originated both as a collection of poems and as Duncan's second Faber publication, this chapter will investigate how 'love' is explored and reconstructed in the poetic language of The Solitudes. It will go on to show how the poems parallel the famous love sequences of the past. Finally it will look at some of the other poems which indicate Duncan's poetic direction.

Duncan's third autobiography, Obsessed (1977) is addressed to a single person, Virginia Maskell, his lover. Maskell had appeared in the first performance of Duncan's play The Catalyst at the Arts Theatre Club, London in 1958. The play, centring on a ménage à trois between a man, his wife and his secretary, had initially been banned by the Lord High Chamberlain in 1957 because of its lesbian overtones. In Maskell Duncan saw the epitome of the character he had intended to create. In Obsessed he describes the experience:

My play bored me unless you were on the stage; and when you were, I didn't know which act you were playing, or care whose words you were speaking. I was content to watch you moving across the stage, my hungry eyes devouring your figure, so boyish from behind, so feminine from the front. That's why, though I distrusted the producer and disliked the production, I attended every rehearsal. It's not often a dramatist conceives a character then finds a player to fit so precisely his imagination. That is what I felt as I saw you as Leone in The Catalyst. (Obsessed p. 12)<sup>61</sup>

In 'Ronald Duncan: Verse Dramatist and Poet Interviewed by William Wahl', published in Poetic Drama, No. 20, Salzburg, University of Salzburg, 1973 which was submitted by Wahl as part of his PhD thesis, Duncan states that The Catalyst was largely autobiographical, so for him to see in Virginia Maskell an ideal he had drawn from life and placed within the stylised and controlled context of a play, was to have her outwardly represent the sexual fantasy figure of his imagination.

An adulterous affair with Maskell followed, but was complicated by Duncan's view on love and marriage:

You cannot divorce; divorce is a kind of vulgarity. . . . I do not believe that by loving two women you necessarily take from either. I've always said this—I've always practised this, one might say not for philosophical reasons but by inclination, but I have found that by loving X, my love for Y has increased and not diminished.  
(Ronald Duncan: Verse Dramatist and Poet', Wahl, p. 121-2)

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<sup>61</sup>The phrase 'so boyish from behind, so feminine from the front' parallels the androgynous desire portrayed in 'Hylas'.

For these reasons Duncan continued in his commitment to his marriage while ardently pursuing his affair.<sup>62</sup> What is more, he attempted to reconcile the two women with each other, perhaps hoping for an harmonious ménage à trois to develop. With Rose Marie Duncan aware that her husband was having an affair, Duncan describes how her relationship with Maskell developed:

Rose Marie and you [Maskell] had become close friends who had private jokes from which she [Gretchen, Rose Marie's lover] was excluded. An old tie still hangs in my dressing-room to remind me how the two of you went into Bideford one day and returned with this gift from you both to me. And didn't you tell me that it had been Rose Marie who had made the suggestion: 'Let's buy our husband a tie'? (*Obsessed* p. 37)

Duncan's idea of polygamy, especially for men, his belief that 'so many women cannot learn to love men until they have learned to love women' (Wahl, p.125), is interesting in that he practised these things and tried while doing so to have others believe likewise. In this respect 'The Solitudes' are an 'aid to love' working through the different aspects of love via a reasoning poetic that moralises and instructs its addressee.

The recipient of the poetry is at least threefold. 'Solitude 1' has Duncan writing 'To my essential self—I sing—' (p. 13), while the majority of 'The Solitudes' are addressed to a specific addressee, usually denoted by 'you'.<sup>63</sup> A

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<sup>62</sup> In the same interview Duncan clarifies his position against monogamy:

I have made several attacks against the 'nonsense of monogamous love'. I suppose I have done this from my own inner experience, from my own knowledge that I have been capable of loving – or doing my best to love – more than one woman at the same time. I have refused to accept this either-or of convention. . . . I have said that if a man is not capable of loving two women, he's certainly not capable of loving one. What the social implications of this are, I really don't know and I really don't care. I often suspect that if the masses had not had an access to literature, they would never have been moved to any kind of physical love whatsoever. The West is completely hilarious in believing that monogamy is a universal or should be a universal habit or convention merely because it happens to be practised in a so-called 'Christian' society. I have lived sufficiently in the East to see that this sort of thing is nonsense. (p. 165-6)

<sup>63</sup> In *Obsessed* Duncan clarifies the specificity of one unknown addressee:

Then as Robinson Crusoe [RD] stood forlorn on the platform, Friday [VM] looked out of the carriage with a final demand.

'Write me a poem every day. It need be no more than a post-card.' I did as I was told. Eliot eventually made a selection of these and published them as *The Solitudes*. (*Obsessed*, p.41)

third addressee is constructed by 'The Solitudes' being published, thus extending the potential recipient into the realm of the unknown reader. The specificity of the addressee is further clouded by Duncan saying 'you are what you love' so that in addressing the lover he is also addressing 'his essential self'. This paradox between the narcissist and the altruist, the recognition of the self in another and the giving up of the essential self in the love for that other, presents the lovers as entwined and inseparable. 'Be bark to my ivy' runs a line in 'Solitude 16' (p. 27) and in 'Solitude 13': 'How can we be parted / Since we are no longer separate?' (p. 25), emphasising that their inseparability is not only because of their tactile proximity, but because they have metamorphosed into a single entity. If all things are not equal, then one part of the unity Duncan constructs can have dominance over another. It is as if 'The Solitudes' is a continual attempt to balance the two parts of love which Duncan has made into a single whole, reinforcing the written subject's declaration of love with progressive examples of implied unity that work towards a holistic though bipartite entity.

Finally, it should be noted that The Solitudes are not ordered in a chronological way, nor was the ordering solely Duncan's. A letter from Eliot to Duncan published in Obsessed, shows that Eliot had a hand in choosing the contents of the book:

Dear Ronnie

I've now been through the revised Solitudes and here are my views as to how the volume might be presented. I think that the volume itself should be called The Solitudes (which is the original title) with a sub-title 'and Other Poems'. 'The Solitudes' would actually be the first section, followed immediately by 'The Post-cards'. I would like to include in 'The Solitudes' section all the poems which seem to me to spring from the same inspiration, including 'Letters Amorosa', 'The Warning', and 'The plea'. After 'Post-Cards' I should put 'The Need'. 'Canzone' seems to me to belong to 'The Solitudes', as do 'Song' and 'Lute Song'. Then come the other poems: 'Strophe and Anti-Strophe', 'Impromptu for a Child', 'Solitude No. 15' which doesn't seem to me to be a Solitude at all, and possibly 'Amo Ergo Sum'; 'The Crone's Lament' certainly, and 'Air Raid' is a good poem. You might, if you like, end up with 'The Calendar'. (Obsessed, p. 156)<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> There is no trace of 'Letters Amorosa', 'The Warning' and 'The Plea' in any other Duncan publication, nor are they apparent within unpublished archive material. It would, therefore,

This letter is enough to show how 'The Solitudes' as a possible project (and it was one that continued long after the publication of The Solitudes) was not conceived as a formally structured poetic narrative even though some form of progression is apparent. Indeed, the numbering of each poem is purely arbitrary as the publication history of three of the 'Solitudes' will show. 'Solitude 2' was first published in Tomorrow, Feb.-Mar 1960, No. 3 (p. 10) as 'The Solitudes No. 8'; 'Solitude 16' as 'The Solitudes No. 21' in Tomorrow, Oct.-Nov. 1959, No. 2 (p. 7); and 'Solitude 18' was first published in Agenda, Dec. 1959, No. 9 (p. 1) as 'The Solitudes No. 6'. In Selected Poems (1976) all three 'Solitudes' appear as in The Solitudes, but in Collected Poems (1981) which attempts to record Duncan's work chronologically but is clearly inaccurate, 'Solitude 2' becomes 'Solitude 9', 'Solitude 16' as 'Solitude 38', and 'Solitude 18' as 'Solitude 40'.<sup>65</sup> The indifferent numbering of 'The Solitudes' matters little when examining The Solitudes as a selection, but it shows that the sequence of poems that appear in print follow their own logic as part of the book and not as part of a wider ranging design. In this study we will look at the poems as texts within the context of their publication and not speculate on the specificity of their biographical referencing. Although a study based largely on biographical material would have its own particular interest, it would move away from the poetry in publication where no direct biographical detail is presented either within, or as an addendum to the

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be fair to assume that Duncan followed Eliot's advice and placed them within 'The Solitudes' section. The same applies to the fate of 'Song', 'Lute Song'. 'Canzone' is more mysterious as there is no 'Solitude' in canzone form, and even though there is a 'Solitude 15' there is no way of telling that it is the same poem that Eliot refers to in his letter.

<sup>65</sup> An example of the chronological inaccuracy of the Collected Poems would be 'Solitude 18' of The Solitudes which is recorded as having been written in 1961, one year after the book itself was published. Collected Poems records 110 'Solitudes' and there are other, unpublished 'Solitudes' in The Ronald Duncan Archive: *The New Collection*, held at The University of Plymouth. Also, it should be noted that seven 'Solitudes' set to music by Thomas Eastward and were first performed on 1st October 1967 by Julian Bream and Gerald English at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Of the seven 'Solitudes' only two, '11' and '15' appear in this collection. Of the other five, one appears in Unpopular Poems ('No. 1') while one other appears only in Collected Poems, not as a 'Solitude', but under the title 'Mi Pensamiento', a poem translated from the Spanish. Of the remaining three, one is a reworking of Eurydice's speech in 'Appenato' in The Mongrel while the other two have no immediately recognisable source, and may well have been constructed to tie the seven poems together for the purposes of performance.

poetry. Biography, therefore, needs to be seen as providing additional information that can be used to support the poetry as published.

'The Solitudes' sequence which forms the main bulk of The Solitudes, consists of 27 poems, each of varying length, structure and subject matter. They begin with the introductory poem, 'Solitude 1' (p.13):

To my essential self—I sing—  
Not to the I,  
Man of the hat, coat and tie;  
But to the me,  
—coffee, muddle and misery. (The Solitudes p. 13)

Before embarking upon an exploration of love, Duncan feels it necessary to explain to whom the poems are addressed. It is significant, not only because Duncan places a written subject at the centre, and one which can be closely identified with a writing subject by virtue of the poem acting as an introduction, but also because the poems are not being addressed to a lover, but to the very person who is writing.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the issue of address is complicated for Duncan by the fact that some of the poems are addressed to his wife and others to his lover. Duncan is able to overcome this problem by using his 'essential self' as the addressee behind the immediate addressees of individual poems.

In his commentary to The New Life, Dante explains the origins of his poems and to whom he wrote them. He provides a critical commentary with the poems. Also, he explains the emotional effect the love for Beatrice produced

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<sup>66</sup>The inspiration for 'Solitude 1' may well arise from the introductory poem to Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. Whitman's poem 'One's-self I Sing' unites all aspects of the self into the modern man:

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.  
Of physiology from top to toe I sing,  
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worth for the Muse,  
I say the Form complete is worthier far,  
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,  
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine  
The Modern Man I sing. (Leaves of Grass, p. 31)

Within the 'simple separate person' lie all the aspects of humanity. Duncan, however, divides the self into appearance and essence, discounting the former in favour of the latter.

within him and how this informed his writing. The poetry responds to these feelings of earthly love. For Duncan, the love he feels forces him to write to himself, to qualify and quantify, to explain how he feels, and to present what those feelings mean within a rational state of consciousness. The focus of attention is already on the written subject, rather than the addressee (the lover), and is developed by making a distinction between the public and the private self. The public self, the one of appearance upon the street, is represented by 'Man of the hat, coat and tie', while the private self, his *essential* self is the 'me, / -coffee, muddle and misery.' This distinction is simple enough, and the idea of a public face which disguises the truth of the person within is a straightforward notion to understand. However, the division of the subject into 'I' and 'me' is complicated by the fact that it is the 'I' that is doing the singing, in other words, according to the logic of the poem, the public self is singing to the private self. There are various ways to understand the apparent anomaly of the person of appearance singing to the private 'real' person inside.

First we may consider the public nature of the book as a published text. If the poems are to be read by an unknowable reader then the poems themselves are presented as having to speak for the writing subject. In other words the written subject approximates to the writing subject and the writing subject makes this apparent before the love sequence begins. The addressee to whom the written subject refers as 'I' is the writing subject 'me', so that the poetry is the ordered disguise of the poetry itself encountering the 'muddled' character of the writing subject. And as the written subject does not sing to itself, so the poetry is not foregrounding its own appearance as poetry, rather it is directly communicating something by using poetry as the medium. Ironically, the poem does draw attention to the artificiality of writing by the presented need for qualifying the division between the writing and the 'real' that informs the writing. The reader is invited to see through the writing to the meaning beyond, and to be aware that the addressee of the sequence is being provocatively described as the poet himself. Why this should be is left unclear so that the



reader remains tantalised until 'Solitude 6' when the first signs of the self as being present only within the addressee is finally offered: 'When only love divides, / nothing is divided' (p. 20).

A second interpretation would be to deny the foregrounding of the poetry and to see the poem as drawing the simple distinction between public or 'apparent' self, and the private self lying behind the façade. The importance of this distinction is to draw the reader's attention to the poet's plight, to show that it is the poet himself who is suffering, disorganised and living in a depressed and chaotic world while on the surface he 'appears' normal as he carries out the tasks of his everyday life. The poet is giving the reader his confidence and in so doing enhances the intimacy of the sequence. However, the returning loop of the poet addressing himself, does not allow the reader to participate on any level other than that of the voyeur so he can only *receive* the messages within the poetry. The contract the reader enters upon reading is always thus. Even if the reader is acknowledged by the author as the 'other' of the act of reading, he does not participate with the phenomenal world of the writer and neither does the writing itself, regardless of how capably he constructs the text from his position as reader.<sup>67</sup> Duncan wishes to draw the reader's attention to his alienated position with the constructed reality in the writing. Where the reader accepts that there is always a gap between his presence as reader and the poet's presence as writer, and that the writer is offering something which can blindly bring the one closer to the other by the production of meaningful text (and all text has meaning even if it is purely meta-textual), Duncan wishes to underline the absence of the reader within the writing process by stressing the 'I' to 'me' distinction as being that which excludes everyone else. And if there is a playfulness to be found in the poet 'apparently' singing to himself when he is

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<sup>67</sup> An introduction to the nuances of Reader-Response Criticism can be found in Freund, E (1987) The Return of The Reader London, Methuen. Notions of reading are properly addressed in that work, whereas I have not developed this line of thinking because my concern has tended towards Duncan's engagement with text production. This, I believe to be his primary concern and any concern he may have for his reader remains secondary. A study of Duncan's attitude to the reader would be insightful as it would encounter notions of coteries, idealised readers and the general reader's reaction to poetry that denies open participation in favour of offering a rational conclusion to the subject matter discussed.

cleverly holding back on saying that his life is contained within the life of his addressee, then such playfulness only enforces the understanding that regardless of authorial location, a personal and exclusive environment is being constructed *against* reading and *towards* the authorial construction of abstract emotions produced through contact with abstracts such as 'beauty' and 'love'. Beauty and love are perceived as a consequence of the phenomenal and are made intelligible through the mediation of the rational consciousness of Duncan as writer. The poetry is the consequence of this causal chain. Each poem is produced as an 'end' where the phenomenal has created an effect which is then rationalised and mediated before, finally, it is ordered, clarified and concluded.

The phenomenal world is not Duncan's primary concern as it serves only to produce an effect upon the emotions which he can then rationalise. For this reason he does not sing to the objects that surround him 'hat, coat and tie' but to the inherent qualities of himself, 'coffee, muddle, misery', where coffee is a metonym for the writer working against the desire to sleep.<sup>68</sup> His 'essential self' is not constructed of objects, nor by the world of appearance, but it is in appearance that his essential self can be made known.

The paradox presented by the opening poem is Duncan's own awareness that however faithful he wishes to be to his 'essential self' in whatever guise that essential self may use, he is always going to be confounded by mediation. The otherness of writing, the otherness of the addressee and the otherness of the readable writing all deny Duncan the ability to make manifest his responses to the significant events in his life as they slip rapidly into the past and exist only as traces within memory. Duncan attempts to bring these events, and his responses to them, back into the present of his consciousness *at the time of writing* and thus make them live perpetually. In doing this 'The Solitudes' is filled with recognisable romantic images to signpost the intent and

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<sup>68</sup>'Coffee, muddle and misery' also echoes the ennui in Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock':

For I have known them all already, known them all –  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons' (*Collected Poems 1909-1962*, pp. 14-15).

colloquialisms to approximate the writing with everyday reality. To see how these details of Duncan's subjective relationship to events, consciousness, writing and traditional notions of love sequences functions, close readings of some 'Solitudes' are necessary. I begin with 'Solitude 2' which opens with the following stanza:

Damn and blast you!  
You behave like a pickpocket,  
    or an absent-minded thief,  
Raiding my sleep, when you don't even need my peace;  
Stealing my heart, when you certainly don't want my  
    love. (The Solitudes, p. 14)

Addressed to a woman of 'punishable beauty' (p.14), 'Solitude 2' attempts to explain to her the effect she is having upon the written subject. The poem is divided into six irregular stanzas with each performing a different function: the first says what she is doing and the effect she is having upon him; the second says how she is doing it: 'Done out of perversity, done out of sheer caprice' (p.14); the third is a rationalisation of her behaviour as a qualification against a protestation: 'True, it is not your fault, you're not to blame' (p.14); the fourth is judgmental in the first two lines, as if something should be done to curb her behaviour, while the last four lines continue telling of what she is and is doing: 'Everything about you is delinquent, / The whole of you gangs up / to chuck pebbles through my fragile maturity (p. 14); the fifth says what he will do to right the situation and why, 'I'll read the Riot Act to your thighs, / And claim back all my property, bit by bit, till I am whole again' (p.14); and the sixth tells her what she should do in the meantime: 'Till then, do not reform' (p.15), and concludes by saying how her behaviour has altered him: 'I value nothing which you do not take; / Nor want these rags, the remnants which you leave' (p.15). The poem is organised in this way to control the emotional effect via rational consciousness. Each stanza performs a particular function by which the subject matter of the poem may be presented and ordered. This form of writing, akin to strophe, anti-strophe, epode and antipode, similarly parallels the Italian sonnet inasmuch as

the poem is divided into distinct sections with each section adding to a constructed argument: you are like this, you don't realise it, you don't realise what it is you do to me, it is terrible, I love it, I will avenge myself, I don't care what they will think of me because without you I am nothing.

Duncan, as he frequently does, uses a conceit as a means of further controlling the objects of writing. Here the woman's behaviour is compared to a petty thief, unconsciously taking from the written subject his love, dignity, power to work, his reputation, indeed everything by which he could define himself. Interestingly, while the woman's behaviour is *compared* to petty thieves, individual parts of her body *become* petty thieves. They are objects to be transformed while behaviour is comparable but not changeable:

Your breasts are urchins; your lips, ragamuffins;  
Everything about you is delinquent,  
The whole of you gangs up  
to chuck pebbles through my fragile maturity.  
(The Solitudes, p. 14)

In transforming the object of his desire Duncan is able to control the woman within the writing. As in a blazon he describes the woman in separate parts so as to construct her wholly in his own way. This he does because the poem is addressed to that particular woman to describe the effect she is having upon *him*. The division of the self in 'Solitude 1' is followed up here by the wholly constructed woman (her parts defined by their mischievousness) fragmenting the written subject by stealing from him parts of himself. These stolen parts are his sense of identity (where stanza three has him reduced to anonymity), his maturity, his reputation, his peace, his heart and his love. These are the things that she takes and these are the things he wishes to have restored, to make him 'whole again' (p. 14).

Constructing the woman as thief is tempered by the playfulness of the colloquial language. 'Damn and blast you!' (p.14) the poem begins, blurting out an irritated and frustrated exclamation whilst lacking vitriol in its oral



to chuck pebbles through my fragile maturity.

(The Solitudes, p. 14)

The slightly ludicrous and surreal synecdoche of eyes running up and down the street, and the personification of her breasts as urchins, and lips as ragamuffins, help to play down the implied violence, a violence which is extreme enough for the written subject to call for an even stronger act of violence to be used in retaliation, as stated in the bald threat: 'But one day, madam, I'll read the Riot Act to your thighs' (p. 14). The equally ludicrous threat of authoritarian violence is, within the colloquial and the playful, an erotic game which has the written subject assuming a position of mature authority figure against the adolescent rebel figure of the woman. This is the opposition Duncan creates from the 'superior' position of age, writing subject, and class as stereotyped by using 'ragamuffin' and 'urchin', both antiquated and thus softened terms for young, usually male, working class trouble-makers, and by the hyperbolic pomposity of upper-middle class expressions such as 'Damn and Blast', and 'one day, madam'.<sup>69</sup> Also they show Duncan's androgynous feelings towards Virginia Maskell, as expressed in Obsessed, p. 12.

The poem is a poem of unrequited love. Suffering is given cause and the written subject finds himself reduced and fragmented by a woman with whom he is 'besotted'. This is a beginning with narrative potential as the written subject states in the final two lines:

. . . I value nothing which you do not take;  
Nor want these rags, the remnants which you leave.  
(The Solitudes, p. 15)

To have nothing of value outside that which the woman now possesses, nor to desire anything she has not taken, shows the completeness of his infatuation.

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<sup>69</sup> Class, ideology, hierarchies and authenticity language are all topics for discussion within the varying Marxist frameworks and can be applied to Duncan's writing. The nature of this thesis would make such a study sketchy at best and rather than fail to explore these aspects fully I have left them out.

All is within her, and so in order to regain the divided self he must have his love requited by claiming back his property in order to become 'whole again':

. . . I'll read the Riot Act to your thighs,  
And claim back all my property, bit by bit, till I am whole again.  
(The Solitudes, p. 14)

Stressing the desire to be unified under the subjective pronoun 'I' can be seen as either a relaxing of the emphasis on the written division in 'Solitude 1' between 'I' and 'me', or as the hierarchization of that subjective division so that a unified subject is seen as a unified self within the public sphere. Appearance would be the appearance of the whole person and not a mask of disguise hiding a different, melancholic and fragmented self.<sup>70</sup> As the mode of address is verbal and apparently dialectical (where the use of apparently relates to the 'appearance' actually presented on the page), the addresser indicates his intent in a public voice, where the 'I' dominates and the 'me' is missing from the poem. In 'Solitude 3' and 'Solitude 4' the suppression of the 'essential self' is lifted, allowing for the two pronouns to become entwined; with 'Solitude 4' emphasising the possessive 'my' in conjunction with the 'I' and not the 'me'.

Both 'Solitude 3' and 'Solitude 4' step aside from the direct address to reflect on the condition of his unrequited love. 'Solitude 3' asks for his solitude to be broken, while 'Solitude 4' is a turning-in, expressing a desire to contain a 'pure' love unsullied by contact with anything external to his consciousness. In this way Solitudes 3 & 4 contradict each other. The written subject desires otherness, but he also desires an holistic unity that would require no other.

'Solitude 3' works from a conceit in which Duncan constructs his solitude as a lake: 'To the lake of my aloneness' (p. 16), which desires to attract life to its waters. What prevent this from happening are not external forces, but conditions he himself creates; 'I am contained by mountains of my making'

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<sup>70</sup> This fragmented self has to be distinct from an alienated self which denies identity because of the subject's non-presence within the praxis of an ideology of which he has no part. Where the alienated subject seeks *identity*, the fragmented subject in Duncan's writing seeks *unity* through both praxis and the rationalisation of that praxis through conscious reconstruction.

(p. 16). The written subject confesses that his solitude is a result of a division in himself, on the one hand loathing his situation, and on the other, confessing to being the progenitor of this unfavourable predicament. There are two hints within the poem as to why this is so. Firstly the line 'I hold nothing but reflections' (p. 16) which suggests a retrospective glance into memory or an inertia brought about by having nothing which is original to himself. He can only reproduce an image that is passed on by something else.

If this idea of reproduction is levelled at the process of writing, then the written subject aligns itself with the writing subject by saying that all writing is either a mediation of phenomena and must be mourned for having no objective reality, or that its writing continually reflects the writings of others, that a glance back through history will show that the content of what is being said, even the methods of saying it, have already been secured and that at best he can only reproduce them. The pleading questions towards the end of this one stanza poem help to clarify this position:

Will no appled boy paddle in me?  
Or sunlaced girl dive and swim in me?  
Has no one a boat to float on me? (The Solitudes, p. 16)

The images of 'appled boy', 'sunlaced girl' and a boat upon the surface of a lake are received and idealised images that are recognisable and unobtainable because they are silent and passive, and above all images, and as such demand the non-participation of the onlooker. This is only plausible if the onlooker can forget himself, and as Duncan requests these images to happen within or upon the written subject – 'in me', 'in me', 'on me' – then notions of the self cannot be lost to the image. Within the request is the impossibility of its realisation and so the desolation remains, both within the writing and in the solitude of the individual. However, there is within the poem a control over the language as these three lines indicate. The plaintive repetition of 'me' followed by the silent stress of the question mark smoothes out each line like the last lick of a gently



undulating wave previously held up, to peak by the short syllables in 'appled' and 'paddle' and 'a boat', or by abrupt consonants running against each other, as in 'sunlaced girl dive'. Repetition of sound patterns also helps to construct the gently rippling effect of endless waves as in 'appled' and 'paddle'; 'girl', 'dive' and 'swim'; 'no one' and 'on' and 'boat' and 'float'. These repetitions are separated by the long syllables of 'boy', 'and' and 'to'. So while there is a feeling of rejection and passivity by the written subject, the poem itself is a tightly constructed composition in sound and sense. It is a developed conceit where the structure of the sound complements the idea of the poem and the triple chiming on 'me?' leads to the paradoxical word play of the last line:

Must I to quench my thirst, drink myself up  
and drown? (The Solitudes, p. 16)

Duncan's elaborate organisation of the poem enforces an indulgent attitude, making the poem as poetry reflect the considerations of the written subject. There is, therefore, from the writing subject a suggestion that there will be no striving against the condition of the written subject and it is the responsibility of all that is external to the subjective position to conform and indulge themselves in him as he is, and he is unchangeable, unmoving, self-constructed and potentially the place of idealised perfection.

Conversely, 'Solitude 4' contradicts any desire for contact with the external world, but at the same time confirms the desire for the possession of an idealised entity, which, because it is not a material object, is not possessing as a 'taking away from another', but the 'possession of a specific quality', and that quality is the capacity to love without the requirement of a particular object of desire ('I would that my love should shine / without an object, without a shadow;' (p. 17)).

Addressed to three 'objects of desire' the written subject seeks a purity in his love that could equal the love of Christ. Christ is God made man and suffers

the temptations that would befall them. This *manness* inspires Duncan to be Christ-like:

I would that I should die within myself  
and live in my love for you and you and you  
as He did, yielding without possessing; (The Solitudes, p. 17)

While the 'you and you and you' remains in itself non-specific and can be seen as directed outward to random examples in a gathering or sermon, the specificity of love being dependent upon an object, a heart and a life external to the written subject connotes a specific series of love objects. The people to whom the poem refers are deliberately masked to extend the nature of love beyond the sexual which a direct reference to a specific lover would imply, to include family, friends or the proverbial neighbour.<sup>71</sup>

The desire to efface the object, which is done by referring to these objects as 'you', is not to wallow in self-love, but to offer a heightened love to those very objects he pretends to reject. By making his love pure he has a love that can be unsullied by situation or social rules and can be spread to all people equally. Duncan is subtly using this poem to argue against monogamy and he is using the example of Christ to do so. And in this parallel with Christ, Duncan is also, and perhaps deliberately, inverting Dante's beatification of Beatrice by attempting to deify himself and not the addressee. He continues to sing to his 'essential self', while the addressee remains divided. The divided object divides the written subject, but what is most desired is to have within a unified subject a quality which can be reproduced without diminution by the divided loyalties demanded by those women whom the written subject, writing subject and Duncan love. All three divisions of subjectivity in text production are played out through the qualifying statement of the argument of the poem, namely that

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<sup>71</sup> Duncan may have had in mind lines from Donne's 'Valediction: Of The Booke' in Donne, J. (1950) John Donne Harmondsworth, Penguin, :

Her who from Pindar could allure,  
And her, through whose helpe *Lucan* is not lame,  
And her, whose booke (they say) *Homer* did finde, and name. (John Donne, p. 42)

any love which is not pure love, as Christ's love was, is a false love within which there is no life:

All other love is death,  
is death's amorous dissembling. (The Solitudes, p. 17)

This hierarchical idea of love is picked up in 'Solitude 14' by the closing couplet, which is broken to emphasise its hierarchical statement:

Those who are separate  
love at lower rate. (The Solitudes, p. 26)

Yet to reach this stage Duncan must first rationalise his love for a woman with the spiritual love he claims as the only true love. This he does in 'Solitude 6' having first constructed the life of man as the life of a leaf under the gardener's eye in 'Solitude 5'.

The point about 'Solitude 5' is that having introduced Christ as the exemplum of a man with purity of love, Duncan needs to show that mankind is without such love and that we spend our life denying the inevitability of death. This results in our lives being wasted.

'Solitude 5' is divided into three stanzas each opening with the refrain and compacted metaphor 'How leaf we are' (p. 18). The first stanza uses the opening of a leaf to represent man's naive entry into the world and how life is then full of hopes and a sense of individuality. This belief is burst by the realisation that the individual is unique only because he does not occupy the same space as another:

. . . believing ourselves  
So individual, we all reach, being identical. (The Solitudes, p. 18)

The individual only comes to realise the replication of life as he moves towards death, when he wilts and accepts his mortality with futility:

At last, all seared in brittleness  
Curled up with tiny fears and hurts, also fears;  
Perhaps the last fear, tethering us to that dry twig  
Our life's become; then knowing that we are  
    Enumerable, we fall, being expendable, all. (The Solitudes, p. 18)

Awareness of one's own short life does not lead to a *carpe diem* revelry, because Duncan accuses mankind of vanity, of acting out of blindness: 'The gardener is blind. He will not sweep' (p.18). Impotence is the condition of man, it is the condition of the first man of the Bible, Adam, the gardener of Eden, the man Christ would one day have to become. This is why the poem culminates by merging mankind through their sameness and Christ and Adam through their interdependence, and is why Duncan has Christ and man asleep as the last word:

How leaf we are  
    Like waves we do become; first urged, then merged.  
That gardener is a fisherman;  
That fisherman's asleep. (The Solitudes, p. 18)

Having the gardener and fisherman pointed out as if they are observable rather than simply iconic, not only gives them an Earthly and reproducible quality (that gardener, not this gardener), but also puts them in the present context of writing. It allows Duncan to address Christ directly in the next poem too, man to man, and to solve the problem of his love for Virginia Maskell, the unnamed lover of 'Solitude 6'.

Duncan furnishes 'Solitude 6' with the kind of rational construction already apparent in Solitudes 2, 4 and 5 so a suitable conclusion may be reached. The argument of the poem is developed through each of the six stanzas in the following way:

First stanza: questions God/Christ as to why He allows the written subject to be blind to his love and remain an atheist.  
Second stanza: accuses God/Christ of taking pleasure in further burdening his 'already torn and tormented mind' (p. 19).  
Third stanza: asks God/Christ why He crippled the written subject so he could only run as far as the woman and not all the way to Him.

Fourth stanza: asks if it is the nature of God/Christ's love that it requires rejection so forgiveness may be rewarded when the wrong-doer sees the error of his ways, and then to say that this must be so because he was made by God. Therefore, he kneels to the woman for a divinely inspired reason.

Fifth stanza: puts forward the alternative that by loving the woman he would find his way to God.

Sixth stanza: confirms his own supposition by claiming that through this poem he has reached Christ by means of his love for the woman. The written subject pleads that she not be taken from him and states that love is indivisible and remains whole to whom ever it is directed, as it was with Christ (see 'Solitude 4').

The poem begins to 'turn' towards an understanding at the point where Duncan is able to form an inseparable bond between himself and Christ through the linking of opposites. He asks: 'Is my weakness indispensable to your strength?' (p. 19) A question he needs to answer: 'It must be or You would not have made me so' (p.19) and to then link this with his love for the woman:

That I can kneel to her  
And will not bend to Thee;  
That I can reach for her,  
And cannot rise to Thee. (The Solitudes, p.19)

Duncan still finds this unsatisfactory as it merely links through opposition. This constructed dialogue with Christ is only to imply that God is his creator so there must be a reason for loving the woman and not God. The answer is to resurrect the position of Adam in the eyes of God:

Or is it—oh, be it so—  
That Thou made her for me  
Knowing that by loving her, I'd come to Thee  
(The Solitudes, p. 20)

Happy with this understanding Duncan allows the concluding statement which drives the poem:

For as you know, Christ how well you know,  
When only love divides,  
Nothing is divided. (The Solitudes, p. 20)

Which is all well and good, but it places the woman in the position of servant, a tool by which the written subject can reach God. She passively receives his love, and the written subject is content because he can justify this love with the understanding of spiritual love that fuels this poem as it does in 'Solitude 4'. It is a working model which allows him to explore love within the addressee on the understanding that all love is part of a higher, more pure love which cannot be fragmented in the way that lovers can be fragmented. With this secured Duncan can proceed to address the woman directly and not by the round-about means of quasi-religious arguments. This means that 'Solitude 6' is addressed to the lover indirectly because it is for her ultimate benefit (being the recipient of his resplendent love) that the argument is constructed. Or so the intention of the poem would seem to have it. Behind the verse however (and not very far behind at that), is the understanding that the written subject is seeking peace of mind. The argument is a rationalisation of an elaboration of pre-lapsarian Eden. The uniqueness of the first love triangle Adam–God–Eve, cannot properly be entertained within the complexities of the twentieth century, but Duncan perseveres with equating his morality with Christian humanism, and he is not afraid to turn directly to the Bible to gain his source material. If he can qualify the potential randomness of events to the fixity of the Biblical stories then he can validate his standpoint. To his 'essential self' he sings and it is to that essential self he must justify his actions in the world of phenomena.<sup>72</sup> The use of personal experience as the basis for an understanding of the divine is reminiscent of both Dante and Donne. In The New Life Dante is visited by a manifestation of 'Love' after his first encounter with Beatrice. Successive visitations follow, as the poems that arise from these experiences progress

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<sup>72</sup> The adoption of a creed of love which can include earthly love is taken one step further to potentially transcend Christianity itself in Duncan's verse drama Abelard and Heloise (1961). Part of the section reproduced in Selected Poems reads:

If this is not how God loves.  
It is how I love.  
I believe we are most holy  
When we become most whole.  
And if God does not love like this,  
I will make love my God. (Selected Poems, p. 85)

To become 'holy' through being 'whole' is also the philosophy expressed in 'Solitude 16'.

towards the deification of his Beatrice. In other words, experience of human virtue leads to its praise as a creation of God. The greater the creation, the closer to God it becomes. To be aware of such divine beauty elevates the observer also:

Who sees my lady with other women around  
Beholds the whole source of salvation  
And those accompanying her must be bound  
To thank God for his grace in creation.  
(‘The Sixteenth Sonnet, The New Life, p. 86)

The conceits in the poems of John Donne also strive to achieve a resolution between the earthly and the divine. Donne begins to seek this resolution through the certainty of his own subjective presence. For example, the fifth of the ‘Holy Sonnets’ begins ‘I am a little world made cunningly / of elements’ (John Donne, p. 167), but awareness of his own mortality forces him to be repentant, and to seek divine resolution:

But oh it must be burnt! alas the fire  
Of lust and envie have burnt it heretofore,  
And made it fouler; Let their flames retire,  
And burne me ô Lord, with fiery zeale  
Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heale.  
(John Donne, p. 168)

Of the remaining 21 Solitudes only three, ‘Solitude 15’, ‘Solitude 19’ and ‘Solitude 27’ are not addressed directly to the lover, and only ‘Solitude 27’, the last poem in the sequence does not concern itself directly with another. The rest explore varying aspects of love so as to qualify and quantify emotional response, via rational consciousness and the understanding of pure love. The themes of these poems can be mapped as follows:

‘Solitude 7’: Wife gives written subject freedom by not demanding.

‘Solitude 8’: Lover gives written subject his ‘self’.

‘Solitude 9’: Lover effects written subject to the extent that she becomes apparent upon his external self (his face).

‘Solitude 10’: Written subject asks the woman to be cruel to him. To love him wholly would be to make him ‘whole’.

‘Solitude 11’: Written subject reasons as to why they should enjoy the day.

- 'Solitude 12': Written subject tells lover *how* he loves her.
- 'Solitude 13': Unification of lover and written subject through love.
- 'Solitude 14': Unification of lover and written subject through a higher love.
- 'Solitude 16': Explains to the lover that by loving him wholly she shall become divine.
- 'Solitude 17': Written subject exclaims how adultery does not alter their unity. The lover is the adulterer. The language is that extravagant, colloquial pomposity of 'Solitude 2'.
- 'Solitude 18': Written subject addresses the lover and reflects upon the encompassing strength of his love which he tells her to flaunt.
- 'Solitude 20': Written subject demands derision as a means to lessen his love.
- 'Solitude 21': Proclamation of written subject's eternal love as it exists for her and within him and now within verse.<sup>73</sup>
- 'Solitude 22': Exploration of love as a learned or innate thing.
- 'Solitude 23': Proclamation of total love because the written subject loves those aspects which are attractive *and* unattractive in the lover.
- 'Solitude 24': Alone, but with the memory traces of the lover rather than his own desires which would be external to their love.
- 'Solitude 25': Effect on the written subject of material object effected by the lover.
- 'Solitude 26': Desire for intensity and not gentleness.

'Solitude 15' observes the woman sleeping, and 'Solitude 19' explores the written subject's response to jealousy. 'Solitude 27' reflects on the nature of writing and draws a circle around the Solitude sequence. Analysing the poems in this way reveals the variety of angles Duncan uses to approach the complexities of love, where the love felt by the self is contingent upon a separate individual.

Consequently they can be grouped according to how Duncan approaches the particular lover he is writing to and about. The first grouping could bring together all poems which address the lover but maintain a separateness between the two lovers: 7, 8, 11, 20, 21, 22 and 26. The second group would specify the unity of the lovers, where their love has them inextricably linked to the degree that they are no longer separate entities: 10, 13, 14, 16, 17 and 23. The third group would have the written subject relating the effect the lover has upon him: 9, 18, 24 and 25, with 24 and 25 coping with the absolute loss of the lover. The last group would be that which explains conditions of love from the written subject's perspective and as such are not poems that necessarily require the specificity of

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<sup>73</sup>The importance of the poem as the means of immortalising love and the lover has its echo in Shakespeare's Eighteenth Sonnet:

So long as men can breath or eyes can see  
so long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (Shakespeare's Sonnets, p. 19)



the addressee for them to operate: 15 and 19.<sup>74</sup> Examples from each group will serve to show how 'The Solitudes' sequence develops.

'Solitude 7' and 'Solitude 8' are of interest to the sequence as a whole because they portray the division of the love object, indicating that the prime addressee is part of an extra-marital relationship. 'Solitude 7' is addressed to his wife, and her inclusion within the love sequence qualifies the claim in 'Solitude 6' that love is not divisible and can be experienced equally for any number of love objects. The progression originates in the desire for pure love in 'Solitude 4' through the workings of 'Solitude 6' to an addressee, the wife, in 'Solitude 7', where the written subject explains to his wife that it is her position as *wife* that allows him to be adulterous. The poem does not directly engage with love, but seen in the context of the previous poem, makes provision for the addressee to realise that his love for another does not diminish his love for her.

The poem is divided into two stanzas of five lines each. The first stanza explains the working of the natural world and the interdependence of things:

As wet lilac bruised with scent  
Leans on the air indolent  
And allows the wind to break  
And permits the sun to slake  
Its fierce thirst and quietus make (The Solitudes, p. 21)

and the second stanza applies these 'natural' conclusions to the written subject's marriage to the addressee and to his adultery:

So you, my love, allow  
And give, and add to it your vows  
But do not seek a pledge from me.  
Your vows give me my liberty,  
Your eyes describe my tyranny. (The Solitudes, p.21)

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<sup>74</sup> Other ways of grouping the poems are no doubt possible, but the groupings I have made have been on the basis that they reflect the underlying considerations of 'The Solitudes' as a love sequence project. It is within Duncan's responses to these grouped conditions that the poetry portrays his love.

What is 'unnatural' are the 'vows' of marriage which are 'added', notably the woman's vow to 'obey'. This is a condition beyond love, and Duncan disputes it as not being part of the natural order. To obey is a social imposition which enables the husband to 'take liberties' so long as he maintains his love for his wife. What the husband has to confront as a consequence of this liberty is the feeling of wrong-doing, the breaking of the old testament Commandment (another imposition) and the hurt that this liberty incurs. The written subject denies responsibility for his actions, claiming them to be in accordance with his stated idea of love as an equally reproducible quality, and regretting only that his wife must suffer as the agent of a social construct which works against the natural order.

The first stanza of 'Solitude 7' has a seven syllable count, the first two lines of the second stanza, six, and the last three lines, eight. Again, the dense patterning of sound, such as in the rhymes 'allow', 'vow' and 'me', 'liberty' and 'tyranny'; together with assonance in 'Your vows', 'your eyes describe' 'my tyranny'; and the consonance of 'love allow' and 'me my', add weight and measure to Duncan's argument. The AABBB / CCDDD rhyme scheme enhances the relentlessness of the poem and echoes the tyrannous control described in the concluding line. In this way Duncan is able to validate the poem's accuracy, even though he portrays himself as irrevocably flawed, trapped as he is by the paradoxical forces of freedom and constraint.

The natural images of the first stanza are deliberately romantic. Duncan creates two gender distinct images: the lilac (female) and the sun (male) with the presence of the lilac as natural object allowing the forces of wind (invisible action) and sun (male action) to be apparent. The sun drinks from the 'wetness' of the lilac, drinking the dew, personifying the evaporation process as the aggressive 'fierce' action of the sun. The poem is therefore saying that a man fulfils himself by taking from the natural, feminine object which remains passive while her presence is recognisable in and because of the effect of the male action she allows to happen. If she actively encourages the fulfilment of

male passion then it is the perfume, an attracting scent that signposts her accessibility.

'Solitude 8' may also be addressed to the wife because the theme of given liberty is expressed in the broken last line:

So now I can give you this,  
the self you give to me.  
(The Solitudes, p. 22)

'The self you give to me' is a gift presented through the humility of the addressee. Beginning with the point of writing 'You asked me to write a poem' (p. 22) Duncan explains why he is writing, first from the addressee's position, and then from his own. She, the addressee, according to the written subject, asks him to write her a poem. In doing this, she is able to give something to him. This something is revealed as the 'self' which he has lost without realising it:

You do not offer me yourself, but myself  
Knowing that is what I have lost . . . (The Solitudes, p. 22)

What he can offer her in return is this self which she has allowed him to recover through the process of writing. The writing subject is apparent through his appearance as the written subject, and it is within writing that the written subject can become whole, if 'self' means whole. What is happening in the poem is the subjectivity of the written subject appears in both the writing and the addressee. Without the writing he cannot become manifest, and without the addressee he would not have noticed his incompleteness and so could not have recovered himself through writing. The result is that because the written subject has been returned to the writing subject, the writing subject can give the addressee himself, within a poem, as written subject, but in good faith and undisguised. The poem is then a profession of honesty through poetry. Poetry is the writing of the real in the language of the artificial. Through the artificiality of verse can the real be accessed, regardless of grandeur:

It does not matter where I look  
at the petals of lilac falling to the grateful lawn;  
at the tractor trailer burdened with its load of dung;  
at her, or her or even you . . . it does not matter,  
Anything which lives is poetry. (The Solitudes, p. 22)

The 'even you' has the addressee as the least likely to contain poetry, it is the last of all examples, after the trailer of dung and the two other women to emphasise how poetry can be found in all things, providing there is the poet to make it so. This unflattering reference to the addressee stems from her humility, and it is through this that the written subject is able to discover himself, his 'essential self'. It is more than unfortunate for Duncan that he has placed women after a trailer load of dung in the hierarchy of poetic potential, and even though he recovers the position a little by saying there is poetry in all things, an order has been constructed where women are positioned one line lower than the lowest of the low.

This first group of poems then concentrates on a single lover, and their unity is not joined, because, as stressed in 'Solitude 11', their love is new and the message is to enjoy it against the flow of time (*carpe diem*) and the thinking of the structured world that 'conspires / To wreck, ruin and upset' (p. 24)

Yet now that we love  
restrain all tears, just laugh;  
Let joy be our purpose  
a smile, our epitaph. (The Solitudes, p. 24)

But within this poem is the suggestion that their love will not go on for ever, and 'Solitude 20', 'Solitude 21' and 'Solitude 22' all tackle the problem of the addressee having moved on to a new lover. Duncan has to deal with this betrayal directly, because of the nature of the love he has constructed and fixed within the relationship.

'Solitude 20' has the written subject demanding that the lover treat him as terribly as she can by doing and saying everything she can against all that he holds dear: his poetry, their togetherness, her fidelity, his money, his pride, his

sanity, his gifts, her beauty. By doing these things she may break his love for her. But the concluding verse, typically for Duncan, reverses these drastic measures by stating that, apart from her ageing (which would happen anyway) they have already been done and still his love is strong:

Do these things which time will do to you—  
For all the rest you've done  
Yet I still love, as I have loved before  
It's not enough?  
Find more! Find more! (The Solitudes, p. 35)

Duncan has to confront the problem that the message of 'Solitude 14', 'we are in that state / In which there is no predicate or object. / Those who are separate / love at lower rate' (p.26), is not eternal, and however strong the unity may be felt, and however determined and pure his love may be, when the object of his desire succumbs to being the object of another's desire the bond is broken. This is because the security of Duncan's love exists within a conscious construction of his own making. The conceits which run throughout 'The Solitudes' are a means by which Duncan can re-construct love and the relationships under his own conditions. This is possible when the addressee is open to such appropriation, either as a figure unaware of the poet's love, or as a lover, but when the lover is no longer faithful then an unknowable element is brought into the equation, resisting appropriation because the addressee is no longer attentive to Duncan's constructions. Duncan attempts to appropriate the addressee's lover in 'Solitude 17':

All he could be at his poor best  
Would be to be deputy, understudy,  
Plagiarising my hands, aping my eyes, parodying my lips,  
And it's you who'll cast him as this stand in  
To watch him try what I alone perform. (The Solitudes, p. 28)

By having already loved the addressee the written subject claims that it will be *his* love on her mind. The new lover will be compared to the written subject

and, in comparison, fail. This overt authoritative arrogance is played down, however, by the conceit of the theatre, and yet is underlined by the claim that the addressee's infidelity merely strengthens his 'essential self':

. . . I have reached that point, philosophically,  
Where I perceive all lovers only labour and perform for me;  
Extended thus, spiritually,  
Insulated so, emotionally, I achieve  
Both the ease you denied me  
And the anonymity that is yours. (The Solitudes, p. 29)

This poem is the warped conclusion of the group of poems which unify both the subject and his object of desire. It highlights the trap of a sublimation that requires a specific person for it to have meaning. To betray that person passes absolute control to that person:

The more you run from me,  
The more you run to me,  
What you become, I am. (The Solitudes, p. 28)

This is a far cry from the lyric gentleness of 'Solitude 15' where the written subject lies with his lover as she sleeps, entwining their condition with sexually charged images from nature:

Her moss of sleep upon the bark of night,  
Her surf of dreams upon the tide of rest (The Solitudes, p.26)

as it is from the plea which concludes 'Solitude 16':

*believe*

In my gentleness; forgive me for this,  
Forgive me for that. Contain my disparities;  
Accept my extremities. Oh love me wholly, so  
Holy shall you

*become* (The Solitudes, p.27)

When Duncan accepts and confronts the loss of the lover he is able to regroup his feelings of love and locate them in his solitary consciousness, as in 'Solitude 24':

So now I wrap myself  
    within this loneliness  
Preferring this fact and its cause  
    because it is yours  
to any dream that was mine. (The Solitudes, p. 44)

The love for the addressee continues within the written subject; it is controlled and although painful, accessible. He can still address the lover in poetic construction as it is through poetry that the construction of love itself is made manifest. Even the phenomenal world can be approached in poetry where it is difficult in reality:

And slowly I am making my peace  
    with your garden.  
I see your bulbs now like fingers through the weeds  
They make me sad, but it is a sadness I am learning to accept.  
    ('Solitude 25', The Solitudes, p. 45)

Eventually, exhausted by the rationalisation of love through writing, Duncan reflects upon the difficulties of writing and the effort of recording emotion. This is the content of the last Solitude, 'Solitude 27'. It is a simple haiku-like poem which perseveres as a conceit and reflects the religious imagery of earlier poems:

Words are a net;  
Feeling, the water escapes through the meshes  
I fish for silence. (The Solitudes, p. 47)

Duncan persists as writing subject, and his written subject must suffer the pain of presence within the writing. The inability of words to 'net' emotion can only leave the written subject seeking emotion outside of language, a place where he will have no part.

The sequence concludes with the writing subject still participating within language as written subject 'I fish', but aware that his poetry is doomed to failure. As Colin Wilson (1974) says, when talking of the same poem in his essay 'The Genius of Ronald Duncan' in A Tribute to Ronald Duncan, Harton, The Harton Press, (pp. 76 - 95), which examines Duncan's career in terms of the individuality of his authorship:

The poet is always aware that, in spite of the torments he suffers, a detached part of himself looks on and records, using the pain to galvanise himself into new insights.

(A Tribute To Ronald Duncan, p.89)

But at the end of The Solitudes no new insight seems possible, though the pursuit of the self in poetry remains.

When considered as a love poem sequence 'The Solitudes' goes further than the desire expressed in a single, isolated poem such as Keats' sonnet 'Bright Star' (1820) that Keats wrote inside his volume of Shakespeare's Sonnets, and where he wished to either capture forever a perfect moment with his lover, beneath the north star, 'or else swoon to death'. Duncan's poems sustain a concentrated love theme, exploring the power of love to transcend the trappings of socially constructed notions of love, while at the same time engaging in the difficulties of emotional and physical relationships. His attempt to understand and explain in verse this problematic, forces him to mediate his sexual relations and the abstractions that accompany them within his rationalising consciousness.

There are two central devices which Duncan uses in 'The Solitudes' to express this procedure: Firstly, the sustained use of conceits which frame and organise the particular aspects of love approached by the poems; 'How leaf we are' (p. 18), 'As wet lilac bruised with scent' (p. 21), 'Be like a chrysalis contained by my fingers' (p. 30), and if not conceits, then metaphors drawn from nature that parallel how he wished his love relationships to be; 'As thrush, lark and linnet are / So do my eyes rise' (p. 27), 'Our leaf of love upon the tree of time' (p.



26) and 'I love you as a tiger loves its prey' (p. 24). These devices help Duncan to quantify and qualify his love relations, offering a pre-organised framework within which aberrant facets of love, such as randomness and individuality, may be controlled. This device is supported by Duncan's second technique which is to bring the poems to a formal resolution, thus sealing his observations in a hermetic structure purporting to 'truth': 'Oh love me wholly, so / Holy shall you / *become*' (p. 27), 'Those who are separate / love at lower rate' (p. 26) and 'So now I can give you this, / the self you give to me' (p. 22). The resolution is made by sound patterning or, as in the last example, a neat reversal of sense. In this way, what seems arbitrary becomes meaningful. The patterning of the poem then strengthens his argument.

The central difference between Duncan's sequence and other love sequences is that Duncan appropriates his addressees. It is ownership-by-consciousness, where Duncan reshapes the world via his understanding, either of how it is or how it should be. Dante's The New Life (1964), for example, never denies Beatrice her own existence. Contrariwise, Duncan's love is fallen, extra-marital and divided. It is the antithesis of Dante's love which is not physical and can be portrayed as a means of spiritual growth:

To every captive soul and gentle heart abroad  
Who for this present verse has eyes,  
That they may send me their replies,  
Greeting in the name of Love, their lord. (The New Life, p. 41)

Dante later qualifies his personification of love, calling love a quality and not a physical being (p. 82), but by making the distinction he shows that love is a state of being brought into the subject and as such is already 'whole'. For Duncan, love is a tool by which two people can be unified. Love serves the function of unification where the potential disparity of the other may be harmonised with the potential disparity of the subject. The strength of love is such that all subjective considerations are turned to the other as if the subject can no longer *be* without the other's reciprocal presence:

Dearest, it is no longer true  
For me to say I love you  
Or that I desire you, though that was true  
A day or two ago, before you took me to yourself  
And from an individuality  
Made one identity  
To which we each are part and now belong.  
(‘Solitude 14’, The Solitudes, p. 26)

Such unification, the other only being in the presence of the subject, contradicts what Duncan says of love to Wahl (1973, pp. 30-31), namely that loving should be a letting go, a giving of freedom to the loved one, but conforms to his dictum that love is a thing achieved through ‘conscious effort’. For Dante, on the other hand, Love is always the counter-point to reason and therefore he does not have the need to concern himself with the practical considerations Duncan requires in order to rationally justify his actions. The absence of rationalised love is why Dante provides a critical commentary to the poems in The New Life. The commentary, which frames the poems within a narrative, explains their construction, and qualifies his use of imagery, and is the workings of his rational mind upon the poetical presentation of the irrational, emotional operations of his heart.

Against this procedure Duncan can be seen as producing a series of poems in which he engages with love, but, where Dante succumbs to love, Duncan subsumes it, putting it to work for his own end through sophisticated and rationalised arguments.

Finally, there are seven additional poems that follow the ‘The Solitudes’ sequence. Of these, the most significant are probably ‘Snapshot’ and ‘Strophe [sic.] and Anti-Strophe [sic.] at Bakerloo’.<sup>75</sup> Of the others, one is the libretto for a choral piece sung, we are told ‘at the wedding of the Earl and Countess of Harewood’ (p. 59) with music by Benjamin Britten, entitled ‘Amo Ergo Sum’ (p. 58); another, ‘The Crone’s Lament’ is a return to Duncan’s use of translation such as he had

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<sup>75</sup> This title is certainly a printing error and should read ‘Strophe and Anti-Strophe at Bakerloo’, which is how the poem is titled in Collected Poems and is how Eliot refers to it in his letters on the subject. From here on I will refer to this poem as ‘Strophe and Anti-Strophe’.

done in The Mongrel, and tells of the sexual desire of an old woman who wants to be an orange tree so her fruit would always be luscious year after year. Her sexual fantasy becomes comic as she wishes for a suitor in the form of a banana tree.

A third poem, 'The Need', is addressed to Duncan's wife Rose Marie, where Duncan offers her his 'need' as a fortieth birthday present and a fifth poem, 'Air Raid' (p. 54), reflects on the personal loss of war as evoked by a bombed-out house. The four couplets of 'Impromptu for a Child' (p. 57) extol the virtues of an ordered farming life where nature has dominion.

'Snapshot' (p.53) portrays Duncan as a poet observing the impotence of village life. He passes through the village, not belonging, but able to assimilate what he sees within his poetic understanding while those he observes remain oblivious to their condition. Instead they pursue petty concerns which leave them in the negative state of 'not reading', 'not hoping', 'not knowing' and 'not seeing'<sup>76</sup>. Duncan, as poet, must also suffer a negative position, that of 'not

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<sup>76</sup> The fourth couplet in the poem and its coda is an extension of Duncan's disillusionment with the working classes, a disillusionment which stemmed from his experience when working in a coal mine in the Rhondda Valley. The couplet runs as follows:

A labourer pushes his bicycle up the hill  
Passing beneath the copper pavilion of beech;  
not seeing. (The Solitudes, p. 53)

The choice of the labourer returning from work and the 'uphill' struggle he faces against exploitation is made all the more difficult because of his inability to see, only to do. Duncan adumbrates the working class from his own experience of them, examining only the fixed condition of their consciousness in relation to his own. He reveals this to William Wahl:

When I'd gone out to the coal mine I became absolutely embittered because I would see that the men were being incredibly exploited. Our wage was 50 shillings a week pay, eight hours a day, and 30 a week rent. The mine owned the house, it owned the pub, it owned the bus, it owned everything. So that most of our pay went back to the mine anyhow. And the miners seemed unable to see this, unwilling to see it—didn't want to see it so long as they had their pint of beer and made very very indifferent love to their women — the women all tired, bored, gray; the whole thing gray, gray. Utterly — gray. And I felt I was running my head at the thickest brick wall that one could . . . that was the beginning of my disillusionment.

('Ronald Duncan: Verse Dramatist and Poet' in Poetic Drama, No. 20, Salzburg, University of Salzburg, p. 77).

Other conditions, such as dependency upon the industry, limits of education, the requirement to earn money to live, all seem to escape Duncan, as does his own position as 'outsider', which he is happy to adopt in the poem. To condemn a coal-mining town for 'grayness' is to condemn it for succumbing to its function and the properties of its mining product. It will actually be gray but the grayness of the people is indicative of the activity and, as he points out, the exploitation, rather than an innate quality of the working classes. In spite of exploitation, perhaps a recognised condition of labour, the people are expected to be sparky, inventive and colourful in themselves so as to appease Duncan and prevent him from totalising their condition and that of the ignorant masses whose stupidity prevents them from living up to an upper-middle class

belonging'. It is a paradox. On the one hand the world he sees is naive, feeble and blind, and so uninviting, and on the other hand it offers companionship, a sense of 'belonging'. At best the poet 'possesses' the people he sees, containing them within the poem, having them under his absolute control. If this view of the poet is placed upon 'The Solitudes' the absorption of the addressee through writing is made clearer still, and if the writing is an explanation of actual activity, then it serves to encapsulate the addressee and to define the conditions of love by which they live.

'Strophe and Anti-Strophe at Bakerloo' is an expression of dissatisfaction with post-war urban Britain where the individual is effaced and becomes part of the dehumanised mechanism of the city. This is represented by the Underground, the paradigm of a functionalist modernist aesthetic, designed to move thousands of people easily through London, with each person knowing where they are by identifying colours and lines and not places. For Duncan, the simplicity of the system blends with the lifelessness of the people who use it, making their passage the movement of the un-dead, a post apocalyptic descent into Hades:<sup>77</sup>

I walk on tired tethered feet  
and with a sad persistent tread  
Follow the crowds of the unburied dead  
Into the Tube's anatomy  
As it devours me  
into the soiled sweat and heat  
Till I'm digested as soiled meat  
and packed within its bowels I'm led  
Through busy labyrinths of the dead. (The Solitudes, p. 55)

This poem strongly alludes to 'The Waste Land', it is Eliot's vision:

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.

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ideal.

<sup>77</sup> Revelations, Ch 9, V 6: 'And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.'

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
(Collected Poems 1909-1962, p.65)

carrying the same sense of measured monotony with the heavy down beat repetitions of 'tread', 'dead' 'led' and 'sweat', 'heat' and 'meat' as Eliot produces with 'brown', 'dawn', 'London', 'undone' and 'thought' and 'short'. But it is also Larkin's perspective on the blandness of the everyday, of cellophane wrapped sandwiches and people in the parks at lunch hour, sitting on their jackets. In the final verse of 'Strophe and Anti-Strophe':

And on a bench a couple lie quite dead,  
I lift my hat. The lovers move. It was ecstasy instead. . . .  
(The Solitudes, p. 56)

The counterpoint to this bleak vision of post-war Britain is to be gleaned from the harvesting of the land. Duncan uses farming as the paradigm for harmonious living where each replenishes the other:

Oh! whose hand can hold the spade  
And sow our eyes into each others hearts again  
till the ghost we are, is laid? (The Solitudes, p.56)

To this question no solution is offered, the question is raised through 'the vision of the blind' (p. 56) and with it the recognition that transformation must come from one who has true vision. It is not him. He concludes the poem by observing in others that which has been so precious to him in 'The Solitudes':

. . . compare  
Love with death and there  
is little difference as they creep  
Into the grave or bed of sleep. (The Solitudes, p. 56)

It would be fair to say that Duncan's love sequence 'The Solitudes' inverts the euphoria of love for another by conditioning what love is and how the love

object should behave. 'Go dressed in my hands, my desire the designer' he says in 'Solitude 18', qualifying the strength of his love by having the love object present it to the world: 'Let the rude world stare at this robe you wear'. The woman is removed from her pedestal to be a mannequin for his love, and by so being, the bond between the lovers is strengthened and the world beyond is alienated.

As with other love poem sequences Duncan wishes to show his love for the other, a presumed reader who is aware of their situation. As mentioned earlier, Duncan avoids the problem of multiple addressees by making himself the central recipient of the poems. 'The Solitudes' seeks to unite the lovers through verse, and further still, posits that the lovers are inextricably linked as the purity of his love can divide without being diminution. As with Shakespeare, Dante and Donne, the addressee is a mortal being. Like his predecessors Duncan seeks to explore the nature of moral love and the frailties of human nature, and to proclaim that however separate the poet and the addressees may be, the poetry will always bind them together.

Christian imagery is used to emphasise the earthly reality of his love by means of contrast. To aspire to a divine love is to aspire to an immortal love. And yet such a desire is always complicated by the real actions of individuals. Verse can control and order the effects love has on the poet, but the addressee retains her position outside the poetry. She is, as Shakespeare observes, in essence, beyond language:

There lives more life in one of your fair eyes  
Than both your poets can in praise devise  
(*'Sonnet 83', The Sonnets, p.72*)

However, Duncan demands more from his poetry. 'The Solitudes' becomes the articulation of the unbreakable bond between himself and the addressee. The poems *become* the bond between them:

And now I have lain you in this verse



## Chapter Three

### Unpopular Poems: Deep within the Subject

While Unpopular Poems, published by Hart-Davis in 1969, continues the themes and forms of his earlier poetic works it is a book that Duncan produced at a time when he was working on his epic project, Man. With this in mind, Unpopular Poems can be regarded as a book that attempts to sustain his previous poetic while he was working towards the invention of a new style. As if to confirm this, Unpopular Poems is not filled with poems penned around the time of publication, but presents work that dates back over the preceding four decades.<sup>78</sup> The reasons as to why this is, together with an investigation into Duncan's use of the personal within Unpopular Poems form the argument of this chapter. This will reveal the extent to which Duncan produces objective truths that transcend the subjectivity of the individual condition.

Like The Solitudes, Unpopular Poems is divided into two sections, the first consisting of twenty new 'Solitudes', and the second comprising songs, libretti and poems, many with an overt Christian theme. Unpopular Poems differs from The Solitudes and The Mongrel in that its tone is more despondent. In those earlier works, there had been hope for the possible reunification of people and land; the belief in a cultural renaissance and the belief that love could transcend the autonomy of individuals. Unpopular Poems replaces these optimistic ideals with introspection, self-doubt and loss. The last poem in the 'Solitudes' sequence typifies this disillusionment:

Oblivion as a writer,

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<sup>78</sup>The Ballad of Stratton Gaol' is dated as 1943, while according to Duncan's Collected Poems, 'Plain Song' was written in 1938. It has already been noted that the chronology of Collected Poems is far from accurate, no doubt due to the fact that Duncan rarely dated his manuscripts. However, as it was compiled and edited by Duncan's secretary, Miranda Weston-Smith, it is fair to assume that the dates cited are roughly accurate.



Death as a man;  
This is your future:  
Escape it, if you can. (Unpopular Poems, p. 18)

The stark self-identification of this unwordy, pessimistic rhyming quatrain expresses Duncan's shattered literary and personal beliefs. Although he was not in literary oblivion, his reputation as a playwright had failed to develop and his poetry had rarely found the approval of reviewers.<sup>79</sup> His private life was equally bleak. Virginia Maskell had ended their love affair, and was soon married with children. Then, on 1st February 1968, she committed suicide.<sup>80</sup> Although many of the poems in Unpopular Poems were written before her death, the despairing tone and the need to reach an understanding of the tragedy clearly affected the way Duncan chose the poems for the collection. 'Envoi', for example, which closed the book and which is recorded as having been written in 1969, encapsulates Duncan's sense of despair:

The purpose of life  
is to increase awareness, sensitivity.  
It follows that the meaning of life  
is to suffer, first in oneself,  
Then for the other.  
The meaning of life is to suffer. (Unpopular Poems, p. 53)

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<sup>79</sup>For example, a double edged review of The Solitudes by Howard Griffin in The Times Literary Supplement, 8th, July 1960, describes the book as a 'self-contained work of art' that is marred by the inclusion of the seven poems that come after the 'Solitudes' sequence. This reserved compliment is undermined: 'Mr Duncan confuses stridency with eloquence and rhetoric with passion; also he confuses love with lust.' And a review of The Solitudes in Time & Tide, 30th July 1960, concludes:

The blend of all these influences, especially with a bit of Mr Duncan's precision of phrasing and passionate intensity thrown in for good measure, boil down to a perfect example of how to write bad modern verse. Of the seven other poems in this volume, all I can say is that they do not seem to me as good as *The Solitudes*.

Duncan is far from confusing love with lust, however, as he is at pains to reveal their interconnectedness in reaching an holistic understanding of love itself. This will be shown later in the chapter when examining Duncan's use of Christ as a figure torn between the earthly and the spiritual.

<sup>80</sup>Having overdosed she went to a wood where she and Duncan used to go together. When she was found she was suffering from hypothermia and died soon after. Duncan always felt that had he known she was missing he would have known where to find her.

It is possible to see how the complex affair between Duncan and Maskell provides the link between the argument of the first two lines of the poem and the concluding four. The desire to achieve through love 'awareness and sensitivity' ended tragically with death, suffering and solitude. Crucially, however, the suffering is not the torment that drove Maskell to suicide, but the suffering Duncan feels at the loss. This is the key to Unpopular Poems for it highlights the self as the victim of external events. This position is then scrutinised by Duncan so he may understand his relationship, conscious and emotional, to what has been imposed upon him.

Two facts then emerge from the term 'unpopular'. Firstly the poems in the collection are so labelled because of their overtly subjective intention. Secondly because Duncan's sense of rejection and isolation means that he can predict no other future for them than to be unpopular. These two aspects are then tied to a third: namely that Duncan is driven by the need to articulate his circumstances through poetry, regardless of how they are to be received. It is therefore, only at the point at which the poems are perceived as being for a public audience that they are defined by Duncan as unpopular. Privately, the poems assimilate the complexities of emotional response and self evaluation, within the rational and imaginative processes of the mind. It is in this space that Duncan attempts a synthesis between the external world and the effect it has upon him. The result with regard to the poetry itself is on one level akin to Dante's The New Life, where external stimuli create an emotive response which is then celebrated through poetry. However, Duncan does not follow Dante in providing a commentary that helps to differentiate these processes. Instead the poetry contains the process of rationalisation, and indeed fixes its response according to what Duncan's rationality wishes to portray. The poetry becomes visibly determined by the circumstances of its being, while the emotive response, which is present in Dante, is suppressed by Duncan's consciously rationalising the event in order to present an holistic response.

This, as we shall see, is different from producing poetry of impersonality, rather it produces a rationalisation of Duncan's response to specific stimuli.

A typical example of how this works can be seen in 'Solitude No. 13' which focuses on the response of Duncan as subject to the physically absent addressee who, as the poem concludes, exists not in the world, but in his mind:

With silent wings  
I circle round your silence;  
On timeless feet  
I walk towards your absence;  
Behind closed eyes  
I look upon your presence. (Unpopular Poems, p. 15)

The triple rhyme at lines 2, 4, and 6 are conditional nouns for the addressee. The addressee is then responded to by the 'I' which begins each of these lines. In other words, it is action of the 'I' who circles, walks and looks upon the addressee that is active, while she herself is persistently conditioned by her proximity to Duncan as written subject.

The 'Solitudes' sequence in Unpopular Poems reveals a man desperate to find an explanation for the failure of his desire to sustain and rationalise concurrent relationships with several women. It is a sequence that explores the complex emotions of loneliness. We shall investigate the 'Solitudes' before looking at the other poems in the collection.

The sequence opens with a declaration that love had come to disturb his serenity, his habitual and moral life. It is a poem in which the main theme and central perspective of the sequence is laid down. Duncan, quietly going about his ordinary business, falls victim to the effects of life, which manifests itself as wild and dangerous natural forces, against which he sees the only defence as succumbing to them:

Love like a storm breaks,  
uproots my serenity.  
No limb of me can withstand

gale of your being  
On the precipice of your eyes,  
I cling to habit,  
Clutch at tufts of morality,  
but all's lost, all blown away  
By blizzard of your gentleness;  
Seeking to save myself I cry:  
'Oh, love, destroy me utterly.' (Unpopular Poems, p. 9)

The opening line, an intensified version of the opening line to 'Canzone' in The Mongrel: 'Love like a dog barks' (p. 20), begins the protracted simile of love being akin to forces of nature. The poem presents Duncan as a man in danger, unable to save himself: 'all's lost'.

To be destroyed by love is to position himself as the victim of love. His responses to this powerful force are then his attempt to reassert himself against the uncontrollable. Duncan, as victim, is centred within the poem, and in the sequence as a whole. These 'Solitudes' are poems that explore how Duncan struggles with forces beyond his control. This is similarly apparent in the next poem in the sequence:

If they should ask where he found beauty  
say: 'in my lips, hair, mouth and eyes,  
-easily in my eyes.' Then stare at them  
so as to silence them. (Unpopular Poems, p. 9)

While the poem appears to make the addressee the central subject of the poem by having her the one under scrutiny, her presence is eclipsed by Duncan's own. This occurs in two ways. Firstly, the 'they' are enquiring after the place where he (Duncan) found beauty, and not seeking any inherent beauty the addressee might have. Secondly, Duncan tells the addressee where that beauty can be found. The defiance of 'Then stare at them / so as to silence them' may well confirm the addressee's beauty, but more than that it confirms Duncan's own discovery of it. The beauty of the woman then vindicates Duncan's aesthetic. And the emphasis on Duncan's position is already in place in that 'they' are seeking the beauty Duncan found.

Therefore, what seems to be a compliment to the addressee is in truth a means of self-defence for Duncan against the unnamed 'they'.

This position makes no claims for universality. It, and the representation of Duncan as subject in the poems which follow, dramatise the individual in conflict with the external world. This may be a shared experience, but there is no suggestion that Duncan wishes it to be seen as such. The 'Solitudes' then oscillate between solitude and loneliness. Loneliness being a state that needs placating, while solitude affords a time for mental contemplation. The need to placate loneliness is the theme of the epigrammatic 'No. 15':

Loneliness is our thirst.  
Other people's loneliness:  
the only water to quench it. (Unpopular Poems, p. 16)

Whereas Solitude 'No. 17' shows contentment in solitude in a way that bends strongly towards the pastoral tradition:

Lobes of mauve lilac  
Lie indolent on the evening air;  
Waxed white magnolia, children's hands in prayer;  
And over the wall aubretia sprawls  
For bees to paddle in its waterfall;  
And all about my grazing eyes  
A green world in innocence lies.  
Grateful for my solitude I keep  
Company with my thoughts, and fall asleep.  
(Unpopular Poems, p. 17)

Pastoral images of harmonious nature, rhyming couplets and the long syllabic endings of the lines keep a measure to the poem. Duncan, comfortable in his idyll, can sleep easily. Solitude is only the absence of other people. Duncan is not alone. His thoughts are his company in a world of unconscious nature. It is significant that Duncan is comfortable with his thoughts, while, as other poems contest, human stimuli create mental anguish. Thoughts, consciousness and self-awareness, are presented as a

means by which one can gain self-fulfilment. By keeping company with his thoughts, Duncan is, therefore, not idle in his contemplation. The next poem in the sequence helps to reinforce this belief:

Neither health nor happiness  
Are as precious as consciousness.  
It is better to be conscious of pain or misery  
Than unconscious in pleasure. (Unpopular Poems, p. 17)

In his essay 'The Genius of Ronald Duncan' which forms part of the festschrift A Tribute to Ronald Duncan, Colin Wilson praises Duncan for 'his capacity to use weakness or self-indulgence as a springboard for pure impersonality.'<sup>81</sup> . What Wilson is alluding to is the persistent presence of a written subject in Duncan's poetry through which personal experience is offered some form of resolution, usually by means of a concluding line or couplet. This makes each poem a self-contained unit of conscious thought, and the poetic devices Duncan uses enable him to communicate it. In this way, the 'Solitudes' in Unpopular Poems, do not so much form a sequence, as a series of poems with a common theme.

The titles The Solitudes (1960), All Men are Islands (1964), How To Make Enemies (1968), For The Few (1977), and, of course, Unpopular Poems (1969), all testify to the need for standing aside from the crowd, to reject acceptance by the main stream and to receive acclaim for following his own unique work regardless of its popularity. The uniqueness of writing, therefore, is dependent upon the uniqueness of the individual, so if Duncan's own poetry is to be valuable then he must be outside of collective thinking and writing. At the same time, the titles of these works promote a self-dramatisation of Duncan as the non-conformist writer. It is a representation that is borne out in the poetry by the persistent use of the experiencing 'I'. The experience, the writing of the experience and its

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<sup>81</sup>Wilson, C (1974) 'The Genius of Ronald Duncan' in Lockyear, H (ed.) (1974) A Tribute to Ronald Duncan, Hartland, The Harton Press, p. 78.

subsequent publication, synthesize into a perspective that sets itself apart from all influence, even though, as we have seen, influences, especially literary influences, are extremely strong in Duncan's work. But while it is clear that Duncan is not writing in a vacuum, his use of previous writings is of much less importance than the use to which he puts them. In other words, Duncan borrows and pastiches to strengthen the *difference* between himself and the poets he takes from. Again, Duncan can be seen to establish his own consciousness at the centre of the poetry. Whether Duncan is able, as Wilson suggests, to achieve an impersonality from a position that is consistently personal is therefore questionable as the 'I' of 'To my essential self I sing', which is used in the first 'Solitudes' sequence to counteract the problem of multiple addressees, has become the over-riding central locus of the poetry.

The self that suffers as a victim of the attention of lovers and the personification of love and loneliness is played out in the poem which appears immediately after the 'Solitudes' sequence, 'The Mistress'. This poem can be used to understand the division between the self and the other in the 'Solitudes' sequence itself:

She possesses me completely;  
I am at her mercy: she has no mercy.  
One moment, she lies quiet as milk  
    the next, she flings the night or my work in my face.  
Sometimes, she encourages me and flatters me,  
    at others, she scratches till I bleed with remorse,  
Her moods are mercurial.  
    She is all extremes, entirely inconsistent.  
I live alone, only to discover  
    Loneliness is just another woman. (p. 19)

The personification of loneliness as 'just another woman', exposes an ironic disillusionment. As Duncan would have it, to love a woman leads to loneliness which is itself a woman. In the poem Duncan sets a trap of escaping from one jail to another and he springs it upon himself.<sup>82</sup> The

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<sup>82</sup>It is clear from the sentiment of the poem that the implied readership is male as 'just another woman' is the kind of epithet spoken amongst men. Its flippancy demonstrates an

mistress, kept woman or house-maid, or both (1950s stereotype of the perfect wife) is inescapable, because her presence is desired, but desired only within the perimeters defined by the male.<sup>83</sup> Duncan presents the female as being subject to, and predetermined by, inviolable character traits. She is the product of binary polarities of mood. It is with these changes from tame to wild, kind to cruel, that 'woman' is defined. She is merciless while he, Duncan, is again vulnerable and needs mercy. So it is that through parody and stereotype Duncan stabilises his own presence as the recipient of external forces and as the progenitor of emotional and intellectual response.

The preceding 'Solitudes' sequence also enable this stable presence, by determining within the other whatever Duncan wishes to explain, either good or ill, so as to ensure the efficacy of the concluding argument. Such choices are not unusual, as all creative acts require a series of acceptances and rejections, but by narrowing the characteristics of women to a few stereotypes, and by then revealing their effect, Duncan falsifies the emotional response. This is because the other is an ordered construction of his own mind and serves his poetic representations. For the poetry to present a universal truth, it would be necessary for the stereotypes and metaphorical constructions to have a truth content beyond the subjective, but because the world exists only to serve the poetry, all claims for truth content rest in the judgmental statements the poetry creates. The need Duncan has to present the poem as being a single controlled and finished unit means that he must close down the opportunity for transition and transformation and retain the moment of writing as the poem's enduring condition. An example of this would be 'Solitude No. 8':

It rains behind my eyes.  
A gale blows through my mind.

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underlying misogyny.

<sup>83</sup>Duncan at this time was beginning his epic poem *Man* which was to take ten years to complete. While *Man* required Duncan to learn the disciplines of science and chart both history and pre-history to reach the essence of being, woman can be dismissed with the words 'just another'.



The great waves breaking on the beach  
Are feeble compared to this tide within me.  
Neither women nor work  
Can quieten this energy which rages within me.  
Only music, only Schubert,  
Can contain me; for the rest, it is waste:  
that word: my epitaph. (p. 12)

Consumed by forces which exceed those found in the natural world, a savage breast that music alone may quell, Duncan rages in no particular direction. The storm that threatens him in 'No. 1' is now within. Because the energy can be put to no end, Duncan calls it 'waste' and so attributes to himself the self-deprecating epitaph.

The word 'epitaph' occurs frequently in Duncan's poetry as it binds the dead to the living. The epitaph becomes, for Duncan, a sign of closure to which one can refer. Death offers a form of physical closure, and the epitaph a literary one.

'Solitude No. 6' closes, not with an epitaph, but with the signing of one:

And he reached that point  
When leaves alone listened  
And the soil only seemed to understand,  
When only the light embraced,  
And the night cherished;  
When the linnet lay with maggots in its wing.  
Now let the thin wind laugh  
over his indecipherable epitaph. (p. 11)

The concluding couplet concludes the 'And/When' construction of the poem with the 'Now/over' closure. Unusually for Duncan the persona of the poem is in the third person. It is only in the closing of the poem that Duncan emerges as writing subject, to demand how the situation is to be resolved. However, this poem comes closest to reaching a level of impersonality as the 'he' ceases to be conditioned by Duncan's contextual relationship with his environment. In contrast to the pastoral contemplation of 'No. 17' here the

figure in the poem has been driven from the human company to seek solace in nature. It is there, amongst the non-judgmental trees and earth that grow in accordance to the passing of day and night, that he can find understanding. The triple alliterative line : 'When leaves alone listened' offers a trace into Anglo-Saxon poetry when civilisation was not so far from the forest, and the forest is not here a place of natural disorder against social order as it appears in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, for example, but rather it is a place where human feeling can be understood beyond the disinterested social world. The alliterative pattern is repeated in the next line, and the play on words that appears in 'soil' and 'understand', where on one level nature personified is wise, while on another, it is literally 'under where he stands' helps to construct a symbiotic relationship between man and the earth. This balance is then enhanced with the measured syllables of the next two lines. The long syllables of 'only', 'light' and 'embraced' are equally balanced by the long syllables in the following line: 'night cherished'. Night and day, therefore, are not presented in a hierarchical struggle, but balanced forces as part of a natural order. This is further emphasised by Duncan choosing 'light' instead of 'day' so as to produce an internal rhyme with 'night'. The line which concludes this narrative, and concludes the 'And / When' pattern offers the reason for the figure's presence in the forest. The linnet, known for its distinctive mating call, the red 'blush' of its plumage and its devotion to its young, here lies dead and decaying. But this too is part of a natural order. The bird dies, its body is broken down, it becomes the soil which nourishes the plants the bird feeds off. In this way the two opposing elements of air and earth are brought together and function in accordance with one another. Sexual desire and love are seen to be in the process of decay; not yet valuable, but still part of the natural balance. But, and crucially, Duncan himself intrudes to undercut this harmony. Nature, in the form of a 'thin wind', mocks the death of love and desire. The tight elongated and repeated 'in' sound has no balance, and 'laugh' is made to rhyme not with a quality of

replenishment, but with 'epitaph', a social construction of end. Indeed, the social world takes over the end of the poem to destabilise it. The ill fitting and incongruity of 'indecipherable' returns us to a world where meaning needs to be extracted from all things, including nature. The closing couplet, then, reinstates the division between nature and society from which there is no escape. In this way, the poem succumbs to Duncan's fatalistic belief that social constructs are unnatural, and that there is no harmonious blending between natural desire and social order. It is, I believe, within this poem, that Duncan is able to articulate this position most clearly. By removing himself from the centre of the poem, he enables acute sensibility that shapes it to escape from a wholly subjective context. It is a rare moment in Unpopular Poems, and one that becomes rarer still when Duncan endeavours to pursue the possible evolution and development of subjective consciousness in Man.

So, as 'Solitude No. 6' indicates, the particularity of the subject driven by natural forces which then stand against the social world, defines the parameters of individual existence. If the individual does not conform to what society requires then he is doomed to be cast out. This state of rejection is, in Duncan's eyes, an error of society and not the individual. The poems are unpopular, but not, Duncan would contest, without value, so he continues with his writing even if their value is neglected and his task seems fruitless. And Duncan repeatedly sees the value in his poetry as being in the revelation of general principles throughout the presentation of the particular.

But grief and embittered loneliness still dominate. By presenting his personal grief and solitude within the 'Solitudes' section, Duncan attempts to draw universally recognisable conclusions. For reasons of simple clarity, in several of the poems, such as 'Solitude No. 15,' and 'No. 18', the abstract concepts of loneliness and consciousness become universally fixed and conditioned. Again, this is because they exist within the personal experience of the poet which validates both the content of the poems and the writing

itself. The act of writing is produced by the need to exemplify objective truths as experienced through the subjective understanding of the individual. Although the feelings of love, separation and loss are universal archetypes, such truths remain inexorably linked to personal experience because Duncan ensures that his experience is consistently foregrounded. When Duncan is the central figure of the poetry the possibility of universal experience is always pre-conditioned, and is thus prevented from escaping Duncan's personal drive for individuation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Duncan turns to Christ as a figure by which he, as isolated individual, can turn for analogy. Christ is the figurehead of Christianity, the single dominant theology of the West: Duncan is the single figurehead for his own writing. Neither is it surprising that Duncan focuses on the crucifixion as the point of identification between them. This he does in 'Solitude No. 19':

Thou, on a Cross; I, on a divided heart.  
No other point of identification, but the nails;  
Mine of indecision. Forgive me, for I do know what I do:  
Do to her whom I love, but not exclusively;  
Do to her whom I love, but not completely,  
Two hands, two eyes, two legs and two feet:  
Choice is not possible, amputation's probable.  
Only my love is whole: each is a part of you. (p. 17)

The inversion of Christ's words upon the cross 'forgive them, for they know not what they do' into 'Forgive me, for I do know what I do' exemplifies Duncan's conscious awareness of the effect his divided love has on his several lovers.<sup>84</sup> But they themselves are not under consideration. Duncan is crucified by his own means, but self-justified in believing that however divided his love may seem to others it is in fact whole. For Duncan to divide love is not to diminish it either within the single act or within its formal condition.

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<sup>84</sup>The biblical reference is from James, Chapter 23, Verse 34.

The poem is addressed to Christ and seeks absolution for Duncan's inability to act in any other way. The curious logic of the last line can only be read if Christ is seen as the manifestation of pure love, thereby being infinitely divisible without diminishment. By using this comparison, the love Duncan imparts to his lovers is in his eyes complete, but because it is not seen as such, he is open to hostility from those who desire his undivided attention. Therefore, Duncan's desire for his love to be understood as genuine and undivided is linked to the notion that there is a greater love of which human love is only a part. This is spelled out in the cantata 'Do not Cling to Me Thus' (pp. 33-5) and 'Ascension' (p. 37) which, together with 'Solitude No. 19', forms the backbone of Duncan's assimilation into his subjective reasoning of Christ as the crucified man.

This takes us into the second section of Unpopular Poems which consist of two arias from his libretto for the chamber opera Christopher Sly and two canticles, 'Do Not Cling To Me Thus', written for St. Albans Cathedral, and 'Canticle' which was dedicated to Thomas Eastwood.<sup>85</sup> This section also has two lullabies, a carol, three 'songs', a lyric and a lament. This stress on musicality further enhances the significance of performance and lyric, as was shown to be the case with The Mongrel and The Solitudes.

The emotion embedded in the song is utilised to present an enclosed message for each poem. As with the 'Solitudes' these messages are most often resolved or 'closed' by a final statement. For example, 'Plain Song' is a poem that follows the convention of using the four seasons of the year as metaphors for the various desires of man. As is common in Duncan's poetry, the message is to encourage a belief that man is part of the natural order, while emphasising the ability to overcome ignorance through consciousness; his single unique attribute. The message of 'Plain Song'

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<sup>85</sup>Christopher Sly was based on the poem 'The Taming of A Shrew' on which Shakespeare based his play. The chamber opera was composed by Thomas Eastwood and was first performed by The English National Opera Group at the Royal Court Theatre in January 1960. Duncan and Eastwood collaborated on several projects including The Rebel, an opera on the theme of the Berlin Wall, and, as mentioned, the musical arrangement of The Solitudes.

therefore, is to decry those who ignore the seasonal existence in pursuit of simple comfort. It closes on that note, with Duncan beseeching the Earth to attend to those:

who with sad frivolity ignore each season,  
pursuing comfort for an uncomfortable reason. (p. 28)

In spite of the rhyme and the chime of 'comfort' the five syllables of 'uncomfortable' emphasise its linguistic relationship to a real state and destroy the potential for a balanced metre. The lack of compression and the dependency on the near rhyme of 'comfort' does not help to support the end rhyme which seeks to order the statement but finds it impossible to do so. Also, the desire to enforce the message of the poem takes over, so that 'pursuing comfort for an uncomfortable reason' produces a subjective statement which leaves the substance of 'reason' unqualified.

As the final couplet of 'Plain Song' is a subjective statement presented as a truism, so the last quatrain of 'Lullaby', which was written for Virginia Maskell's child, shifts its emphasis away from the child it has until then celebrated, and onto the written subject<sup>86</sup>:

Who wakes more gaily  
Than thrush, lark or linnet?  
I, for the boy of you;  
I, for the joy of you. (Unpopular Poems, p. 31)

The poem reworks Heracles' speech in 'Hylas' when he is describing Hylas as he rests, presumably in Heracles' arms. Where Heracles says: 'What falls more softly than the petals of a rose? These eyelids / On Hylas' tired eyes' (The Mongrel, p. 13), 'Lullaby' begins:

What fall more lightly

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<sup>86</sup>It would not be stretching a point to suggest that 'Lullaby' is not written as stated 'for Virginia's son' but for Virginia herself. Duncan was unable to resist the temptation to make himself present in what was intended to be a selfless poem.

Than lilac to a lawn?

These eyelids over your tired eyes. (Unpopular Poems, p. 31)

The natural similes are continued until the last verse, when focus is shifted away from the child and onto the singularity of the writing subject. The effect of the 'I' is such that the impersonality of the poem is radically controlled by the personality of the poet. What is more, the 'thrush, lark and linnet' carry with them a sexual connotation, that is not intended for the child, but for his mother. While comparing himself to birds waking at the earliest point in the day is an understandable exclamation of joy, one has only to recollect 'Solitude 16' in The Solitudes to find the same sentiment being directed towards the child's mother, who at that time was Duncan's lover:

As thrush, lark and linnet are  
So do my eyes rise,  
Sing for the life in you  
Joyful at your being. (The Solitudes, p. 27)

So, while an innocent reading would celebrate the child, it is clear that the poem alludes to Duncan's affair with the child's mother, and Duncan presents himself in the light of the poetry that resulted.<sup>87</sup>

Duncan's need to present the developing essence of his own subjectivity, to identify himself against the impinging presence of others, leads him in two directions. One is to focus upon his own self as affected by others, and the other is to mirror his suffering to that of Christ. Neither of these paths present 'pure impersonality' but seek to reveal a complex and melancholy subject who struggles against the forces of a disintegrating social world. In maintaining the notion of writer as cultural pedagogue, Duncan

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<sup>87</sup>The line 'I, for the boy of you' may hint at Duncan's description of Maskell as 'so boyish from behind' in Obsessed, p. 12). This may have some personal resonance if the piece is a coded love poem.

highlights himself as being the conveyor of meaning. In order that this may be achieved he must maintain an authoritarian position within the writing.

The cantata 'Do Not Cling To Me Thus' retells the story of the ascension by focusing on the character of Mary Magdalene. Christ rises from the dead to implore Mary to let go of his earthly self so that he may rise to God. Her earthly love prevents spiritual love:

You hold me here in the world of man.  
Mary, if you love me, do not cling to me thus.  
(Unpopular Poems, p. 34)

Duncan portrays this earthly love as reciprocated by Christ, so that a division between the earthly and spiritual is constructed, based on the principle that Christ was man and God. Earthly love then shows the distinction between that and spiritual love, and enables the rise to Heaven to be seen as a spiritual development. The chorus concludes:

And she let him go.  
And he rose from her love,  
And he rose from his love:  
To a love that is greater  
Than human love. (Unpopular Poems, p. 35)

The outcome of the poem complies with Christian theology, but Duncan's choice of Mary Magdalene as the character who must allow Christ to ascend to Heaven is an interesting one as it points to the comparison Duncan draws between himself and Christ, namely, that his love is divided. This was already present in 'Solitude No 19', when Duncan compares his divided heart with the crucifixion (p. 17). Here the comparison is more direct and it is further substantiated by moving from the third person narrative of 'Do Not Cling To Me Thus' to the first person narrative of 'Ascension', where the persona adopted is that of Christ himself. Because the poem was not destined to be performed in a cathedral, Duncan is able to explore the 'human' side of



Christ in greater depth. The biblical story remains the same, but Duncan seems to wish to confirm that Christ had an earthly lover:

Seeing me, Mary Magdalene embraced me.  
'Do not cling to me thus,' I cried  
'While I am still a man.'  
'What a man loves, he does become.'  
(Unpopular Poems, p. 37)

And to confirm the Christ's love for the woman that threatens to bind him forever to the earth, the stanza concludes:

It was not that I had risen from the dead  
but love had not died in me. (Unpopular Poems, p. 37)

In other words, Christ had to rise again so as to shake off the raiment of his earthly love.

Having already created the parallel between himself and Christ, Duncan adopts Christ's persona, as he had previously with Judas, to present Christ as a man in isolation, midway between God and man. And where Duncan portrays his own life as 'waste', in 'Ascension' Christ too sees that he has brought nothing but misery to the earth, because his teachings have been misunderstood:

I stood for a moment observing Peter  
dexterously mending the mesh in his net,  
And in that moment I saw the whole tapestry of tears  
which I had woven:  
Two thousand years, with less love at the end of it;  
And I saw Charity's long crusade of savagery;  
Tolerance turning to bigotry and faith to the thumbscrew.  
(Unpopular Poems, p. 38)

Christ, unable to achieve his goal of leading men toward genuine love and compassion, desires, in Duncan's poem, to reject society, favouring instead to

absorb all sin within himself and to suffer alone. All these ideas, as we have seen already, apply to Duncan's own feelings:

That I should not have projected the struggle within me  
but should have lived it internally:  
denied myself, betrayed myself, judged myself and thus  
given man  
that love he could not give me: a compassion  
beyond the Passion. (Unpopular Poems, p. 38)

Earthly pleasures must, for Duncan, mean something more than the event itself, and poetry also must mean beyond its being and its reception. So when, in 'Written on a girl's table-napkin at Wiesbaden' he verbally attacks a young woman for wearing a crucifix, claiming that she wouldn't know Christ if he came in to the cafe and spoke to her and that all she wants are affectations and easy pleasures, Duncan attacks all loose affiliations to 'truth' and 'purity' for failing to be studied and deep felt. Duncan himself becomes present as the Christ figure evoked by the poem by referring to his own pet addictions of coffee and cigarettes:

If he were to walk into this cafe  
I doubt if you'd notice him  
Nor know how long he sat there alone  
Stirring his coffee, perhaps smoking one cigarette after another  
(Unpopular Poems, p. 47)

which, together with the opening lines of the succeeding stanza:

As though waiting for somebody  
But without an appointment, (Unpopular Poems, p. 47)

are qualities already attributed to Duncan in 'Solitude No. 14':

In my time, I was here too,  
But you did not notice me sitting there alone,  
Stirring my coffee, smoking interminably  
As though waiting for somebody

But without an appointment. (Unpopular Poems, p. 15)

Duncan's comparison of himself with Christ gives, as he sees it, credence to his actions as well as portraying him as a man shunned by the crowd, a man misunderstood and openly rejected.

To present and sustain a strong subjective position, Duncan uses the negative emotional responses of rejection, pain, misery, solitude. These are located within the particularity of the writing subject itself and as such serve as a means of self identification, even if 'knowing thyself' is to know of one's own futility. Duncan sees himself as a prisoner of his own self-wisdom. In 'Ballad of Stratton Gaol' this becomes a literal description:<sup>88</sup>

Great souls in prison cells  
lie  
and commit no perjury  
but to themselves do injury,  
farming their mind's boundless demesne  
for a harvest of fears, dreams and worry.  
To their sorrow, pain comes as a relief,  
Pain comes as mercy to the confined saint and common thief.  
(Unpopular Poems, p. 48)

From this general position Duncan moves to using Gandhi and Pound as examples of great men who he knew personally and who were imprisoned for their convictions. In the fifth stanza Duncan reveals his own incarceration:

Where do I come in?  
I am.  
For what? For salving from the sea  
thirty gallons of petrol—for me!

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<sup>88</sup>The only real point of comparison with Wilde's 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' is in the observation of the condemned, but Wilde was made an outcast and was ostracised and despised as a social deviant. Duncan was not, and yet he manages to align himself with the powerful figures of Gandhi and Pound who were imprisoned for their actions and under threat of death. Duncan's own actions and punishment do not compare and there is never the vulnerability that is found in 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' and The Pisan Cantos. Instead there is an implied self-explanation that exemplifies a 'truth' whereby great men will always suffer at the hands of the power brokers. Wilde's prison experience forced him to examine his life. Duncan uses his experience to express an independent principle.

And using same for purposes of husbandry.  
Poor husbandry! Poor me! Both wedded to poverty!  
Now my cows un milked; some stacks open; some corn  
uncarried.  
Here I am by four white-washed walls confined, no little  
worried. (Unpopular Poems, p. 49)

Duncan's own confinement is attached to his labour. He is a man of the soil, a farmer similar to those who farm 'their mind's boundless demesne / for a harvest of fears' while maintaining practical industry: to nurture and to make things grow both in the mind and on the land (the 'pig-sty' and 'poetry' of 'Practical Ballads', The Mongrel, p. 90). The focus is on that he exists, 'I am' and that which he wishes to achieve through being is thwarted by conflicting laws of conduct. Duncan presents himself, therefore, as a man who strives to succeed but is prevented from doing so. He is unjustly a victim, a captive of social constructs that restrict him to the level of the fly that shares his captivity. The inescapable confines of social order makes mental activity fruitless, so that both man and fly become, as he states: 'passengers to the same futility.' (p. 50)

Futility is not within the endeavour, but in the society which prevents that endeavour from ever coming to fruition. Duncan's deep frustration with society and politics in general is that it conspires to deny the individual talent. Unpopular Poems does not so much shine against this belief but concentrates upon its effect. The potential for greatness which appears in 'Lines for N.S's First Birthday':

Then Prince of Words, Emperor of a phrase  
you'll share that throne  
Where Donne and Dante sit. As their heir  
their language shall be yours  
And all poetry, your own (Unpopular Poems, p. 51)

ends with defeat. 'Solitude No. 20':

Oblivion as a writer,

Death as a man  
This is your future:  
Escape it if you can. (Unpopular Poems, p. 18)

Death, even death in life ('not all the dead are buried') can be overcome through immortality as a writer, as with Donne or Dante. But when you are spurned as a writer then the futility takes over. Death, loss and loneliness are all that remain, together with grief, sorrow and suffering. This leads Duncan to conclude that his life, both literary and emotional, is 'waste': 'That word: my epitaph.' (Solitude No. 8, p. 12).

Because Duncan's primary focus in Unpopular Poems is on himself as a suffering man – 'the meaning of life / is to suffer, first in oneself, / Then for the other' ('Envoi', p. 53) the poems become centripetal, pulling experiences of the world into a particular, context driven subjective disillusionment. The question remains to be asked that if all life is suffering and the end is futile, then why go on writing? The answer to this must be in the continual need to confirm the cogito and to reveal himself as a tangential presence. The poetry therefore will, even beyond his death, prove his existence. But most importantly the poetry will prove his existence while he lives. Unpopular Poems is therefore a confirmation of Duncan's belief in the significance of the rational consciousness of the individual. Through the rationalisation of his own vulnerability to external stimuli, Duncan is able to claim objective truths about the world, such as the 'Loneliness is our thirst. / Other people's loneliness: / the only water to quench it' of 'Solitude No. 15', (p. 16).

However, the need to simultaneously assert his own presence, traps these truths within the context of his own utterances. Rather than achieving the impersonal through the personal as Wilson suggests, Duncan yields to the weight of his own personality. This position puts him in conflict with his former publisher and mentor, T. S. Eliot, who, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' states:

. . . for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. (Selected Prose, p. 28)

The force of personal context grows stronger in Duncan's work towards the later years of his life. Man (1970-4), for example, is conditioned by Duncan's ability to learn and transmit knowledge, while For The Few (1977) continues still further his belief in a dwindling audience, and the importance of self actuation through writing.

While Unpopular Poems declares itself as out of favour with literary values, it presents a continuation of what Duncan sees as a neglected poetic tradition. It is a collection determined to put thoughts into art, even if those thoughts plunge deeper than ever into his own psyche. The conscious process of assimilating event and emotional response it causes serves to determine, even over-determine, the poetry so that the closures offered by the poems function above all else on a subjective level. The pressure of Duncan's self-consciousness serves as his key for individuation and becomes the pervading undercurrent of Unpopular Poems. The overriding emphasis Duncan places on his own situation and thoughts that arise from it offers little space for objective empathy. It is as if the understanding which Duncan seeks to achieve conditions the poems, so what seems to be a process that moves towards resolution is in fact contrived to develop the already configured conclusion. While this enables Duncan to measure his poems and ensure a unity within their structure, the emotional development the poems promise is closed down by reductive conclusions. This in turn emphasises the consciousness behind their order which is centred in the poems themselves. In Man, the dam bursts. Consciousness is unmasked to become the central concern for what was to be Duncan's epic project. The next chapter investigates Man as the fulcrum of a poetic that strove to place subjective understanding at the centre of human development.

## Chapter Four

### Man: The Pursuit of Consciousness

Having pursued lyric, pastoral, love and dramatic poetry, Duncan turned his attention to the oldest poetic form: the epic. Duncan's poetry had always attempted to reveal an understanding of how a thinking, perceiving subject responds to specific stimuli, and to create through poetry an holistic vision of mankind. By the late 1960s Duncan had reached a stage in his poetry where he needed to replace the individualistic response to stimuli with a universal understanding of human consciousness. Through this search, he now thought, the individual could finally be understood within the schema of creation.

Placing himself at the centre of the universe by framing his own consciousness as the embodiment of consciousness per se, Duncan began writing Man (1970-4), an epic poem that journeyed into received knowledge and used many of the established devices of epic poetry, the most immediate of which was its sheer size and compass. Man (1970-4) is 335 pages long and consists of five parts, a total of sixty-three cantos. It explores the knowledge of the universe, from its origins, to the formation of the planets, the development of life on earth, the development of humans, the development of cultures and societies and even projects itself into the future. Central to all this is the isolated figure of the epic hero. As we might have expected from the evidence so far, that hero is Duncan himself, fixed in time to the moment of writing, but wandering backwards and forwards in history through learning and cognition. If, as Pound said in ABC of Reading (1961), 'An epic is a poem including history' (p. 46), then Man is a poem that attempts to include all history. And if, as Paul Merchant in his book Epic (1971) claims, it must also be 'surpassing the dimensions of realism' (p. 1) then Duncan's poem works from the reality of his position as writing subject in order to

delve into the world of equations, myth, ritual and science-fiction. Also, Duncan uses the epic device of digression, often breaking an argument to follow a personal anecdote or to construct an oppositional discourse between science and poetry.

In using and reinventing epic poetry Duncan clearly aligns himself, as he had before, with the modernists. Pound had used Ovid and Homer as a basis for The Cantos; Joyce, Homer and the story of the wandering Jew in Ulysses; and Eliot, Dante in Four Quartets. Duncan also turns to Dante, but where Dante was guided through Hell to Paradise in The Divine Comedy by Virgil and then Beatrice, Duncan chooses the physicist Herman Bondi as his guide. There is no Beatrice for Duncan, and the only woman who comes close guides him through a hellish future and seeks only instant sexual gratification.<sup>89</sup> But Man differs from its modernist predecessors in that it avoids fragmentation and collage. Rather, the poem is segmental, narrating a history of the universe by using science, and focusing on specific events that represent the stages of cosmological, geological and finally human development. And because Duncan's journey is a journey within his own mind, the impersonality that is present in The Waste Land, is replaced by a dominant personality, written into the poem to denote where the 'action' is occurring.

The mental journey on which Duncan embarks, and which seeks to unravel the universe, is always constructed through the conscious enquiry of the individual. Duncan continually foregrounds the pursuit of conscious understanding, for:

Only consciousness itself can teach,  
When it, like light, returns to illumine its own source,  
So the answer flies to the question which is asked  
Where memory and imagination join.

(Man, Part One, Canto Five, p. 38)

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<sup>89</sup>This occurs in Part Four, Canto Fifty One, and will be examined later in this chapter.



In order to understand the mysteries of the universe as they appear within the cognitive workings of the mind, Duncan used various manifestations of science, such as physics, chemistry and geology for his sources of knowledge, and by adapting science to poetry Duncan also sought to overcome what he saw as the fruitless division between science and art. Together with a presentation of an evolutionary history of mankind, Duncan wanted to show not only the progress of mankind, but also to suggest the ways in which consciousness could develop still further.

The five parts of Man were published by the Rebel Press, between 1970 and 1974, with Part One published in 1970, Part Two in 1971, Part Three in 1973 and Parts Four and Five in one volume in 1974.<sup>90</sup> As much of Man was already complete when the first part was published, Duncan was able to predict the contents of all five parts in the introduction to Part One:

Part I focuses on physics and cosmology; Part II, on molecular biology and the anthropological background, from the evolution of life to the emergence of man. Part III recalls some of those human experiences which caused consciousness to develop first towards the spoken and then ultimately to the written word. Part IV is an attempt to isolate those events in human history which have moved consciousness forward. In this part I will concentrate on such events as the invention of fire or the wheel, and ignore all those happenings such as wars and revolutions which had local, but not evolutionary, significance. By this I mean events which, through tragic in themselves, had no significant impact on the growth of human consciousness and therefore, to my particular perspective, are irrelevant. Part V will dwell on the nature of consciousness and its potential: the possibilities of future growth. (Man, Part One, P. 11)

There are two important phrases from this precis. Firstly, 'to my particular perspective' is significant because it frames the poem very specifically from a subjective understanding. This position must then be taken on trust by the

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<sup>90</sup>Although Man is divided into five parts, the cantos themselves run sequentially from one to sixty three. When Man: The Complete Cantos was published there was no change to the format of the individual parts. Indeed the page numbers of each part were retained so there are, for example five page tens. No publication date was given for The Complete Cantos, and neither is there an ISBN number. Similarly, there are no ISBN numbers for any of the individual parts. I have used The Complete Cantos for the purpose of this study.

reader if the poem is to offer insight rather than opinion. The second phrase is 'the possibilities of future growth'. These possibilities, as we shall see, are crushed by the end of the poem, leaving Duncan more isolated than ever with only the reflective qualities of memory to comfort him.

As the introduction to Man, Part One describes, the genesis of the poem began in 1961 when, alone in a flat in London, he suffered a deep emotional crisis.<sup>91</sup> He had begun his second autobiography, but found that he was sliding into an atavistic reverie that surpassed his previously held belief in ancestral memory expressed in 'The Mongrel': 'It is apparent that each man is his own father' (The Mongrel [1950], p.29). Duncan cultivated his belief in atavistic traces, developing Jung's notion of the archetype whereby primitive drives are retained in the brain. This emerges as the basis of Man, Part Three which invents a proto-human consciousness and the instinctive qualities that continually govern human behaviour. As he states in the introduction: 'I found myself thinking that the date I had given for my birth in my autobiography was inaccurate: I was not 47: some parts of me were possibly 20,000 years old.' ('Introduction', Man [1970], Part One, p. 7) The belief that his own consciousness had inherited traces beyond his immediate family, back to the origins of consciousness in primeval man, made him, he says, question his true origin.<sup>92</sup> This led him to ask questions as to the origins of the Earth and, ultimately, the origin and construction of the Universe itself. Aware of the limitations of his scientific knowledge Duncan began to read the sciences of cosmology, physics, chemistry, biology and geology. In these scientific disciplines Duncan states that he 'discovered poetry' (Man, Part One, p. 10).

Having researched the physical nature of the universe, Duncan also felt the need to address the mythic nature of religion. Also he saw the need

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<sup>91</sup>Although not stated in the introduction, the emotional crisis he was suffering was the termination of his affair with Virginia Maskell and his wife's petition for divorce. This is the subject of his third autobiography, Obsessed (1977). The importance of Virginia Maskell will be discussed later.

<sup>92</sup>It should be remembered that Duncan's father had died when he was only a few months old.

to explore history, and to celebrate the individuals who had advanced human consciousness against the dictates of those whose power they threatened to destroy.

His curiosity, or the 'ache' as he described it, as to the condition of man used himself as writing subject and benchmark for all humanity. 'I am the miracle: man' he writes in Part One, Canto One (p.13), and later, in Part Five, Canto Sixty: "I speak in the first person / because I am the only person I know" (p. 94)<sup>93</sup>.

When Part One of Man finally appeared in print on 7th March 1970 with a print run of 150 signed cloth copies and 1000 soft-back, it received little attention.<sup>94</sup> 200 or so copies were sent 'gratis to physicists at most universities in US and GB' and 70 copies were sent for review. Those individuals who received copies and replied included Lord Snow, Arthur Koestler, John Betjeman, Lord Mountbatten, Colin Wilson and F. R. Leavis.<sup>95</sup>

The poem begins with Duncan embarking from a position of Socratic ignorance, aware of his own lack of knowledge, yet certain that to be aware of his ignorance is better than to believe himself wise when he is not.<sup>96</sup> Finding the right kind of question to direct him on his way is primary priority: 'The question of the question the most difficult question' (Canto Three, p. 18). By foregrounding the need first to define his terms, Duncan is able to present the poem as an accurate knowledge of the world and our place in it. Like Dante, who in The Divine Comedy starts in a dark wood and

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<sup>93</sup>There are over 800 examples of the pronoun 'I' within the 63 cantos. This averages out at 13 per canto although their distribution within the text is fairly erratic. The quantity of subjective pronouns within the poem shows Duncan's continual integration with the substance of the work, his judgmental position as writing subject as well as indicating the significant use of narrative personae to 'tell' the story of the evolution of human consciousness.

<sup>94</sup>The poem would have appeared sooner were it not that the entire first run had been destroyed in a fire while waiting to be bound.

<sup>95</sup>The diary was begun in 1964 and called 'Diary of a Poem'. It was written in two manuscript books and speaks of the progress he was making with the poem, personal events and his thoughts on the books he was tackling to further his understanding. These diaries are held by The Ronald Duncan Archive, *The New Collection*, The University of Plymouth.

<sup>96</sup>Socratic ignorance is the stance the teacher takes in the patient questioning of the pupil so as to bring him to an understanding of a truth. Duncan is both teacher and pupil and tries to put aside his previous knowledge so as to learn anew.

reaches Paradise, Duncan also finds himself in a dark wood but there he remains. The more he learns of the world through the writings of others, the more he sees human potential diminish. This is spelt out in Canto Fifty Seven, the opening canto to Part Five:

'A dark wood.' You can say that again.  
Darkness darker than night. My feeble mind  
Spluttering, a snuffed candle  
Illuminating nothing but that I have lost my way  
Completely. It has been a long journey.  
I have forgotten where I came from;  
I cannot remember where I was going.  
On elbows of pain we have lugged our thought  
to this abyss, precipice in our mind; all doors  
having closed behind us  
We are alone. No one to answer the telephone  
Nobody anywhere.

(Man, Part Five, Canto Fifty Seven, p. 88)

This allusion to Dante is introduced at various stages during the poem, most notably in Part One, where Duncan chooses Hermann Bondi (now Sir Hermann Bondi) to be his Virgil<sup>97</sup>. Where Virgil guided Dante through Hell and Purgatory, Bondi, a physicist who worked with NASA on the space programme, became Duncan's guide through the science of space. In all cases Duncan uses written texts as his source material. These books of facts and theory are then located within Duncan's poetic and philosophical sensibility and are placed in dialectical opposition with the reality of existence that impinges on his conscious rationale.

The journey into knowledge and the revelation of the actions of historical figures is a useful parallel between Man and The Divine Comedy. And yet Duncan uses Dante's poem primarily as a useful thread to tie Man into the fabric of poetic tradition. In the same way, traces from Pound, Eliot, Wilde, Donne and Sir Walter Raleigh among others, help to bind the poem into poetic history. In other words, Duncan makes the poem part of the

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<sup>97</sup>Part One is dedicated to Hermann Bondi, '*the better mind*'. This echoes Eliot's dedication of The Waste Land to Ezra Pound, '*il miglior fabbro*' (the better craftsman).

history he is narrating. But it is Dante who enables Duncan to solidify the magnitude of his journey and works as a motif to aid Duncan's pessimistic view of a world in which he sees little beyond man's inhumanity to man, or more specifically, men's inhumanity to Man:

. . . Whoever blows that bugle  
Has been sick into this drum.  
Men on one side, man on the other.  
(Part Four, Canto Fifty Five, p. 77)

Duncan's awareness of traditional verse forms, in particular the poetry of Dante, Pound and Eliot, enables him to work formally within a recognisable poetic tradition, while continuing his own project. He is not afraid to quote openly from other texts and to use established narratives in similar ways to the established verse forms used in The Solitudes (1960). Duncan uses The Divine Comedy not simply because of Dante's journey through Hell and his arrival in Heaven, the desired and absolute end, but also because Dante had reversed the idea of the epic hero as a character external to the poet. Dante's journey validates Duncan's decision to place himself at the centre of the poem. And this he must do as it is from his own consciousness that the poem arises, develops and concludes.

Only by simultaneously realising the conception of the universe while showing an awareness of the present can Duncan move towards an holistic understanding of himself. All the world has happened before him, but all of it is experienced in the present. For Duncan, therefore, there is only the present tense. The future, that which all conscious endeavour strives to 'get right', is similarly located in the moment of his current thought and in the 'hope' that knowledge of the past in the present will supply the means by which the future will be different.

Working from the Darwinian idea of evolution Duncan believed that evolution would not remain at the current level of consciousness:

. . . for it seems illogical  
to suppose that evolution, which so far has been so assiduous,  
Should stop at me  
rest content with Duncan.

(Part Two, Canto Seventeen, p. 47)

And that if the right questions are asked then it would be possible to journey forwards, to progress, and yet the future remains speculative. How a positive vision could be realised is not mapped out. The future Duncan depicts in Part Four is only a bleak reflection on what has happened in the past. The lessons of history and pre-history show Duncan the majority were asking the wrong questions. He, Duncan, would at the very least be able to claim that he attempted to find the right ones. The 'wrong' questions he sees as those raised through political machinations, social considerations, religious practice, cultural ignorance and mass stupidity. The 'right' questions, however reside in the minds of 'great' individuals. Duncan makes this particular point clear in Canto Forty Three, the first canto of Part Four:

Consciousness my focus: I am not concerned with plumbing,  
or usury: at its most serious, still frivolous,  
Not worth one canto, conveying no spectrometer reading  
except to a cash register;  
Yatter about matters of material distribution . . .  
*Reductio ad Marks und Spensum.*  
Important to the People, but the People are unimportant  
from this perspective. I am not concerned with the common  
man  
But the uncommon man. Those individuals who've budged us  
from the trough  
could all clamber on one bus.

(Man, Part Four, Canto Forty Three, p. 7)

As this section indicates, Duncan dismisses low culture in pursuit of high art, while the focus of consciousness against 'usury' is obviously aimed at Ezra Pound. Pound, in Duncan's view, was the great poet seeking the wrong answers and so doomed to failure. The Cantos, in Duncan's view, falls into the trap of material considerations, which aligns it with the irrelevancies of

convenience living. The world, as Duncan saw it, was not to be improved by changing the conditions of labour and economic distribution, but by the abstracted reasoning of a well-tuned consciousness.

To progress with this ambition Duncan needed to align himself with and distance himself from his mentors Pound and Eliot. While aligning himself with them provided Duncan with strong literary credentials, his own departure into science provided him with uniqueness, and as if to make this clear Duncan uses Man itself as the means to present his argument for a poetic which might once again unite science and poetry:

Einstein was a better poet than either Eliot or Pound if imagination (not mere wds) is the measure. And imagination, the conceptual thought, is the measure. The rest is x words. Poetry is not in the pity, not in the self-pity. It is in the perception to understand the *connection*. Blake knew this and so did Francis Bacon. And Leonardo. And Leonardo. Viva Leonardo. (Diary of a poem, entry dated 11/1/68).<sup>98</sup>

For Duncan the Age of Enlightenment must once more be rekindled against the works of those who do not see. In this way passages of Man become meta-criticisms of the poem itself, highlighting the failings of other writers and movements and establishing a framework by which the poem can be assessed. These meta-criticisms often take the form of a brief gloss on a poet, or movement such as Imagism. Duncan criticises the efficacy of the particular ideas that are used to create particular kinds of poetry. Where the image may be effective, the underlying project behind those ideas is flawed and the poetry misdirected. For example, his often repeated attack on stream of consciousness writing reappears in Canto Eight where Duncan puts forward the notion that conceptual thought frees the poet from writing poetry that is of no interest to anyone other than the poet himself:

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<sup>98</sup>'Poetry is not in the pity' is a deliberate contradiction of Wilfred Owen, who in the preface to his collection Poems (1920) stated the opposite: 'The poetry is in the pity'. (Reprinted in Owen, W (1967) The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen ed. C. Day Lewis, London, Chatto & Windus, p. 31.)

For if poetry fails, as it is failing,  
To carry the charge of mathematics; the evocative,  
The concise formulae of physics, then poetry will become  
A red dwarf, burned out, provincial,  
Merely amatory,  
    a trivial [sic] document of subjective diahorreah [sic].  
And if it tries to carry them all,  
    it will become unintelligible.

(Man, Part One, Canto Eight, p. 49)

The idea of unintelligible poetry that attempts too much, poetry that omits rather than elucidates, is a further attack on Pound's Cantos, and in case this specific attack is not clear, he writes it out long-hand:

And lead me not into Ezra's temptation:  
    the lucid phrase illuminating the incoherent thought.  
    (Man, Part One, Canto Eight, p. 49)

Duncan's awareness of Pound's Cantos, both in terms of content and its formal constructions, is complex and remains an issue throughout Man. Certain passages in Man are stylistically similar to Pound with their collating of historical referencing to enhance the covert argument, while other passages condemn the Cantos as a failure. In stressing the need for coherence and for an allegiance to a poetic tradition ('Sow Donne or Dante on a barren mind, / And all is green again', Part One, Canto Eleven, p. 72), Duncan could use Pound as a poet who used his understanding of the history of poetry, whilst rejecting the Cantos as the articulation of incoherent thinking. Duncan's overt desire for a coherent aesthetic is forcibly stated throughout Man so as to validate his own writing and to signify that his poetry has that place in the poetic tradition he believes so valuable.

Finally, then, it can be said that Man is Duncan's attempt at an overview of human development. It is a poem which puts forward an idea of how human consciousness has been enhanced by individual figures in history who have overturned what he sees to be false truths which had been used, more often than not, by those in power to support their own



arguments. Duncan's vision is of a history made from repression and failure and of a human race driven by basic instincts hidden beneath the mask of civilisation:

A female baboon will, fearing a male might pinch her food,  
Brazenly stick her rump in the air to offer her vagina  
as a distraction; similar gesture frequently  
Observed in jungle of Curzon Street.  
(Man, Part Two, Canto Thirty Two, p. 116)

Occasionally a heroic figure strives to changed the received order of things. Duncan identifies his project as a compliment to the work of these people, and in so doing remains autobiographically present within the poem, part of an historical continuum and aware of the need to change it for the better. But he can offer no new path out of the forest. All he can do is to reveal the extent of the darkness of that forest. And this realisation comes in spite of his positive predictions of the introduction.

In each of the sections of Man, Duncan pursues consciousness in particular and differing ways. It is necessary, therefore to examine each section so to explore the range of the different approaches to consciousness and human knowledge, to see how the poetry is formulated, and to show how Duncan's schema unfolds.

## **Part One**

*'Today the man of knowledge might well feel like a God become animal.'*  
*Friedrich Nietzsche*<sup>99</sup>

Part One consists of thirteen cantos, ending with a self-effacing poem entitled 'Ode to Ignorance', in which Duncan presents his position as writing subject as one 'limited by perception' and 'lamed with this language' (p. 92). The first canto, however, begins with the following proclamation:

I am: God I could become  
If I could remember my future  
As I have forgotten my past.

I am: God I will become  
When I can imagine the whole  
As I have remembered a part.

I am: God I shall become;  
For I am the only conscious thing  
In an unconscious universe;  
I am the dreamer who can dream  
he is dreaming;  
I am the miracle: man. (Man, Part One, Canto One, p. 13)

As an opening statement the form of these three stanzas reflect the proclamation they contain. Beginning with the Cartesian logic of 'I am', the section progresses through three rhetorically structured stages towards an intended progression: 'God I shall become'. Altering only the modifier in the opening lines of each section from 'could' to 'will' to 'shall', shows bold determination. This is emphasised by the overt presentation of the written subject in the constant presence of the pronoun 'I'. The direct opposition between what is 'I' and what 'could', 'will' and 'shall' be, the metamorphosis into God, is qualified by a list of tasks to be fulfilled by his consciousness. The

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<sup>99</sup>Epigram 101, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in Nietzsche, F (1968) *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Modern Library, p. 274.

requirement for the tasks to be cognitive is then itself qualified by the proclamation: 'For I am the only conscious thing / in an unconscious universe'. This unique position is then confirmed by the concluding statement: 'I am the miracle: man'. 'Man' is revealed as the miracle of creation capable of taking on the mantle of God, with the triple alliteration on 'm' tying the written subject to the religious and the human totality. And by adopting the persona of 'all men', Duncan conflates the whole of mankind with the subjective part, which is the written subject. This means that the poem and the subjective representations that will appear in the poem are to speak for all humanity. To be conscious of oneself, and to be conscious that all other things are unconscious produces a position of power over the natural world. This power is produced through conscious awareness. Where the rest of the universe continues 'naturally', man's consciousness gives him the ability to change the world in a way that is different from the natural order of things. However, for this to be done to the benefit of mankind it is necessary for itself to maintain a sense of order. This new order will be achieved through an understanding of the human condition as it now is and as it has been throughout evolution. Duncan puts forward the idea that within the consciousness of the individual there lies the history of mankind: its crawl from the primeval soup; its historical progression through various civilisations; and its continual failure to understand itself as a conscious being. The opening persona of 'all man' continues:

A year of years lie behind my name,  
a century of centuries has waited for this hand.  
It took all time's tide to reach me;  
The expanding darkness has groped for me;  
Through the leafless wood, the blind wind's blown to me;  
Beneath the heavy ocean, the patient coral's reached for me;  
I am the miracle: man. (Man, Part One, Canto One, p. 13)

The conflation of all man in the written subject is reflected in the rhetorical quadruple chime on 'me', which has a sight rhyme with 'name',

the written subject, in the persona of 'man'. The section drifts relentlessly to the present tense of the 'I am' by the repeated sounds and syllable length of 'year' 'years', 'lie', 'behind' 'my' in the first line and similarly in subsequent lines: 'Century', 'centuries', 'time', 'tide', and so on, while the dark and leafless wood echoes the opening of The Divine Comedy:

Midway this way of life we're bound upon  
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,  
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.  
(The Divine Comedy, Hell, p. 71).

Having stated what had led to his moment of being, Duncan then announces himself a second time: 'I am the miracle: man'.

Duncan places the persona of the conscious man at the beginning of the writing process of the poem, to show how it is first necessary to reach a stage of consciousness before the universe can be seen as it is. In other words, the universe only becomes present when there is a consciousness to make it so. The individual, therefore, defines the universe after his own understanding. And by seeing the universe one can see one's own self located within it. The better informed the individual is about the universe the stronger his position within it.

While religion had been the means by which man understood his place within the universe, Duncan sees that it is the duty of both science and art to achieve this end in different ways.<sup>100</sup> Both of these disciplines, while

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<sup>100</sup> Duncan writes in The Diary of a Poem:

I will have to re-read Whitlow, Bondi, Hoyle and Einstein again. These are genuinely religious men. Men seeking connections (religio = I connect). Their minds humble me whereas the literati make me feel insufferably arrogant. (2/9/68).

And then a year or two later he emphasises the significance of science to literature in the twentieth century:

But just as a classical background once essential tool for a poet, now a knowledge of physics and biology is necessary. Crick and Bondi do not replace Aristotle and Euripides but add to them. Literature must widen its focus or go down the drain as mere emotive . . . decoration . . . This is my struggle and purpose: to make poetry a useful tool again, a vehicle for consciousness, not a mere silly day dream . . . Poetry must think: it is not enough to feel. And think lucidly. From chaos; order; from the incoherent: the lucid. That is my drive. I will hang on that branch (unpublished Diary of a Poem, 1964-70, entry dated, 6/10/70).

choosing different means, seek an holistic understanding of what was, what is and what will be. Because science and art share the same goal, Duncan sees no reason why they cannot be integrated within Man so that each can shed its light on the other.<sup>101</sup> And what is more, the scientific concern for accuracy and 'truth' serves rational consciousness more fully than religion. Art needs this accuracy, to enable it to achieve consciousness of the whole, which is, so Duncan says, the purpose of human endeavour.

To go beyond the conscious limitations of the individual, to have the 'painter daub beyond his canvas' (p. 17), is the means by which man can free himself from the everyday distractions of life and reach a state of perfection.<sup>102</sup> However (and this is the recurring problem for Duncan in the poem), to reach that point where one can move beyond the subject, it is necessary to be a thinking subject oneself. It is necessary to maintain a self-consciousness so that the self can be located within the external reality which is being understood. Therefore, the whole is both the whole of the universe and, perhaps more importantly, the whole of the self: it is being self-aware, being 'the dreamer who can dream / he is dreaming.' 'Ode to Ignorance' concludes the section on this same note, that it is within mankind that the universe is made conscious, and therefore all things and all hope reside in man:

Yet for all that, all this and this, the Universe  
Can only speak, or sing, or weep through us.  
May night which knows no mercy  
Find compassion, and kneel down to Man in stars.

(Man, Part One, Canto Thirteen, p. 92)

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<sup>101</sup>During the time of the first Apollo missions Duncan was on good terms with Herman Bondi, and asked him if it was possible if he, Duncan, could travel with the astronauts so as to provide the poet's perspective on what 'happens' when a man is removed from his planet and stands on another looking back to where he should rightfully be (unpublished Diary of a Poem, 1964-70, undated entry).

<sup>102</sup> Gender considerations in Duncan, as mentioned earlier, stretch as far as to suggest that women are nothing more than necessary distractions to the male. There is no suggestion in Man that the development of human consciousness can ever be achieved by a woman, as indeed there is no suggestion in any of Duncan's writing that women are, or will be, capable intellectual thought. Duncan writes, therefore, from the security of a distinctly male and patriarchal vision of society.

In amongst the repetition and alliteration, which helps to fix attention upon the poem itself by insisting on its linguistic existence ('this'), is the elision of 'Universe' into 'us', which, in essence, is the crux of the poem.

In Part One Duncan prepares the ground for his epic cerebral journey, a journey which he hopes will take him beyond his present understanding and towards universal knowledge and self discovery. Part of this journey is the significance of the poet, whether he be Homer or Duncan. The poet, in this case Duncan, plays a vital role within the poem, because the literary skill of the 'telling' of the tale is that which communicates the event and relays the wisdom that derives from that event. Man occurs simultaneously in two places: the writing desk and the place of the recorded event, just as the Odyssey exists in the telling and in the tale. However, there is a third dimension in Man. This is the textbooks Duncan uses to gain his information. These three elements enable Duncan to advance his learning while conflating events in history with his subjective position as both poet *and* the repository of human consciousness:

. . . I dip my pen in the sockets of night  
And write that the stars may read  
And the blind world tread  
To where the white rose leads. (Man, Canto Two, p. 17)

But contradiction is always close to the surface of Duncan's writing. While on one level he exposes the extent of his ambitious project, on another he down plays his chances of success. In this way he is able to maintain a grand project, while simultaneously presenting himself as a fallible man. This fallibility, the flaw in all men, conditions the larger aim. If the reader is made aware of this, then if Man fails to achieve its goal, it would not be the fault of the writer, as such, but the fault of the human condition. At the beginning of Canto Two this humility helps Duncan to distance himself from the reader and to make sure that his journey is observed to be his, but on behalf of the rest of mankind:

The ask aches in me.  
 I write because I know  
 Nothing. The ask aches in me.  
 Do not read this, if you are looking for answers.  
 If you follow me, you will reach nowhere.  
 I can only mislead you.  
                                   I will only take you  
 To where you are. My revelation  
                                   Is your reflection. I write because I know  
                                   That I do not know. The ask aches in me. (p. 16)

As with Socrates, as with Eliot in The Waste Land - 'On Margate Sands.  
 / I can connect / Nothing with nothing' (Collected Poems, p. 74) and Four  
 Quartets - 'My words echo / Thus, in your mind. / But to what purpose /  
 Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know.' ('Burnt  
 Norton', Collected Poems p. 189), and as with Cordelia in King Lear - 'That I  
 am glad I have not, though not to have it / Hath lost me in your liking' (King  
 Lear, I, i, 232-3, New Penguin Shakespeare, p. 69), to offer nothing is made  
 positive by being divested of falsehood and prejudice. The refutation of there  
 being anything in the poem which can be of any use to the reader creates a  
 circle which always returns to the poem. In addition, offering no answers is  
 deliberately provocative, coming as it does at the outset of a major work  
 which attempts to reveal consciousness. It is a tantalising admission: 'I write  
 because I know' line break, and then the reduction: 'nothing', and it is one  
 which sets up the contradiction of the writing self and the reading other. The  
 two are presented as distinctly separate so that Duncan can divide the writing  
 process into an activity and the reading process into a reception of that  
 activity. Duncan places himself apart from the reader, and the self-  
 effacement, while serving as a safe-guard against failure, also encourages the  
 reader to confirm for Duncan his distance from the mass of humanity.<sup>103</sup> 'Do  
 not read this if you are looking for answers' he continues, and yet the poem is

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<sup>103</sup>The low regard Duncan has for his readers becomes apparent in Part Five, where 'he', the reader, is described as an inattentive Irish woman whose name is of too little consequence for Duncan to remember properly, and who is concerned only with sex and tea. (See Part Five, Canto Fifty Eight, p. 89)

to be written regardless of whether it can satisfy the reader's questions: 'But let the amputated pianist play' (Canto Two, p. 16). And if the world remains uninterested in what he produces, he will carry on regardless:

And write that the stars may read  
And the blind world tread  
To where the white rose leads. (Part One, p. 17)

Duncan's presentation of himself (written subject) *against* the reader is an important inclusion within the writing because it does not mean that he is writing without consideration of a readership, and writing only for the sake of the subject matter and the poetry. By mentioning the reader directly he is openly seeking readerly engagement. However, in so doing he presents himself as distinct from the reader so that he can stand alone, like a tragic hero whom the world has forsaken and misunderstood. This image would be borne out by an examination of Duncan's autobiographical works, but it is just as apparent within Man because at various stages throughout the poem he reveals his own opinions on art, politics and society.<sup>104</sup>

The written subject remains prevalent throughout Part One so as to tie the mathematical formula he uses in explaining the universe to the conscious subject because: 'the Universe / Can only speak, or sing, or weep through us'. But while a written subject is present, it punctuates the overview of the current understanding of the universe.

The written subject becomes the poet who knows more by studying more. It is the point at which the scientific knowledge can be presented, because it is through the learning of the poet and his cognitive selections that

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<sup>104</sup>There are many parallels in Modernist literature to this problematic characterisation of the self. The narrative persona in Dostoevski's Notes From Underground continually seeks self realisation, but feels that this is only possible by causing others to 'suffer' his presence. And when he finally is recognised, even respected by the whole he both loves and loathes, his previous understanding of his own condition is altered to the point where he seeks to be rejected once again so he can return to that which he knows himself to be. See Dostoevski (1972) Notes From Underground and The Double, Trans. Coulson, J, Harmondsworth, Penguin.



the reader may gain enlightenment. At the beginning of Canto Three he writes:

If I see further than other worms,  
It is because I stand on the shoulders of other worms,  
Glow worms. As gravitation grasps the feet of light  
So can the force of my ignorance reach out  
to bend reality to human meaning.

(Part One, Canto Three, p. 18)

To reach human meaning it is necessary to gauge what is *known* as against what is *believed*. For this reason each canto in Part One is given a theme which equates to an aspect of the universe. These themes are indicated by a Greek sub-heading, which, while announcing the direction of individual cantos, ties the modern act of writing into the ancient act of writing, thus helping to emphasise Duncan's allegiance to an epic tradition. Also they serve to establish his classical education in the mould of Pound, Joyce and Eliot.

The thematic headings of Part One include: PROTOS (first); LEUKOS (white or blank); CHRONOS (time); KUKLOS (cycle or circle); HELIOS (sun); MENE (moon); GALAXIAS (galaxy) and KOSMOS (the order of the universe). In each canto Duncan relates the knowledge of the physicists to the understanding he himself has of the world, and places both within an aesthetic sensibility. Much of this is presented as a narrative which includes historical development of ideas, personal autobiography and allusions to literary figures. For the most part, the starting point for these narratives is the position of the written subject waiting for knowledge to remove his ignorance:

The abyss  
Above my head, an abyss.  
Invisible hands hold my feet or I'd fall  
into the abyss, unfathomable.  
Grateful to gravity, I try  
to understand its nature:  
failing abysmally.

An abyss within my mind,  
An abyss above my mind  
failing abysmally. (Part One, Canto Twelve, p. 80)

Similarly in Canto Four:

You, whom I love most,  
Of all things need most, tell me what you are.  
Do you exist, if eyes do not receive you? (Part One, p. 32)

Canto Six:

From my memories of the future  
You may interpret my mind's tense  
To take what meaning you prefer  
From time's metaphor. (Part One, p. 40)

And the heavy-handed opening to Canto Three:

One of the disadvantages of being a writer, even a poet,  
Is that in time, even your own time, you discover  
That you have to know something, or think you know something,  
Before you can write about it, even form a sentence,  
Let alone draft a Canto. (Part One, p. 18)

From this narrative perspective Duncan can construct a narrative which reveals the need to understand the universe, while using cosmology and physics to provide an accuracy which will aid such understanding. His conscious, questioning mind constructs the questions. It is physics that provides the answers, and if it does not then it offers a fair approximation of what is known about the universe.

The subjective mind seeks to discover objective truth and to do this it relies on the works of selected physicists. The use of the works of these physicists is qualified in poetic terms. Einstein, for instance, is described as 'the Dancer':

And the Dancer answered: 'The total extent of space  
Is dependant on the totality of matter,  
and vice versa' (Part One, Canto Fifteen, pp. 36-7)

and Sir Hermann Bondi is described as: 'a poet or I've not met one' (Part One, Canto Two, p. 29). However, Bondi also has his role to play as Duncan's guide:

But Bondi, standing in for Virgil,  
Leads me through the babble of those halls  
Where only vulnerable hypotheses prove valuable;  
A hell Dante never knew, that place beyond good and evil  
where all the curious are confined  
within the limits of their mind.  
(Part One, Canto Twelve, p. 80)

With the cast of characters established – Duncan as the ignorant pupil being led through the halls of wisdom by the chosen guides – what remains is for the knowledge imparted to the pupil to be made present within the writing. Duncan does this by reproducing theoretical writing and mixing it with his own beliefs and his cultural and aesthetic sensibility. He writes what he has learned and presents it to the reader within a poetic framework. In this way the universe is shown to be something within the mind of the individual, aesthetically compatible and having an objective reality which cosmology reveals more accurately than anything else. Poetic diction on its own is not enough to reach the totality of the universe. What is required is the poetic quality of scientific formula which can communicate and sustain order:

If poetry's purpose is to communicate  
Any word or symbol is valid, if it has meaning.  
(Part One, Canto Eight, p. 49)

Part One, therefore, can be seen as the beginning of Duncan's voyage to understand the totality of the world, and the human consciousness which

makes intelligible that world. And with Duncan it is not that the external world is only a part of the internal reality of consciousness, but that consciousness is the only tool we have with which to make sense of that reality. The two are inseparable, but the universe is external to and greater than consciousness. The individual must extend his own consciousness if he is to fully understand his place within the universe:

All that I cannot comprehend: being a part  
Unable to perceive the whole; limited by perception  
Lamed with this language, able only to articulate  
What I do not know, making measurements  
Which mean only to the ruler.  
Clay was our past, clay is our future:  
A fossil sandwiched between ignorance and oblivion.  
(Part One, Canto Thirteen, p. 92)

### *Part Two*<sup>105</sup>

*'on molecular biology and the anthropological background, from the evolution of life to the emergence of man.'*

Man, 'Introduction', Part One, p. 11.

Part Two is structured in a way that chronologically follows the geological time scale of the Earth.<sup>106</sup> Where Part One concerns itself with the formation of the matter required for the formulation of the Earth, Part Two deals with the geological changes of the Earth from its formation to when

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<sup>105</sup>Duncan R, (1971) Man, Part Two, London, The Rebel Press.

<sup>106</sup>Duncan includes a chart of the geological time periods within the poem so that the reader can follow the structure of the book more easily. This diagram names the time periods and their relation to rock structure, shows their age and their rock thickness. Alongside this is a list of life forms, indicating when they first appeared on the Earth. There is also a second diagram which is taken from a text book by Preston Cloud and Aharon Gibor (Cloud, P, Gibor, A (1970) 'The Oxygen Cycle of the Biosphere' in Scientific American, Vol. 223, No 3, pp 110-123). This charts the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere from the formation of the earth to the beginning of the Ice Age some twenty million years ago. Both of these charts emphasise Duncan's prioritising of scientific theory as the means by which we can make sense of the universe and our place within it. In addition the charts help to strengthen Duncan's poem as a kind of text book itself, one which attempts to truthfully reveal the development of the Earth, while incorporating a poetic sensibility which will ultimately pass judgement over mankind.

man first evolves. As with Part One Duncan uses scientific texts to map this progression.

Beginning at Canto Fourteen, subtitled ARCHEAN (1), (the oldest of the geological strata), Duncan introduces an autobiographical narrative in which he lunches with T.S. Eliot, Eliot having been his friend, his mentor and his editor.<sup>107</sup> This meeting is that of two twentieth century poets, one famous and widely admired, the other a maverick who has followed his own path. The lunch is presented as the point where evolution has enabled man to achieved civilised aesthetic consciousness. It is the beginning and the end. As Eliot wrote as the first line of 'East Coker', 'In my beginning is my end', and Duncan in Canto Fourteen: 'Beginning and end: cerebation of fire-flies' (Part Two, p. 8). It is the knowledge of one's own life which precedes the knowledge of others, because it is the point at which the world can be assembled. Duncan continues: 'consciousness: / This alone, encouraging' (p. 8). Human consciousness is the beginning of all questions. It is the place at which myth and religion can be invented:

God did not create man.  
Man created the idea of God. The concept zero:  
also necessary to mathematics.  
(Part Two, Canto Fourteen, p. 11)

As an opening canto to a section which will narrate the evolution of life on Earth, Canto Fourteen necessarily debunks all myth. This is because

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<sup>107</sup> Man was published by Rebel Press and not Faber. Duncan's last Faber publication was Home-Made Home in 1967, but his last Faber poetry publication was The Solitudes in 1960. Duncan's Diary of a Poem, 1964-70 refers to a lunch with Eliot which he wanted to include in Man: 'We are most idle when we appear most busy. I must not cultivate "apparent idleness". Eliot urged me to do this twenty five years ago.' entry dated, 7/11/66. This entry is specifically introduced in Canto Seventeen, where, quoting Eliot, Duncan writes:

And my advice to you is to get back to your farm  
and stop frittering yourself away with this strange obsession for  
microbiology. . . .

You know, science never did a poet any good.  
My hope for you is that you should be excessively idle;  
from your idleness much might emerge. (p. 50)

Here Duncan is drawing from the past and locating the memory in the present of Man. The significance of autobiographical material and its use within the poem will be looked at towards the end of this chapter.

myths, both sacred and secular, are based on the human desire to locate oneself in the universe without specific evidence of external reality. This is not to say that human desire is insignificant, but to stress that the earth can be shown, through scientific theory, to have evolved differently from any mythical idea:

Every poet or child could exercise his imagination:  
write his own Genesis. (Part Two, Canto Fourteen, p. 9)

Part of this debunking process is an historical description of those early scientists who attempted to understand the origin of life. Canto Fourteen shows the degree to which wild assumptions were drawn from crude theories which could be used by the church for its own ends:

This pretty fable, supported by the Church for a thousand years,  
led Alexander Neckam in the thirteenth century to propound  
his theory:  
'Birds evolve from fir trees which are in contact with salt water.'  
And because this, to the scholastic mind,  
Now classed all birds as vegetables, both geese and ducks  
were gnawed to the bone by all monastic orders  
On fast days. (Part Two, p. 13)

Canto Fourteen is lengthy at twenty pages, but it seems necessary for Duncan to devote so much space to the refutation of religious belief in a 'vital force' as being the essence of existence. This is done by espousing the evidential view that life generated from inorganic matter, and that the evolution of that theory took many hundreds of years and was not itself a spontaneous construction.

Having established the 'true' nature of life, Duncan is then at liberty to progress with his mapping of the evolution of life right to the point where human consciousness itself commences. This is necessary because in the over-all interpretation of humanity which Duncan is espousing, consciousness *evolves* and so may continually be advanced. This stands

against the idea that we are for all time either good or evil or somewhere in between<sup>108</sup>. The poetry is dense with scientific explanation, of which the following example is typical. Duncan's case rests in the scientific ability to 'prove' how life was generated, rather than having to rely on religious speculation:

Failure to perceive that before the simplest organism could be  
formed,  
the material of which it is composed  
Had itself to evolve from inorganic matter,  
a process which took a thousand million years  
Before the enzyme wrote its signature, the catalyst forged amino  
acids  
On the sterile earth which by its very sterility  
sustained them.  
For were such primary materials to appear now  
they would be devoured now. A lifeless planet  
Was, not only logically but chemically,  
A precondition for the creation and evolution of life.  
No paradox here. The formation of these inorganic substances  
No longer a matter of conjecture.  
All the known organic building blocks now produced *in vitro*.  
(Part Two, Canto Fourteen, pp. 27-8)

This, of course, is still conjecture, but science is able to accumulate evidence to support its claims, which, for Duncan, is more compelling than blind faith.<sup>109</sup> And Duncan presents his accompanying argument in the style of scientific theory so as to further authenticate his writings and his conclusions. He foregrounds the facticity of the content so that the poem may succeed as a didactic piece of writing and can carry its own sense of

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<sup>108</sup>In Human, All Too Human (1878), Nietzsche writes against the good/evil dichotomy: 'Evil is the characteristic word for man, indeed for every living being believed in, for example for a god; human or divine means as much as devilish or evil. The signs of graciousness, helpfulness, pity are taken anxiously as wiles, as preludes to a disastrous conclusion, soporifics and craft, in short, as refined malice. As long as individuals have such an attitude, a community can hardly come into being; at best, only its rudiments: hence, wherever this conception of good and evil rules, the ruination of individuals, their tribes and races, is near.' Nietzsche, F, (1968) The Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York, The Modern Library, p. 147.

<sup>109</sup>Later, Duncan confesses to a less ardent belief in science:  
I am becoming convinced that Science is another fairy tale: a good one I'll grant that.  
But a fairy tale. . . . I think I'll write fairy stories . . . Once upon a time there was time  
(Duncan's 'Diary of a Poem', entry dated 25/3/70).

authority. For this reason the authority of the presented facts is not itself questioned. So when Duncan catches himself writing 'poetically', i.e. sliding into the realm of his own imagination, he writes himself out of it, overtly showing the reader the poetic intent of the piece and his determination to write the scientific truth. An example of this occurs in Canto Fifteen, where Duncan is beginning to narrate the conditions required for life to begin. He starts with a speculative idea of how the earth began to cool and then drifts into poetic diction:

Then once upon a dream, a nightmare of nights ago,  
The seas cooled, the clouds of steam dispersed,  
And the sun daggered the horizon again, and the light,  
the light entered its inheritance,  
Walking with white feet over the silent waters,  
Sowing the seed of life  
Until the great belly of the Earth was pregnant:  
All from water  
All from light.  
That is where the dream began,  
In the microbe, in the man . . . (Part Two, p. 30)

This needs to be corrected if it is to carry the charge of scientific thought. The poet may 'dream' and reach the stage where the origin of life can be encapsulated in verse, but the story remains imaginative and so mythical and it lacks the rigorous discipline required if an objective truth is to be reached:

No, this won't do at all. Not at all. This sort of rhetoric  
might pass for poetry, or something like poetry,  
Not for sense. (p. 30)

By writing the shift from the imaginative to the rational into the content of the poem itself Duncan foregrounds this poetic direction, showing the reader the aesthetic behind the poetry. Also he reveals that the communication of that aesthetic forms part of the aesthetic itself.

In Canto Seventeen Duncan returns to the lunch with Eliot. This canto, subtitled 'ARCHEAN (4)', echoes the italicised poetic companion



narrative to Part One, Canto Eight: '*Man is but a shadow of a dream*' (p. 50). It collects the reference in Canto Fourteen of the shadow between him and Eliot '*A shadow, there was always a shadow, walking between us*' (p. 7) and modifies both to show how he is now capable of more objective reasoning by accepting a less delineated idea of the nature of life:

Whatever life is, and it could be the shadow of a dream,  
or a dream of a shadow, always a shadow walked between us,  
It is not an absolute condition, but relative.  
Possibly none of us is alive yet. (p. 47)

As Duncan progresses with the speculation of what constitutes life by using the geneticists Crick and Watson, the men who discovered DNA: '*life to-day is found only in association with proteins*' (p. 47), so the debate with Eliot on the nature of life is rekindled. This brings the scientific understanding of the origin of life forms back to the question of conscious development of the individual as it is revealed through autobiography. Duncan is again present within the poem so as to qualify his poem from the position of poet.

As the canto moves towards Duncan's luncheon date with Eliot an argument is progressed from speculation on the nature of life to the proclamation of the discovery of DNA with a plea that it should not become a new religion, '*Let us not worship D.N.A.*' (p. 48). From this it grows into an account of the polymerisation of molecules, and of the experimentation that showed the emergence of organic matter from inorganic matter. This position is strong enough to refute myth by being:

A tenable hypothesis, at least preferable  
To *RAKILES* lying on the mud by the banks of the river,  
giving birth to the earth and himself from his dung.  
(Part Two, Canto Seventeen, p. 50).

It is at this point that Eliot is introduced:

'I think I'll take some cheese,' Mr. Eliot had said,

'I can recommend the Double Gloucester.  
 And my advice to you is to get back to your farm  
 and stop frittering yourself away with this strange obsession for  
 microbiology. . . .  
 You know, science never did a poet any good.  
 My hope for you is that you should be excessively idle;  
 from your idleness much might emerge. A Bath Oliver?'  
 (p. 50)

This speech is followed by a formula for a carbohydrate, the scientific description of the Bath Oliver. While this is partly a joke at the expense of Eliot, it allows Duncan to develop his line of thinking. Having drawn attention to carbon ('It is carbon which holds the key', p. 51) he then describes the chemical constructions of the basic compounds of life. What this break in the narrative achieves is seemingly two fold. Firstly it punctuates the narrative in a way that prevents the reader from being overwhelmed by the representation of dense scientific formula. Secondly, it returns the poem to the journeying poet: the act of writing and the specificity of the chosen subject matter. For Duncan it is imperative that he continually justifies his project as worthy material for poetry. So, by presenting the great modernist poet as an aloof and somewhat ludicrous figure who can provide a quick dismissal of Duncan's project by showing greater interest in the quality of the cheese, Duncan presents himself as going against the great man shown to miss the point of his intention.<sup>110</sup> Underlying this, however, is a sense that Duncan is

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<sup>110</sup>Hugh Kenner also mocks Eliot's expertise on English cheese as an example of Eliot assuming the role of the kind of connoisseur who marked 'good taste' in the English upper classes. In adopting this persona Eliot could use the ignorance of a companion to show his 'cultured' knowledge:

The Stilton vanished. After awing silence the cheese board arrived, an assortment of some half-dozen, a few of them identifiably cheeses only in context. One resembled a sponge cake spattered with chocolate sauce. Another, a pockmarked toadstool-yellow, exuded green flecks. Analysis and comparison: he took up again his knife, and each of these candidates he tapped, he prodded, he sounded. At length he segregated a ruddy specimen. "That is a rather fine Red Cheshire . . . which you might enjoy." It was accepted; the decision was not enquired into, nor the intonation of *you* assessed.

His attention was now bent on the toadstool-yellow specimen. This he tapped. This he prodded. This he poked. This he scraped. He then summoned the waiter.

"What is that?"

Apologetic ignorance of the waiter.

"Could we find out?"

putting himself in a deliberately vulnerable position of the student who defies his master. Ignoring his master's advice may advance poetry. Duncan may be the brilliant protégé. But he risks creating a monster that could lead to his own destruction. The poem presents a man seeking his own ends, deliberately setting himself apart from those authorities who believe he should do otherwise. And the effectiveness of this and other passages like it, is in its juxtaposition with the dispassionate language of scientific explanation. By foregrounding opposition to his project Duncan reaffirms the image of the lone figure endeavouring to find an objective reality beyond the subjective limitations of his own being. Like Dr. Frankenstein and perhaps Pound too he is doomed to fail, but in so doing will become a tragic hero. A man who attempted great things for the good of mankind only to be humbled by the grandness and excessive vanity of his dream. In Canto Sixty One he reveals this Romantic intent, saying that he was a man:

. . . who wondered if Death itself could somehow  
Lie down to die; and somewhere, the living  
Be brought to life; so that man's identity  
Merged beyond himself and his brief span,  
Immortal, not in himself  
But contained within a consciousness, he clasped  
(Part Five, p. 105)

In this way Duncan progresses through the aeons in which life slowly developed, expounding and engaging with the questions raised by biologists

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Disappearance of the waiter. Two other waiters appear.

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"\_\_\_\_\_."

He assumed, at this silence, a mask of Holmesian exaltation:

"Aha! An Anonymous Cheese!"

He then took the Anonymous Cheese beneath his left hand, and the knife in his right hand, the thumb along the back of the blade as though to pare an apple. He then achieved with aplomb the impossible feat of peeling off a long slice. He ate this attentively. He then transferred the Anonymous Cheese to the place before him, and with no further memorable words proceeded without assistance to consume the entire Anonymous Cheese.' (Kenner, H [1975] *The Pound Era*, London, Faber & Faber, pp. 441-2.)

Duncan shows Eliot to be more concerned with the substance of the upper middle class persona than the considerations of poetry. In this way he is able to intensify his own writing against the great man who can dismiss his project like something that is not in the best of taste.

and geologists until all the known species of the earth are accounted for. This is Duncan re-writing the Genesis story with the aid of contemporary scientific thinking. The difference between the Man and the Bible is that Duncan concerns himself with the evolution of animals and of the Earth, while the Bible has these things spontaneously produced by an all-creating God.

The prehistoric story which Duncan creates is the familiar Darwinian pattern, only extended and with explanations of the conditions that made such developments possible. Life is described as a painful birth. Pain and grief are presented as the *a priori* condition of man.

Beginning in the shallow seas where the first vertebrates originated, the point in the evolutionary chain where Duncan says 'I can begin to write I' (Canto Twenty One, p. 70), the carnivorous predatory instincts of animals emerge:

They searched for food in the deep clear water,  
Preyed on other fish, needed a jaw,  
and in blind hunger bit their way to teeth,  
In shoaled terror swam their way to fins,  
finding in mobility, the shark's ferocity. (Part Two, p. 70)

From which Duncan concludes:

Once predatory, we can say we;  
Those seas deep in screams, the tides  
Entire terror:  
to bite, to begin; to prey,  
To progress; our kind, not from kindness. (pp. 70-1)

And from this he deduces that:

By fit, we mean the crude was cruel,  
By fittest, the most cruel.  
It is all in the pain,  
Either receptacles or instruments of pain;  
a conjugation of cruelty;  
All in the pain. (p. 71)

Within the pathetic fallacy of a writhing, oceanic inferno is the writing of the inherent qualities of all animals. From pain and cruelty comes the notion of the victim. This marks the development of the animal to the proto-human, so that the concluding section to Part Two reads:

To inherit a future, claim our bequest from this past.  
Dare to remember what we suffered  
to find the courage to imagine what we are to suffer.  
All in the suffering. May we find  
the suffering we can bear. That my only,  
This my prayer. It was there we grew,  
there we first knew.  
To suffer, to know; to suffer, to grow.  
I can now write I.  
This pain is me. This past is mine.  
Suffering, the measurement of man.  
(Canto Thirty Three, p. 119)

When man is finally distinguished from the animal, he can begin to suffer as an individual and as such can become self-aware: 'To suffer, to know; to suffer, to grow', where to suffer requires the conscious ability to reflect beyond the moment of experience.

Duncan presents a narrative of the evolution of life, which says that mankind is conditioned by the causal chain of existence. Within mankind are the traces of his primeval past. Our basic human instincts take us back to a species which survives against the competing species. The successful species is only so because it knows terror enough to evolve against its predators. These are lessons which are learned through pain and grief.

So far Duncan has explained the pre-linguistic world. He had done this by using several different language systems, and by incorporating some of the guiding tools of intellectual and cultural development: art, religion and science, but not all. Politics Duncan believes to be entirely corrupt; society is another distraction, which links with politics; and philosophy, when mentioned, is as quick, un-sign-posted references.<sup>111</sup> Art, science and

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<sup>111</sup>Plato's idea of the philosopher being the man who is outside the cave experiencing the real world while the rest see only shadows on a wall, receives an echo in Part Four, Canto Forty

religion, on the other hand, he refers to directly in order to foreground their significance to a modern sensibility.

At this stage in the poem, Duncan has reached the point where man is finally conscious and able to articulate primitive thoughts. Part Three examines the consciousness of proto-humans to show the basic instincts which underpin human existence.

### *Part Three*<sup>112</sup>

*'recalls some of those human experiences which caused consciousness to develop first towards the spoken and then ultimately to the written word.'*

*Man*, Part One, 'Introduction', p. 11.

To create the primitive social structure of primordial man, Duncan uses William Golding's novel *The Inheritors* (1955), as it tells of the lives of a small tribe of proto-humans who encounter a superior race of Homo Sapiens<sup>113</sup>. The Homo Sapiens abduct and kill the proto-humans, sacrificing a small proto-human girl and keeping a proto-human baby as a pet. Towards the end of the novel the narrative perspective changes from that of the proto-humans to that of the Homo Sapiens inheritors, so as to draw a distinct evolutionary line between the complex and dangerous Homo Sapiens (us) and our benevolent and extinct predecessors. However, Duncan does not use Golding's Rousseauesque idea of the pre-nascent man being free from hierarchical power struggles and therefore 'more human' than his successor who is bound by a primitive social contract. Duncan rejects the idea that a non-hierarchical social utopia is the basic desire of man to favour instead the

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Three as man emerges into consciousness:

'smug frogs squatting at the bottom of a pool

We peer up through the weeds

to conclude our puddle rims reality' (Part Four, p. 12).

<sup>112</sup>Duncan, R (1973) *Man, Part Three*, London, The Rebel Press.

<sup>113</sup>Golding, W (1955) *The Inheritors*, London, Faber & Faber.

selfish desires of individual subjects. This he does in Canto Thirty Six by creating a social group and then having them die of hunger. Only the narrator remains, left to survive by himself. Duncan's primitive man seeks to satisfy its own needs independent of group structures. In this way Duncan reverses Golding's socialist position and favours his own autocratic idea of the human instinct, one more akin to his own isolation from the literary and the urban world, writing in a small hut atop a North Devon cliff. However, there are allegiances to Golding's book as a diary entry indicates:

Reading Golding's "Inheritors". Its theme is near to mine. I think he missed many opportunities. And I couldn't follow his descriptions especially the geographical positions in which things take place.

(The unpublished 'Diary of a Poem', entry dated 7/11/66)

In spite of this there are some direct borrowings. The initial hunger of the tribe is present at the beginning of both books, as is the presentation of seasonal changes in climate. Although Golding's novel is set in early spring and Duncan's begins in winter, the inclusion of season indicates an occidental climate, making both books suitably Eurocentric. Other parallels can be seen in the choice of food-stuffs for the people. For example, both Golding's and Duncan's characters eat honey and are able to find it in similar places. Also both sets of characters have a fondness for marrow bone and especially the liver of the animal. Indeed there are passages in Man, Part Three that not only share a similar theme to The Inheritors but seem to be the same story told from a different perspective, so that only the intent has changed. An example of this would be the finding of the dead animal. Neither Golding's tribe nor Duncan's individual kill the animal, but while Golding produces a sense of taboo around killing (made more apparent by the tribe's primitive religious allegiance to the Oa, or earth mother), Duncan uses the animal as a means by which a further goal may be achieved, namely copulation. Furthermore, where Golding's tribe find a doe, Duncan's

character finds a pig . The pig is a traditional taboo food, so in using this animal Duncan is able to show that religious practice does not have its roots in evolution, but is imposed upon man.

For Golding's tribe the finding of the animal means that they can feed the old man of the tribe, and the meat is gathered up to take back to their camp, and the liver is given to the child. In Man, however, the liver is selfishly guarded by the man until the woman offers her buttocks in exchange:

She goes to take liver from me.  
I say: no. I it to keep.  
So she knowing other hunger inside of me  
Turns, kneels down  
                  giving her buttocks as cave for him.  
I drop my food and eat  
                  she with my meat in one mouth  
Now lets me feed her other.  
                  Meat makes her my mate.  
                  (Part Three, Canto Thirty Seven, p. 30)<sup>114</sup>

The distinction between the two books, that of a primitive, but social group in The Inheritors and that of individual survival in Man, is crucial in considering Duncan's view of humanity. Duncan's epic poem, written as a history of man and the development of conscious thought, truly begins with the individual having to survive on his own. Where Canto Thirty Six incorporates a tribal group only to have them all (the written subject excluded) die of hunger; Canto Thirty Seven has the written subject forcibly ejected from the parental cave and sent off to fend for himself. This is the natural order in Duncan's book. It is the family unit shedding its off-spring, the father forbidding the post-pubescent son from remaining with his mother, and the mother reluctantly agreeing with her one partner:

This she, my mother, now with eyes wet and wetting  
Say to me:  
                  'go.'

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<sup>114</sup>For Golding's description of the finding of the meat, see The Inheritors, pp. 51 - 57.





At this point the written subject has only encountered two women, his mother and the lover. Therefore, in the term 'all women' there is an intrusion by the writing subject who wishes to present his idea of an absolute condition which governs how men relate to women.

The otherness of women, derived from the singularity of the subject's mother, is confused by the fact that the women of the poem, whether mother or lover, are not the subject himself. When he says "there is no other" he is not saying that all women carry individual identities, but that he sees in them all only the image of his mother. Even though the opening two lines of the canto state: They are them. / They are them. (p. 20), otherness is only that which divides the subject from the outside world. When the external world refers to people they are not divisible into individuals, but are objects through which the subject can identify himself. This, when put alongside the idea that the underlying human condition is self gratification, means that there is no possibility of social harmony because all ends are subjective. Therefore, all 'others', as negated individuals, are insignificant. With the fundamental character trait being self preservation, man is then capable of envy, personal greed and even murder. Such human capabilities are presented in Canto Thirty Nine, when a new written subject describes events around his killing of his brother. This tale is a conflation of the Cain and Abel story and Macbeth, placed in the context of primitive human society. The physically stronger narrator is made to kill his smaller, weaker, but much smarter brother. He is encouraged to do this by his 'woman', who convinces the written subject that by eating his brother's brains he will gain his intellect . The community within which the murder takes place is based on segregated family units with each couple withholding their property. This possessiveness, instinctively derived through self preservation and self gratification, results in jealousy and the desire to have for oneself what one sees in the possession of another: food, warmth, bear skins to lie under. These material goods are then objects of wealth:

My own woman stronger than Ra.  
 Ra's own woman faster than Ra.  
 But all times Ra finds:  
 His pit with stag; his snare with bird; mine empty.  
 At the river: fish under rock he lifts; none where I look.  
 (Part Three, Canto Thirty Nine, p. 36)<sup>116</sup>

It is the survival of brain over brawn. However, this is over-turned by the cunning greed of the woman who is put in a weakened position by the inferiority of her male. The success of others, therefore, leads to jealousy dispossession and murder.<sup>117</sup>

Murder, in Duncan's view, does not produce remorse, nor is the inherent selfishness of the wealthy brother a critical factor in the murder. The effect of the murder on the written subject is to alter *him* and it is his condition which is the focus, not the dead brother:

With stick Ra found, I kill him.  
 With pebble on beach, break his skull open.  
 Eat his soft eye.  
 I walk back slowly.  
 Now Ra faster than me.  
 I see picture of his woman saying why? why?  
 Now Ra's inner tongue tells me to say:  
 'the waves took him.'  
 My woman smiles. I sit in the sun.  
 Now with Ra's eye inside of me I see:  
 Night darker than darkness,  
 darkness she cannot see.  
 (Part Three, Canto Thirty Nine, p. 38)

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<sup>116</sup>It may be of significance that Pound's childhood nickname was Ra. (see Ackroyd, P (1980) Ezra Pound and His World, London, Thames and Hudson, p. 100. A plate note reads: 'When a friend of the Pound family asked him if she might call him by his childhood nickname 'Ra', he replied: "Well, I've been called worse things".' Duncan could well be constructing a sibling rivalry between the two poets. Pound, dead by the time Man, Part Three is published, would be killed by the writing poet who, by his own confession, adopted some of the techniques Pound used in the Cantos for his own poem.

<sup>117</sup>There is a certain irony that Duncan's persona here is over-shadowed by a more successful brother, for Duncan always seemed to be overshadowed by the figures of Pound, Eliot and Britten.

The importance of possession and ownership is so dominant in Duncan's early vision of man and the formation of consciousness, that it is by way of securing a possession that the first word is written. This word is 'I':

But this beast me, mine.  
If tongue cannot be heard,  
if feet not say my way  
Can hand speak to them  
As hand spoke to it, now forever still?  
On hard horn with same stone I scratch  
This mark for me.  
Straight as that tree  
This

I

To speak for me. (Part Three, Canto Forty Two, p. 46)

The subjective pronoun 'I', the written subject as the first word, shows the vital ingredient in Duncan's view of writing and subjectivity. The writing subject places himself at the centre of literary pursuits and he does so to mark a form of ownership. In Canto Forty Two, the subjective pronoun marks the dead animal which he alone has killed. It has been his endeavour. The subjective presence of the written subject in Duncan's poetry may therefore be seen as a device by which Duncan can mark his poetry as his own possession. He has written the poems by himself, and does not owe allegiance to any other, unless he specifically wants to. The content of the poetry has been gained by him alone. By placing the subjective pronoun into the poem, to speak for him, Duncan enforces the central tenet that it is the effort of the individual which drives mankind, and that the individual seeks to retain what is rightfully his. It is clear that Duncan does not see this simply as one of the basic conditions of mankind, but also as the starting point of all writing. Also it is clear that Duncan himself is in agreement with this condition. It is a position of loneliness, pain and grief, but it is the position in which man can identify himself against 'others', should he have the skill and ability to do so. Man can exist within a social group, but his instinct is to place himself at the centre of all things, including writing.

Writing at its most basic level is therefore a subjective necessity for marking out property. Poetry, when considered in light of this declaration, is the marking of the poet's imagination. The presence of a written subject within the poetry is for Duncan only a further means by which the poet's imagination can be shown as specifically his and not the duplication of another man's thought.

It is also worth noting that Duncan likens the first written word 'I' to a tree. Trees have been used elsewhere in Part Three to symbolise penile erections. These erections are personified to be *part of* and *apart from* the written subject:

. . . Him wanting;  
Him, the blind tree of me,  
Who sees she when my eyes close and I'm sleeping,  
Him, upstanding, wanting wind of her to blow;  
Him thirsting for her thighs drink.  
This hunger more than hunger:  
its pain limbs me. (Part Three, Canto Thirty Seven, pp. 21-2)

Sexual desire has a will of its own, and is a stronger force than the desire to eat. Similarly, writing is part of and apart from the individual. The 'I' is carved onto 'hard horn' which increases the sexual charge of its tree-like erectness. The 'I' of the poem, while being a fictitious construction (otherwise the first word would have been written by an Englishman), unites the act of writing with the sexual need for self identification. When the individual can be identified separately from the group through his own independent achievement, then he can fulfil his sexual ends. This is the reason why the proto-human wishes to make his mark by the kill.

The evolution of consciousness in Part Three begins with mute terror and loneliness. In the beginning of man there is no love:

Love was not my wombing.  
It was fear that got me,  
Hatred which begot me;

Violence is what I am.  
(Part Three, Canto Thirty Four, p. 8)

The instinct of violence is fuelled by hunger and then sexual appetite. It is this which leads to the first murder, and it is this which ultimately leads to the first word. And the first word is self-reflecting. If it is a name it is abstract, signifying the self as identified by the self, and not the self defined by someone else.

Strangely, 'I' is not the first spoken word. For Duncan the spoken language precedes the written language and in a primitive culture he sees language occurring as verbs first, nouns second. Duncan chooses 'fire' as the first word. This is because of its benefits to man. It was fire which instigated the first social groups, as it marked a place where people could gather, warm and safe from predatory animals:

It was the flame and its fire which made us.  
Before flame found, we were apart,  
Not as now: together.  
Before fire found, we were: he, she, their young, an old;  
But after: many round it, feeding flame:  
Together . . ." (Part Three, Canto Thirty Eight p. 34)

If this 'togetherness' seems incongruous with Duncan's belief in the individual, it is because it is a memory of an old and dying proto-human telling the written subject about the origin of fire. Fire is the verb which comes from the noun 'flame'. But in the origin of language it is the verb which precedes the noun, the effect which precedes the cause. What is required for this linguistic feat to happen is a deductive mind that can trace back the effect to its cause. This form of reasoning is then the faculty of consciousness which, in Duncan's scheme, allows man to develop. Rational consciousness is therefore the necessary ordering construct that makes sense of the world and allows the individual to function as a human and not as an animal.

Rationality, then, is the bedrock for human society and it is that which had given birth to language. Also it is the uses and abuses of rational thinking within social structures, together with the basic human instincts of sexual desire, violence and self preservation which Duncan explores in Part Four, when he examines the cultural history of the world up to the present day, and beyond.

***Part Four***<sup>118</sup>

*' . . . is an attempt to isolate those events in human history which have moved consciousness forward . . . I will concentrate on such events as the invention of fire or the wheel, and ignore all those happenings such as wars and revolutions which had local, but not evolutionary, significance. By this I mean events which, though tragic in themselves, had no significant impact on the growth of human consciousness and therefore, to my particular perspective, are irrelevant. . . '*

Man, Part One, 'Introduction', p. 11.

Duncan revises the above statement made in the 'Introduction' to Man, Part One in the 'Foreword' to Man, Part Four (1974). He divides the section into two parts, the first he describes as an 'anthropological anthology', and the second he describes as comprising historical cantos. He calls the division an 'axis'. This is because, he says, he is attempting to 'plot mankind's position . . . on a graph.' However, the axis, or point of rotation, is actually a mark of opposition between the high achievement, as signified by 'Rembrandt, Einstein and Schubert', and the worst excesses of mankind, represented by 'Auschwitz, War and Revolution.' It is important to note that there is no subtle rotation of one side into the other, and there is little to suggest that the first set of achievements are in anyway apparent within the first set of Cantos. In fact the foreword was clearly written prior to the book

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<sup>118</sup>Duncan, R (1974) Man, Parts Four and Five, London, The Rebel Press.

itself, because the division of nine anthropological cantos and four historical cantos has been altered in the final text, so that there are eight anthropological cantos and five historical cantos. This reveals how Duncan worked from idea to text, with each poem made to fit a specific agenda. Therefore, his journey into knowledge is roughly simultaneous to the writing of each Canto. True enough, the major themes still echo and resound through all the cantos, but there is no direct referencing to events that will happen in future cantos.

The opening two lines of the introductory canto to Part Four, Canto Forty Three, spell out the failure of the intention described in the foreword and in the general introduction:

In this Part, I planned to write about those events  
which caused consciousness to grow: false track.  
(Part Four, p. 7)

The section continues:

My mistake, basic: the assumption consciousness had grown,  
gaffe derivative from naif and conditioned belief in progress  
In all things because there had been some improvement in  
sanitation or surgery'  
(Part Four, p. 7)

The need to explain how the poem is developing in relation to his overall scheme, drives away the kind of poetic patterning observed earlier in the work. The writing here is a prosaic mixture of long explanation and judgmental positioning. Passages such as these reveal two things. Firstly that Man is an on-going project full of false starts, pitfalls and wrong directions. Secondly, that Duncan is unable to resist talking about himself as the conduit for discovery. While seeking 'pure knowledge', he falls into the trap of articulating his prejudices, thus the poem is tinged with what may easily be perceived as gross posturing.



Duncan sees error in his thinking that there has been growth of consciousness through cultural advancement. As Duncan saw it, the technological advance in the 1950s and 60s Britain was not an advance in knowledge but simply a means to create comfort. And when the body is comfortable the mind dulls. Instead he seeks an holistic development for man, but finds no evidence. We are doing the same as always, only the tools have changed.

The way out of this difficulty is once again to stress his intention. His focus is on consciousness, and that is to be found in the individual. This means that the masses have no place in his schema, which in turn means that social advances, or the rise of class consciousness, is not relevant subject matter. He seeks to reveal the heroic figures of history:

. . . I am not concerned with the common man  
But the uncommon man. Those individuals who've budged us  
from the trough  
could all clamber on one bus. (Part Four, p. 7)

All groups of life that can be regimented into class structures are attacked – all that is, except the upper-middle classes, the elite:

As for the Proletariat  
who are all so damned inferior at . . .  
And confound the middle classes  
with their small eyes and enormous arses . . .  
Lenin's first official act? Ordered a Rolls Royce from Hoopers,  
the aristocratic point of view:  
The best is not good enough. Tomorrow a wise man will carry a  
guinea:  
a tip for his executioner . . . (Part Four, p. 7)

This last quotation needs to be examined in closer detail. The Proletarian working classes, are rejected as inferior and as such are unable to achieve anything.<sup>119</sup> The middle classes are presented as myopic, over-fed

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<sup>119</sup>An entry in Duncan's 'Diary of a Poem', dated 25/9/70, runs:

The majority is always, invariably and inevitably wrong. The evidence of history shows conclusively that if "progress" has been in the hands of the will of the

caricatures. The upper classes should then follow as Duncan's sequentially oriented poem would have us expect. But this is not the case. The next attack is on the leader of the proletarian uprising in Russia. By ordering a Rolls Royce as an official act, Duncan condemns Lenin, at first glance, for shirking his communist ideology in favour of personal luxury. However, the possibility for Duncan to defend the proletariat from their hypocritical leader never happens. Lenin, seen as a great figure of the working classes, merely seeks the trappings of the elite. As Duncan sees it, when a member of the 'lower' classes reaches a position of power he seeks the trappings of the elite. Duncan is in fact saying that it is the desire of all men to be part of the elite and to seek the 'aristocratic point of view'. This view, that the 'best is not good enough' makes them strive to improve themselves, most specifically by gaining wealth. Duncan puts forward the argument that when a member of the lower classes seeks to raise the conditions of that class, what he actually wants is that which he does not possess, and which he sees in the hands of those in the classes above him. The working class man does not want to change society, he wants to pillage another. And it is this condition of mankind which Duncan has already stated to be the basic drive of humanity in Part Three. The elite classes (and the structure Duncan draws is distinctly Western, and distinctly English) are those individuals who have those things which are desired by others. They are the smart 'Ra' while the rest are the killing other.

Where then is Duncan to be located as writing subject within this dichotomy between the elite and the envious, when he has created a written subject in the guise of the murderer? It is clear that in Canto Forty Three, Duncan is not located within the working or the middle classes, and that his sympathy is for the aristocracy, doomed to execution. And yet he himself has been complicit in that execution. Two items need to be examined in order to

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majority, humanity would still be in the trough. If we have "progressed", it is on the backs of less than 100 individuals - whom the mob stoned.

explain this conundrum. The first of these is to see what is gained by the murderous proto-human. The answer is darkness:

My woman smiles. I sit in the sun.  
Now with Ra's eye inside of me I see:  
Night darker than darkness,  
darkness she cannot see.  
(Part Three, Canto Thirty Nine, p. 38)

This darkness is a conscious awareness of the act of taking within himself the essential quality of another. The murderer has become both himself and other (he sees with Ra's eye), and as such may be considered impure, a mongrel. Even though Ra is the murderer's brother, his sensibility and intellect is alien to him, and it is jealousy of these qualities that leads to murder. Duncan also saw himself as a mongrel, a precarious individual who was half-German, half English. Precarious because of the Second World War and precarious because of the inter-mixing over the centuries of their respected royal families - especially the German and English.<sup>120</sup> As Duncan himself could claim royal blood, and as he was supported in part by landed money, his affinity lay with the upper middle classes, and it was with these people that he primarily associated.

In short, Duncan places privilege as an unavoidable result of evolution. There are those who are innately better than others, and through this innate quality they gain wealth. Duncan sees nothing wrong with this. It is the condition of mankind. What is wrong, however, is the need for those without privilege to seek it when they do not deserve it.

This said, the first section of Part Four begins at Canto Forty Four, and is titled "Anthropological Anthology". Canto Forty Three serves as a general introduction to the Part, so as to retrench the basic idea behind Man, namely that consciousness is the single most important quality of the human

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<sup>120</sup>Duncan's father is reported to be the bastard son of the Crown Prince of Bavaria.

condition, and that man is always constrained by the language he uses in manifesting that consciousness. Meanwhile, the poet continues:

who filled this pen with treacle,  
crossed this nib from spite?  
Words, without them the maniac dribbles;  
With them, this poet trots to insanity.  
(Part Four, Canto Forty Three, p. 11)

And Pound, the poet who was officially classed as dangerously insane:

We assume we are more conscious than Ra.  
It is probable we are more intelligent (Part Four, p. 12)

More intelligent through our rationality and our understanding. But Ra had intuition, affording him 'a glimpse of a whole' (p. 12), which is what Duncan wishes to achieve.

Duncan uses Part Four to present a glimpse of the 'whole' of civilisation. To do this he returns to the textbooks and recorded personal experiences. He continues to use narrative personae to make the events more immediate and more personal. For Duncan, the theme that governs western civilisation is sacrifice, but before progressing with this he presents the reader with an apocalyptic vision of humanity in decay:

When you piss,  
your water is black;  
When you shit  
your bowels flow out of your arse hole:  
Turds emerge from your mouth.  
(Part Four, Canto Forty Four, p. 17)<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>This section is so unusually graphic for Duncan that it is impossible not to think it has been taken from elsewhere. The nightmarish and surreal imagery is similar to that found in Lautréamont's *Maldoror*, an early model for the surrealists, but more significantly, it echoes 'Canto XIV' in Pound's *Cantos*:

Above the hell-rot  
the great arse-hole,  
broken with piles  
hanging stalactites,  
greasy as sky over Westminster,  
the invisible, many English,

Physical decay takes necessary function from the human body. Turds emerging from the mouth is the point of physical and mental decay. The human is wholly dead, killed by the perpetrator of the curse. The brain and the heart of mankind is killed. This is sacrifice. Where one person has control over another, then that other is dead:

I am rolling out your brain like dough:  
I shall bake it for my bread.  
I have my fingers round your heart,  
I crumble it : you are dead. (Part Four, p. 17)

Canto Forty Five is a juxtaposition of authoritative reporting on cannibalism. The narrative persona here is reporting events as he sees them in Central Brazil in 1946. Sent by UNESCO to report back on cannibalism to 'the Committee for Primitive Peoples sitting in Paris' the Canto frames and files its report. The outcome of the narrator's study is that cannibalism is indulged in because human flesh tastes good. However, this witty concluding remark masks the more significant part of the sacrificial ritual : that the victim becomes an object for sexual gratification by the young women of the capturing tribe. The drawing together of sex and sacrifice is echoed throughout Part Four so they are seen to be interdependent. Duncan portrays sex as the one 'luxury' that man can indulge in when doomed to death at another's hand. This links back to Part Three and Duncan's belief that man's most instinctive desire is for sexual gratification. While this desire persists it contradicts rational behaviour and thus distracts from the attempt to advance consciousness. Ultimately, as Duncan has already stressed with some force in Part Three, it is the attempt to return to the blind world of early childhood and dependency upon the mother.

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the place lacking in interest,  
Last squalor, utter decrepitude,  
the vice-crusaders, fahrtng through silk  
waving the Christian symbols,  
..... frigging a tin penny whistle,  
Flies carrying news, harpies dripping sh-t through the air, (The Cantos, pp. 62-3).

The two of the three cantos in the first section of Part Four which do not directly relate to sexual activity relate instead to the death of women. The first, Canto Forty Eight, relates an Eskimo tale of the ritual around burying one's mother. The poem is a poem about letting go, and allowing the old woman to die according to the ritualistic tradition of that culture. The second has Duncan himself appear as a written subject, visiting a friend whose wife has died, but who refuses to allow that fact of her death to interfere with their marital relationship.

Death is an inevitable consequence of the physical body, but the spirit, the essence of the dead, can live on within the consciousness of the surviving individual. For Duncan, history shows us that people rush headlong toward death, and they take with them terror and an innate sense that if death is to come upon them then the blind instinct for copulation is brought to the fore. This is why Duncan has couples copulating on the cattle trucks headed for Auschwitz, and describes the sexual debaucheries of nuns and priests during the black Death. The proximity of sex to violence marks the key element of western civilisation:

Why did that pile of girls, I saw at the bottom of the shaft  
Lie with blood between their naked thighs?  
What had I to do with thee?  
Bestiality (wrong word) first passion to be excited  
last to be allayed. (Part Four, Canto Fifty Two, p. 54)

In Duncan's futuristic vision of London in Canto Fifty One, sex has become so reduced that it is banal and everyday. Sex is that which is done automatically, violence removed, and religion is replaced by a lungful of oxygen. Society is reduced to the maxim 'we eat to breed, we breed to eat' (p. 42). This brave new world denies consciousness, as much as did the revolutions where mob rule replaced the more easily disposable system of monarchical government.

Canto Fifty Five, another futuristic canto but this time presenting a narrative following a Third World War, is the first of the concluding cantos. It looks back at the history which incorporates the present day and goes beyond to reveal where man had gone wrong. Here, as elsewhere, political solutions are false solutions and the wrong people had been chosen to develop consciousness. Ultimately the condition of the late twentieth century is revealed:

Then in the 70's (the 1970's) when we'd acquired most  
of the means,  
We completely lost, or forgot, any purpose:  
Except comfort, pursuing it to its uncomfortable conclusion;  
Reason, ridiculed; intelligence, suspect;  
Scientists despised like priests;  
priests turned into busy social workers . . . (Part Four, p. 77)

With rationality destroyed and the significance of science underrated, aesthetic sensibility is the last category that Duncan needs to address:

Poetry beyond contempt,  
Not undeservedly; public sex,  
Private desperation; music, mainly masturbation;  
The past denied, future discounted; not that we had no Gods  
but strange Gods: each man his do-it-yourself messiah;  
Communications, no communion; media,  
no message; emphasis on education, as ever:  
Nobody knowing what to teach . . .  
Pass the cannabis; Sartre, mistaken for an intellectual  
(Part Four, p. 77)

Failure to take into account the past and to learn from it so mankind can progress into the future is what Duncan sees to be the major flaw in the late twentieth century. It is the reason for writing the poem, for charting the evolution of life and the development of civilisations. It is the reason for re-drawing the progress of consciousness by re-engaging with the specific parameters of reason, science and poetry.

Towards the end of Part Four Duncan re-iterates not the fall of man, but the inability of man to rise above his basic instincts. Duncan sees a world where human sensibility remains maladjusted, and so long as it is, so mankind will never be capable of anything but the trivial and the violent. Lamentably the darkness experienced by the first murderer will remain:

It had been a long journey. So much to be lost here.  
Light is not light enough. There is darkness  
Darker than night. Man came from there;  
men, going there. (Part Four, Canto Fifty Six, p. 81)

### *Part Five*

*' . . . will dwell on the nature of consciousness and its potential: the possibilities of future growth. . . '*

Man, Part One, 'Introduction', p. 11.

But the possibilities of future growth have been destroyed by man's repeated failure to consider what Duncan would have us believe to be the single significant aspect of life: consciousness. This results in Duncan once more entering the poem as a written subject reflecting on what he attempted and what he failed to achieve in the writing of the poem.

Throughout Part Five he is shadowed by an imagined reader, who is manifested by the person he is talking to as he openly contemplates his writing. This 'reader' is a woman who is only interested in sex and tea and having her name remembered correctly. Her character, inattentive and banal, is Duncan's attack on the readership who fail to take note of what it is he is saying. She is a pre-construction which guards Duncan against criticism while helping him to construct himself as a lone poet standing beyond the consensus of opinion. Duncan presents the woman as incapable of thought, and she is only a distraction to the male. Indeed, she is so insignificant that





And the reader is openly made a figure of fun:

I asked Miss O'Rurley if she used intuition.  
'Are you suggesting I need a deodorant?' she said.  
And her back put out the stars. (Part Five, p. 93)

The end of the journey, as at the beginning, sees one man attempting to say who and where he is. The attempt to journey from the dark wood has merely revealed the wood to be darker still. Of everything that might be there is everything that had been. By looking into the past of the world and the past of the individual, Duncan finds only the route he has taken and on that evidence there seems little way forward. When he examines himself at the moment of writing he sees only a man at the moment of writing, with the uncaring world failing to grasp the significance of his vision and of his writing. To be conscious, therefore, is a double edged sword. It can lead to knowledge, but it reveals that such knowledge is redundant in the face of man's repeated failure to use his consciousness wisely.

Duncan is left enfeebled, offering only the subjective idea that the individual is a fortress that has to be protected against outside invasion. Consciousness is only present within each individual and does not offer anything to anyone else, it can only take away. Therefore:

*Defend the frontiers of your mind.  
All battles lie in there. The rest is loss.  
Give all away, that they can take away.  
All treasures in your mind.*  
(Part Five, Canto Sixty Three, p. 111)

The pathos of the closing lines of Man is such that Duncan returns to Christ for hope:

*His crucifixion in your mind.  
His Resurrection in your mind.  
And now that that dream is past,*

*the only way out is through your  
mind again.*  
(Part Five, p. 111)

But for hope to be in the mind of the individual is to accept that the individual is essentially alone in the world. All that exists is individual consciousness, those who detract from it, and a past which the present writes in pain and grief. The statement in the opening canto remains, for Duncan, forever true:

For I am the only conscious thing  
In an unconscious universe (Part One, p. 13).

In the next part of this chapter we shall examine various aspects of Man that are brought to light by the exegesis of its five parts. The first of these to consider is the effect Duncan's subjectivity has on the poem.

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### *The Correlation Between the Written and Writing Subject as Signified by the Subjective Pronoun 'I'*

It is no coincidence that the first word of Man is 'I' and that the second word is 'am'. The Cartesian rationalism, of thought predicating existence, that man is a thinking substance, is the foundation for the poem. It is from this position that Duncan continues to explore the nature of consciousness. Taking for granted that he 'is' Duncan seeks to discover 'what' he is, and 'where' he is, not in specific geographical terms, for he is well aware, as the reader will be too, that he is in Devon, sitting in a hut over-looking the sea:



The poet, conscious of both himself and his project, makes this known to the reader. The reader is left in no doubt that he is being presented with an author who will *personally* explore the nature of consciousness. There is no possible speculation as to the intent. And Duncan intervenes as written subject to ensure that there can be no misunderstanding. He wants the overall control of the poem because he is concerned that his 'meaning' will be misinterpreted.

Secondly, the presence of the writing subject as written subject enables Duncan to equate himself with the whole consciousness of mankind. If it is apparent to the reader that it is he, Duncan, who is adopting the holistic persona of 'the miracle, man', then it is always from him that the various other subjective narrative voices are being uttered. What this does is to filter the different characters he adopts through the journey of the single poet. It is Duncan who is journeying towards knowledge *on behalf of* the rest of mankind. However the journey is specifically his, and it is he who is feeling the pain and terror of evolution. This is distinctly different from Dante's perspective who is guided through the three stages of hell, purgatory and heaven by others, describing the condition of people who have died, either as sinners or as penitents. Those people retain their individuality and are allowed to tell their own stories. In Man the stories of others are presented through subjective narrative personae and are not granted independence from the writing subject's control. Duncan is more than a reporter of events; he assimilates them within his consciousness (which, for him, is where all things reside) and then recounts them, via his conditioned view of mankind. All is filtered through the sensibility of Ronald Duncan.

The problems which surround this type of appropriation occur when the individual narrative perspective is most clearly that of other people who describe the events surrounding their lives themselves. This is different to the adoption of an historical character whose life was accounted by others and as such is part of the cultural mythology.

When, as in Canto Fifty Four, the Auschwitz Canto, Duncan uses Primo Levi's personal, first person narrative account of his deportation to Auschwitz in If This Is a Man (1958), he is taking the autobiographical account of a person who is only known through his writing. So, it is not the man who is taken from history, but the writings of the man and his role in a particular historical event which Duncan utilises. Duncan's interest in Levi's writing is not concerned with Levi's participation, not with the writing itself, but with the event: the holocaust. The authentication of the event which Levi is able to impart enables Duncan to provide a 'truth' which he would not otherwise have, and his guise as 'all men' enables him to adopt Levi as a persona. But by adopting the subjective pronoun used in If This is a Man Duncan denies Levi his individual suffering by placing it within the eclectic, all pervasive consciousness of Duncan as writing subject.

Levi's personal narrative is reduced to a tale told of an historical event. Its heartfelt passion that the reader can obtain through the knowledge that the man personally experienced what is apparent in the writing is lost when Duncan repeats it in Man. This is because the reader knows that Duncan is not the man himself, but the narrative persona which is conditioning it. When Duncan writes 'I am a Jew' (p.67), there is no reason to doubt him, either metaphorically or actually. But when Duncan writes 'my number is now 186352', the specifically referenced identity is too strong to carry belief. The adoption of the character takes over at the expense of those who had their names replaced by numbers that were crudely tattooed on their arms. This is all the more disturbing when it is apparent that Duncan appropriates the identity of not just the possible, unknown owner of the number 186352, but that of Primo Levi himself (174517). Levi was subjected to Nazi genocide and is here subjected to the ideology of Man, where the suffering of the individual is lost to Duncan's notion that all mankind suffered and goes on suffering throughout history. As a result Duncan denies the individual his right to exist independently from Duncan's conscious understanding. The

citation of Levi's book in the bibliography does not save Duncan from this dilemma as it emphasises the extent to which he has appropriated the recorded experiences of another man for his own ends.

Although the Auschwitz Canto is the most extreme and difficult use of a written subject, it is symptomatic of Duncan's desire to create the actual presence of a living being experiencing historical moments. This is done so as to create a sense that whichever time he happens to be writing about, it is concurrent with the moment of the writing itself. Duncan's consciousness, so he says, stretches through all history: 'Look into my eyes, for there all history is recorded' (Canto One, p. 13), while at the same time being apparent in the present: 'is not the present / Our only tense?' (Canto Six, p. 42). This present tense is then borne out by the present tense narratives, such as those of the proto-humans, and with emphasis on the present tense time of writing through the now conditioned subjective pronoun.

In conclusion it may be said that the written subject serves the following functions. Firstly it signifies a writing subject who is in control of the writing process. This ties the intent of the poem to a specific objective of which Duncan wishes the reader to be completely aware. Secondly, the first person narratives make *immediate* historical events, so that they can exist within the present tense of the writing. This makes them seem more realistic, which is central to Duncan's belief that past experiences are held within the consciousness of the individual. Thirdly, by using first person narratives Duncan is able to show the development of himself as the journeying epic hero alongside historical characters. He adopts the persona of all men, but primarily he is Duncan; the point at which the evolution of consciousness has reached, however satisfactory it may be to 'rest content with Duncan.' The written subjects and the writing subject remain within a symbiotic relationship, whereby the possible present of an 'other' is continually brought back into the specificity of the writing subject. All things in Duncan's consciousness. All things conditioned by his vision.

Duncan does not doubt the fairness of this vision. He sees the horror in history and sees that such horrors are repeated regardless of our faculty for reason. The rest is a lament, a subjective weariness that with the knowledge of the world within him, there is nothing that can be done to change anything:

“Pity, pity me.  
Release me from being man  
Let me crawl out from this bog, this mire, this undergrowth  
This jungle . . . (Part Five, Canto Sixty, p. 97)

“I speak in the first person / because I am the only person I know”  
Duncan writes at the beginning of Canto Sixty, p. 94. And to present the knowledge of that which is outside of his experience is plausible because he has, in some form or another, whether by learning or through his imagination, made it apparent to himself. The centrality of Duncan as writing subject is the central tenet of Man. Textually, he is the point from which all else follows, whether forward or backward. And the end of Part Three places the use of the subjective pronoun, the first word written, in the ownership of the proto-human, written-writing subject:

This  
    I  
    To speak for me.  
Tongue speaks for now,  
Hand speaks for after.  
    Long after I am gone:  
    This mark will speak for me.  
            (Part Three, Canto Forty Two, p. 46)

Here the ‘I’ marks possession and elsewhere in the text the ‘I’ marks the possession of conscious thought, ultimately belonging to the writing subject, within the context of his written work. With the writing subject so dominant it is important to look at the use and effect of the autobiographical elements of Man.



## *Anecdote and the Autobiographical*

While the project to discover the nature of human consciousness is objective, Duncan's personal subjectivity is key to his learning process. In considering the autobiographical writing in *Man* it is necessary to distinguish between the presence of a writing subject from that of the written subjects of the narrative personae. The writing of narratives and the explanation of scientific developments are framed by the presence of a writing subject who is saying: 'so what have we learned from this? What has it told us?' These questions enable Duncan to construct his conclusions about the condition of mankind. For these conclusions to be valid, Duncan thinks it is necessary for his own self to be apparent within the poem. This subjective appearance is to enable the reader to see how clearly the journeying subject, Duncan, is learning beyond his sphere of reference, while remaining in touch with his own personal life. The writing process is, therefore, an *artificial* activity pursued against the everyday while the everyday competes for his attention, demands his time, and impinges upon his emotions forcing them to rise to the surface. This makes it difficult for Duncan to remain objective and to follow the course of objective reasoning. There is always a clash between objective discourse and the subjective reality of his personal world.

To highlight the difficulty of the task of keeping the objective and the subjective separate Duncan foregrounds the dilemma within the writing so making the struggle apparent to the reader. It is a paradox. On the one hand Duncan writes that 'the People are unimportant / from this perspective' (Canto Forty Three, p. 7), while on the other he is aware that his own conscious understanding is dependent on 'people' with a small 'p', either in the form of those who read his poem, or those who effect his subjectivity and mark the distinction between the subjective and the objective. And inside that dichotomy is Duncan's own battle between his objective reasoning and

his emotional responses. This comes to the fore with the death of Virginia Maskell:

Not knowing she lay dead, this Canto begun so objectively,  
Ending subjectively, proving conclusively,  
we are a mechanism producing consciousness,  
Conscious of pain.  
The pain is me. (Part Two, Canto Seventeen, p. 58)<sup>123</sup>

While Duncan's reasoning maps consciousness, his emotions reveal the horror, terror, fear, grief and pain which the subject feels in response to an increased awareness of the world he inhabits. As a result the individual seeks pity. But because Duncan himself is at the centre of the poem he feels for his own suffering as a paradigm for the suffering of all mankind:

To inherit a future, claim our bequest from this past.  
Dare to remember what we suffered  
to find the courage to imagine what we are to suffer.  
All in the suffering. May we find  
the suffering we can bear.  
(Part Two, Canto Thirty Three, p. 119)

Man begins with Duncan wishing to write his autobiography but is complicated by his realising that his life stretches out beyond his own tangible existence. That within the present and only tense is the past and the future. With this in mind it is possible to see how Duncan uses autobiographical elements from his own life as a bench mark against which the consciousness of all mankind can be gauged. As he narrates the history of mankind he is narrating his own history. The writing subject invades the written subject,

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<sup>123</sup>The effect Virginia Maskell's death had on Duncan is revealed in his diary:

On Thursday [1st Feb. 1968] she [Virginia Maskell] was buried at new Hall Convent. I cried through the mass (which was meaningless to me). I threw a poem in her grave. Much of me lies there. Will lie there. I cannot now go anywhere without her being there, listen to music, look at the sea, touch my horses. It is all pain. Pain is my skin. These incoherent pages: the heart of me. Oh the pity, the waste, the pity, the waste.

How will I ever get back to Man? I don't know. The trouble is I'd laboured so hard to stem my "subjective hosannahs" and to try to write objectively about something other than emotion. Now I drown in it. I am swept away. (Duncan's unpublished 'Diary of a Poem', entry dated 7/1/68).

and autobiography makes this more 'real'. And if the writing subject is *really* feeling and experiencing his life then he is also *really* feeling and experiencing his objective view of human consciousness. Duncan centralises himself so as to provide the focal point for his poetic journey and to ensure that there is a continuum within consciousness, which is *at the time of writing* (which becomes the present time of writing). In other words, a living man experiences the non-living; the conscious man experiences the unconscious. And however objective one wishes to be, so Duncan says, the subjective truth of one's own existence as against the objective truth of the existence of all other things, remains the only real truth one can know:

I have opened the palms of my hands,  
Tried, tried to empty myself,  
Stand where the red ousts the pink,  
And follow where the white rose leads,  
But I have got nowhere, but here, nowhere.  
It seems that the ego has no purpose but to persist.  
(Part Five, Canto Sixty, p. 98)

Ultimately all is brought back into the consciousness of the subject. As Duncan says of Virginia Maskell:

For where did she ever live except in my mind to me?  
And did she not take her life  
Knowing that was her way back to me,  
Into my mind where her life was, is, and will be?  
(Part One, Canto Six, pp. 42-3)

The thread of autobiography re-surfaces throughout the poem, most notably in Part Five, where Duncan examines his whole life to see what he personally has learned. This is placed against the intrusion of women and the mundanity of life. Duncan is presenting an image of himself striving to go beyond subjective indulgences in order to reach a higher, abstracted truth. But this truth is always manifest within the subject: 'What have *I* learned?' (My italics).

By constructing himself as a character Duncan is both part of and apart from that character. In Canto Sixty, for example, he presents himself as telling the story of his life and of the intention of Man to a woman. But because the account is narrated inside the poem itself, Duncan shows that the writing process is inseparable from the intertexts which inform his living process. Both events, therefore, are subject to self-conscious assessment and the entwining of the objective with the subjective controls the construction of the poem. Part Five, therefore, is the writer coming to terms with his own project, and using his own life as an example of how things have not changed. The fictionalisation of this life, the placing of the writing subject in an artificial situation of describing his life to a woman who is not real but a metaphorical representative of the failure of mankind to understand the importance of his writing, reveals the problem of the project in itself. In wishing to extend his own consciousness Duncan has had to enter the realm of his imagination. To present a 'factual' account of history and the development of consciousness he has not only resorted to his own subjectivity, but has relied on his imagination to fill in the gaps that his direct experience cannot. It is the experiences and perceptions of those experiences by the individual consciousness which make the event 'real'. Therefore, if he is to reveal the truth which lies outside of his consciousness, he has to return to the reality of his own consciousness in order that they may become apparent.

The fictitious meeting with T.S. Eliot after Eliot's death is based on meetings when Eliot is alive. This provides a degree of credibility to the meeting. Eliot was Duncan's editor, and they did dine together. Autobiographical fact. Duncan dining with Eliot after Eliot's death, however, can only exist in Duncan's mind. That a similar event occurred in the past enables him to resurrect it in the present. The purpose of this is to re-establish the subjective quest of the project Man. Eliot is characterised in what Hugh Kenner (1972) describes as 'one of his Garrick personae' (p. 441),

while Duncan characterises himself as a poet, worthy to be dining with the great poet, but clearly with his own ideas. He continues to dine with Eliot because he values his friendship and because death is not necessarily a condition of the body, but a state of mind. This is made clear in Canto Fourteen, where Eliot is introduced:

Then, with portions of smoked eel  
And half a bottle of Piesporter between us, Eliot relaxed.  
Fingering his black tie, he said with unusual conviction  
overcoming his habitual caution:  
'I am convinced that life persists after death. And you?  
What do you think?  
'First I need to be convinced that life exists before death,' I replied,  
attempting some levity.  
A waiter interrupted. Neither of us wanted the soup.  
'You may possibly have something there', he said.  
By coffee, we'd agreed: life could not be defined by copulation,  
reproduction,  
only by consciousness, and of that  
We had little evidence before us, around us,  
Or even within us. (Part Two, Canto Fourteen, p. 7)

The meeting after Eliot's death follows on from this, though some cantos later:

Then Uncle Tom died. But we continued to lunch together  
not infrequently. There was no frivolity to him  
And he was always a good, a sympathetic listener.  
So at our old table, I drink his wine,  
Now wearing a black tie too. And ask the questions he asked.  
(Part Two, Canto Seventeen, p. 52)

Asking the questions Eliot asked, and bringing them into the present, 'I drink . . . now wearing' presents a 'real' situation and the workings of a real mind within a recognised poetic tradition. Duncan stabilises his subjective opinion by working things through with Eliot as a counter-point. In this way Eliot is used to support Duncan's vision of mankind. Eliot is presented as a 'real' protagonist to authenticate Duncan's position in the same way that Virginia

Maskell and Rose-Marie Duncan appear at other stages in the poem and for other reasons.

This kind of self justification shows how self-reflecting Duncan is *within* his writing and *about* his writing, and suggests that through his writing Duncan can attempt to validate his own existence. By seeking 'insight' into the consciousness of the self Duncan is exploring what it is to exist. It is Duncan's idea that if one is to know oneself it is necessary to know one's place within the space time continuum and the language of the space time continuum, effectively owned by the scientists, which draws him to learn science and equate it with poetry, his own personal medium.

The relationship between the subjective consciousness of the individual gaining knowledge of the objective world and its representation through the writing of a poem (which becomes external to individual consciousness by existing on the printed page and not forever in the mind of the individual) uses many language systems and intertextualities. The truth content and effect of these other language systems, when present within the linguistic construct of Duncan's poem, form the next part of this study.

### *Language Systems, Intertextuality and Truth Function*

*' . . . with my heterogeneous ideas yanked by violence together . . . '*  
(Part Two, Canto Seventeen, p. 52)

Duncan draws a distinction between knowledge of the world and the world itself. Meaning, in Duncan's view, is that which language attempts to reach, but is confounded by language not being the thing it wishes to communicate:

The more I write, the more I know  
Meaning evades me. (Part One, Canto Eight, p. 49)

Knowledge drives the writing, but the ability to access that knowledge remains slippery. The irreconcilable opposition between writing and the object of writing informs Duncan's writing of Man, although language itself is given no intrinsic value. For Duncan, language is not something which shapes and changes thought prior to the thinking, rather it is always secondary. Language, therefore, is the means by which we recognise the existing forms of the world and their associated concepts. As Duncan perceives it, the writer must first know of these things and then use his linguistic skills to make that knowledge apparent within writing:

One of the disadvantages of being a writer, even a poet,  
Is that in time, even your own time, you discover  
That you have to know something, or think you know  
something,  
Before you can write about it, even form a sentence,  
Let alone draft a Canto. (Part One, Canto Three, p. 18)

Knowledge, therefore, gives authority to the writing. Duncan takes on the role of the diligent researcher, fact-finding so as to give his poem a sense of authenticity which he sees the subject matter demanding. For instance, if Duncan is to write about the formation of the universe, he sees that he can do so in one of two ways. Firstly he could concoct an idea of the formation of the universe which is metaphorical or he can concentrate on scientific enquiry. Duncan quickly dismisses a figurative construction as too simple. Scientific enquiry, however, is an attempt to 'know' absolutely what took place, whereas the metaphorical uses the 'fact' that the universe has taken place to shed light on something outside of the event or thing itself. What is significant here is Duncan's dependency on authoritative documentation external to his own sensibility. In recording what has been discovered by others Duncan filters that knowledge through his own poetic understanding, and so forms a conjunction between an external intention and the intention of his poetic endeavour. The authority of a discourse that relies upon its own specialised language system is such that when it is transferred to a poetic text

it carries with it its own set of 'truth-functions'. As Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1971) states in her PhD dissertation, 'Poetry as Knowledge: The Use of Science by Twentieth Century Poets':

The epistemological claims of the original system will usually involve some idea that it "tells the truth" about a certain aspect of our experience of the external . . . world and hence that the meaning of a term in the system is dependent upon this function. (p. 3)

Forrest-Thomson's thesis examines the use of science by T. S. Eliot, Hugh MacDiarmid, Ezra Pound, I. A. Richards, William Carlos Williams and William Empson in terms of the imagery and structures that integrate systems of understanding with the real and their ultimate dependence upon the verbal order. Forrest-Thomson argues that the linguistic dialectic that exists in science between data and the articulation of that data, when introduced into poetry, correlates with the arrangement of factual statement and emotive or metaphorical aspects of the poem. It is in the poem, as the new site of linguistic expression, that a synthesis occurs between structural organisation, imagery, the understanding of the preceding linguistic order from which definition arises and the production of meaning. This new site, with its new linguistic order, preserves 'the unique status of poetic discourse' (p. 320). Theory and practice are there interdependent when assessing the representation of what she describes as 'outside' experience (p. 322).

Forrest-Thomson not only shows the importance of scientific discourse to twentieth century poetry, but also she usefully explores the relationship between different linguistic methods of description and definition. From here it is possible to see how Duncan presents the 'truth-function' of scientific discourse in Man by foregrounding his inclusion of mathematical formulae. The 'truth-function' of formulae operates both empirically as description and aesthetically in its symbolic ordering. Thus Duncan includes them within the poetry, not as imagery or to metaphorically



support a poetic argument, but as a system which is in itself poetic. Duncan, typically, ensures that this position is understood by adding a line or two of explanation:

If poetry's purpose is to communicate  
Any word or symbol is valid, if it has meaning.  
(Part One, Canto Eight, p. 49)

Then follows a stern warning about what will happen to poetry if it does not follow the lead Duncan is taking in including science in his work:

For if poetry fails, as it is failing,  
To carry the charge of mathematics; the evocative,  
The concise formulae of physics, then poetry will become  
A red dwarf, burned out, provincial,  
Merely amatory,  
A trivial [sic] document of subjective diahorreah [sic].  
(Canto Eight, p. 49)

In this quotation Duncan uses the metaphor of a 'red dwarf' to describe the potential future for poetry, using the metaphorical aspects of the descriptive term in a secondary order of signification which, nevertheless, has science providing the language by which contemporary poetry can be judged. By reversing a binary opposition of science and poetry where the perception of poetry as superior (a given starting point from which Duncan works) is overturned, Duncan can then feel able to justify his claim that Einstein is a lyricist and Herman Bondi a poet.

Scientific formulae are then used to show their innate poetic qualities:

$6\text{CO}_2 + 6\text{H}_2\text{O} \rightleftharpoons \text{C}_6\text{H}_{12}\text{O}_6 + 6\text{O}_2$ : the formation of sugar  
(Chemistry is poetry  
only more accurately written.)  
(Part Two, Canto Sixteen, p. 43)

The chemical equation balances out its sides to form something akin to poetic patterning. A balance and an order is created that is in itself holistic, for there

is no part of the equation which can leak out and be left unaccounted for. That is the essence of the formula, the translation of a set of things into a different state of being. Poetry in Duncan's view is the translation of the non-linguistic into the linguistic and the closer the poet can get to approximating the non-linguistic, the better his poem.

Both the scientific equation and the poem, so Duncan will have it, strive towards a closure which becomes a contained unit of meaning. The result is an understanding of a transformation which has been made possible by the language used, whether mathematical or poetic. This is what Duncan means when he says that in science he finds poetry, and it forms the basis of his argument for his use of science in Man in the imagined discussion with Eliot. A long passage in Canto Seventeen discusses with Eliot (now dead) the importance of order to both poetry and science, culminating in the following comparison:

. . . Order. It's that which excites me about molecular  
biology.  
I tell you, Possum, I've discovered composers  
who can write a double fugue  
On an eyelash; poets whose stanzas make the links in Dante's  
terza rima  
Look as clumsy as a scarf  
knitted by an amputated man with a skein of eels.  
I'm talking about protein  
which, with an alphabet of twenty amino acids  
Running from glycine to histidine,  
can write the whole canzone of the cruel sea  
(Part Two, Canto Seventeen, p. 53)

For Duncan the formula for protein is more exact than the poetic forms used by Dante. The order, then is more significant than what is being transmitted within that order. For Duncan, the ability of science to discover the component parts of nature and to express them in a way which is divested of all superfluous material enables it to reach the essence of life clearly and without subjective bias. The stark emptiness of the chemical equation, which can nevertheless encapsulate the thing according to its own

language system, achieves a unique 'meaning' that poetic diction cannot achieve alone. The potential for an empirical truth which cannot be refuted is, for Duncan, a fundamental requirement from which all else can follow.

Duncan's argument runs that it is necessary for the poet to return to the basic essence of existence, as represented in the most specific empirical terms available. By doing this the poet can construct a poetic which will be both objective and truth seeking, and which will avoid what he considers to be the heinous crime of 'subjective hosannahs'. Another protracted section, this time in Canto Sixteen, spells out the position:

(None of this is the proper subject for poetry? Then what is?  
This the ribs: let others flesh them: find the rhetoric,  
Forge the imagery: the rest, cosmetics, decoration. This, the ribs;  
walk on ruthlessly, do not fall into the Sitwell.  
Your purpose: to extend the range of your own ignorance.  
Your destination: ignorance. It will be all you know.  
And whatever your feelings are  
try not to put them on this page.  
I am sick to death of your feelings: try to make poetry  
Think again. Not self-expression: self-suppression.  
And besides, since she brings you her unhappiness,  
you will have her wholly in the end.) (Part Two, p. 45)<sup>124</sup>

To fight against the subjective it is necessary for Duncan to forge some kind of knowledge which takes him outside of subjective considerations, while at the same time maintaining the basic essence of poetry: to communicate and to be ordered. Duncan is under no delusion that scientific equations gain privileged access to the thing itself. Instead he shows that the scientific approach to the world and the language it uses to do so is more lucid than a poetic diction which continues to be cluttered by the false image standing for an imagined reality. In Part One, Duncan tackles the problem of describing the sun:

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<sup>124</sup>In spite of this need to quest for truth, Duncan admits openly that truth itself is an unreachable goal because of its ultimate dependency on human perception:

'A hypothesis: a stem, not a destination.  
Never a destination, there is no destination.  
Truth, like the horizon, inevitably recedes  
As we approach it, moved by our own perception.' (Part Two, Canto Fourteen, p. 22)

Or, to lame me with a restricted poetic diction  
I could describe it as: (Part One, Canto Eight, p. 48)

and of the two images he then produces, 'a porthole in the sky' and 'a red panther stalking the blue prairies', he says:

Neither of which would be any more accurate than saying:  
(Canto Eight, p. 48)

then going on to paraphrase verses 5 and 6 of the Nineteenth Psalm. From these lines it becomes clear that it is the accuracy which science offers that is desired over and above the myriad of potential perceptions of the poet.

A universal idea is offered by science which can be utilised to produce an hermetic idea of the self. If the universe can be shown to exist in a certain way then the individual can know where he is located. In this way individual identity is strengthened. With the construction of individual identity being of paramount importance to Duncan there is little surprise in finding the line 'Now I can begin to write I' occurring at several stages during the poem. The first occurrence is when animals emerge from the swamp:

Then, in Lower Ludlow: a seam of ancestors,  
I can begin to write I:  
the first vertebrates appear.  
(Part Two, Canto Twenty One, p. 70)

The second occasion is the point at which the first moment of suffering can be articulated from the personified pain of human birth:

And remembering that pain  
I can begin to write I.  
(Part, Two, Canto Twenty Three, p. 78)

And then thirdly at the point where the proto-human writes the first word, 'I' at the end of Part Three. All of these moments where the self is able to be

considered as coming into being have been pre-empted by the first words of Canto One: 'I am'. The presence of the writing subject is then that which takes pre-given texts and reproduces them within a poetic discourse so as to substantiate the moment of conscious existence which has already been reached. The first vertebrates appear in a seam of rock. They are dead but by being discovered they can be shown to have 'lived'. The only difference between their existence and the present day is the time scale which separates the two. Human consciousness is able to reduce that time scale through rational thought, constructing, in the present, the time scale which separates the present from the past. What is reinforced is an understanding of the present to which the past relates. The past and the universe, therefore, only exist within the thinking mind of the individual. If that thought is not exercised then the universe and, more importantly, the individual who resides in that universe exists only through misunderstood concepts.

The individual does not exist any less for lack of knowledge with regard to physicality, but consciously cannot say 'I am' with any supporting truth, and so cannot write his autobiography - the written extension of himself.<sup>125</sup>

If this position is considered with regard to the use of texts brought into the poem it is clear that all is allowed so long as he, Duncan, makes the reader aware that he is borrowing from other texts. If he does so, then he is expressing a conscious decision based on choice. If he does not, then he would not show himself to be aware of the substance of his conscious decision making.

Duncan takes great pains to ensure that this awareness is made apparent. He begins by saying that poetry is an assembling (Part One, p. 72),

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<sup>125</sup>The facticity of autobiography is itself highly problematic as it can only be a further literary text external to the subject. However, the elements of desire that are used to construct a 'faithful' account separate the autobiography from a work of straight fiction, if only on a simplistic level. At best an autobiography can be said to carry the desire of the author to write himself into the recording of chosen events and as such offers a perception of the author which is presented as authenticated and self-referencing.

and goes on to say how and why he will do this. Using the rhetorical qualifier 'like any seasoned poet' he continues:

Pickpocket or pirate, I will lift anybody's wallet  
If it contains a word I want, or board Einstein's barge  
To borrow his lyric of meaning:  
E = mc<sup>2</sup>. (Part One, Canto Eight, p. 49)

To enhance the tradition behind this stated claim that all poets thief from others, taking their possessions for their own ends, Duncan provides a bibliography at the end of Parts Two and Five, to show the texts he has used for his project. But the texts listed are only those he has specifically chosen to further the narrative development of human kind. Literary borrowings and the referencing of texts by other writers remain covertly present, tucked into the developing narratives and the spread of names which proliferate throughout the text.<sup>126</sup>

In spite of the use of language systems which exist within their own fields of discourse independently of Man, and in spite of the need for Duncan to achieve a network of truth-functions within the poem, it is his own distinction between the conscious subject and the external reality which conditions the poetry. Always he returns to the point where he must examine his own existence, and to be aware that he is the only thing that he can know and that all knowledge only leads to this existential fact. He does this because of his belief that it is the uniqueness of individual consciousness which enables consciousness as an abstract condition of mankind to grow.

Individuals such as Bondi, Einstein, Eliot, Pound and Dante are for Duncan significant names which stand out from the herd. It is only those individuals (men) who do so who are worth considering. Duncan places his own individuality alongside these people to see how he measures up. He

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<sup>126</sup>The majority of these names are either those scientists concerned with the understanding of life and evolution, or they are Duncan's artistic heroes, or they are political figureheads he attacks for their hypocrisy and their failure (along with the mass of mankind) to grasp the fundamental essence of human consciousness.

sees failure. But he does not fail through an absolute truth that some people are better than others, he fails because he is living his life, while the lives of others can only be imagined and brought to life within his own consciousness. The construction of real people as those of individual achievement, highlights specific active moments of their lives, and as such constructs them as heroic figures. Duncan portrays himself within the poem as the man who must learn from these people, but his self-consciousness fails to free him from his own subjectivity. Because all is brought back into himself, it is himself which is of most significance. While he reflects upon his own condition Duncan is unable to 'achieve' and so remains static. His journey remains one which ventures into his own mind as he sits rooted to his desk. By foregrounding himself as a writer engaging in the writing process Duncan becomes trapped by his own literariness, the 'I am writing that I am writing that I am writing' syndrome. As a result his subjective presence is never lifted, and the project of Man always returns to be a project of the writer attempting to understand himself.

### ***Man and the Epic Tradition***

Unity of action in Man is not the story of a hero told through poetry, but rather, as with other twentieth century epics, the heroic figure is dependent upon the poem for his existence. It is a development of the secondary epic whereby the conventions of the genre are consciously used to add weight and dimension to the work, so that while the poem 'includes history' it is not the history itself that is so important as the way the poet seeks to condition the event. In Duncan unity of action is transformed into a 'unity of centre', that all history is channelled through the singularity of Duncan's consciousness. The epic journey, therefore, occurs only within the mind for it is there, Duncan contests, that the lessons of history can be

harnessed for greater ends. The different aspects of science and art and history are bonded together by the writing subject's journey towards understanding. Each Canto and each Part work towards this end. For example, the concluding section to Canto Seventeen runs as follows, after a proclamation that 'To be conscious is to suffer':

Unless we stand under this  
    how can we understand?  
Unless we understand,  
    how can we wonder?  
Unless we have wonder,  
    what is life for?  
Life is for the wonder that life is.  
Wish for nothing more. (Part Two, p. 58)

This section, which attempts to totalise the human condition, follows the writing down of several chemical equations and a description of the discovery of the enzymes and atoms which explain the building blocks of life. The action of enzymes and other chemicals which can be examined independently of their role in organic life is tied in not only to simple organic life, but also to the chemical construction of the conscious subject who is narrating that function. Such disparate themes as a lunch with T.S. Eliot and an 'Eskimo' burying his mother are unified by the omnipotence of the writing subject and his intention to unite all things within the consciousness of one specific individual who seeks to extend himself beyond his own ignorance.

The second quality which may be regarded as essential to epic is 'rapidity'. There is undoubtedly rapidity in Man as Duncan manoeuvres through the universe, charting thousands of years in the space of a few pages. Whole ranges of evolutionary development are presented and then progressed from, scientific experimentation presented and then improved upon as one theorist replaces another. Time scales are reduced to the essential components of events. A theory is explained and developed and then the impact that has on the writing subject's consciousness is expressed.



And often, as the above quote testifies, a concluding maxim is produced. The rapidity of action is not only present, but provides the essential dichotomy behind the poem: that there is an individual existing in the present who contains within his mind the formulation of life and the universe. Where evolution occurs over millions of years an accountable sequential pattern can be drawn within the instant of the present tense. The causes are judged by the effect, and the most recent assessment of the effect and subsequent theory about the cause forms the basis of current thinking. This precarious development, often involving false starts and misguided ideas, is condensed in the poem to produce a rapidity of progression that accords with the criteria for an epic poem.

A third criterion is 'the art of beginning in the middle'. Duncan as writing subject is *central* to the poem, but so is his point in the present. This present is where consciousness of the past and the possible future exists. All, for Duncan, occurs in the present tense. From the present one can travel into the past and the future because all is conditioned by the moment of conscious thought.

The next, 'the use of the supernatural', is something more open to contextual conditioning where what may be deemed supernatural becomes less clear. Duncan examines myth, but his greatest allegiance to myth is in the hypotheses of cosmology. Here theory is rigorously presented to provide an understanding of the universe in which human kind automatically resides. While working against the notion of a constructed supernatural creation, such as that offered in Christian mythology, science constructs an argument that relies upon a belief in rational explanation. Though the creation of the universe and the earth can never be 'experienced' it can be approximated through our understanding of the laws of nature. As scientific theories enter the common currency of everyday thought they gain a mythic status as being the authoritative description of the universe. This is maintained until another theory overthrows it by being more *believable*.

Entwined with this is an element of simplicity and beauty, such as with the equation for the sun which Duncan uses in Part One, Canto Eight.<sup>127</sup> As Duncan claims that 'Every poet or child could exercise his imagination: / write his own Genesis' (Canto Fourteen, p. 9), his idea of the supernatural and individual consciousness seems incongruous. The supernatural is the construct of the imagination and for Duncan the empirical explanation of the world through 'qualified' knowledge is more tenable as it offers a degree of facticity that is objective and not based on faith or excessive use of the imagination. Imagination, however is the means by which man can extend himself beyond what he thinks he already knows, and as such is an essential ingredient of consciousness. But the imagination must always be reined in and controlled by reason.

Perhaps the most significant conformity to the epic tradition is the relationship between the bard and the epic hero. Merchant (1970):

The epic hero's fame is directly linked with that of his bard; but the bard's quality depends no less on an ability to concentrate all his energies on his subject. It is this sharp focus on the central figure in his massive isolation that gives the great epics their grandeur and universality. We are confronted by Man in history. We are all involved in what becomes of him. (*The Epic*, p. 4)

Like Dante, Duncan is both hero and bard. But Duncan, while representing history and locating himself within that history, also locates all things and all thought within his own conscious understanding. This means that all events take place within his reasoned imagination. Therefore Duncan's 'heroic' quest is to enlighten himself about the condition of man and then to translate it into poetry. As bard Duncan's heroic subject is Duncan as conscious individual. The bardic Duncan, (writing subject) is self-conscious

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<sup>127</sup>Probably the main reason why Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* has been a persistent best seller is the simplicity that Hawking gives to such a complex system of theories, as well as the almost mystic quality of quantum mechanics itself. Similarly, the astonishing computer generated images of chaos theory have stirred the imagination and served as both symbol and icon for British youth culture. Seeking order and beauty in nature is the domain of both scientist and artist.

to the point where he turns all other subjects into objects, who then conform to the ideology Duncan wishes to espouse. Because Duncan is the only subject he becomes isolated, taking on the guise of all mankind. He himself is all he can know, he is 'the only conscious thing / In an unconscious universe' (Canto One, p. 13).

Duncan includes the individual within Man, yet he includes the universal. However, notions of universality stem not from theological argument, but from the theoretical writing. The specific discoveries made by particular individuals, such as Francis Crick, Newton and Einstein, are seen as being discoveries which extend consciousness objectively towards what can be considered as a qualified, objective universality. Consciousness in Man is therefore divided into the imaginative mind and the rational mind. These two characteristics are not mutually exclusive, but serve each other. The rational mind, however, remains the dominant form of consciousness, as it is that which can 'rationalise' the flights of the imagination. Similarly it is the rational mind which controls and *orders* the poetic form.

As mentioned earlier, it is to Dante's Divine Comedy that Man owes its central allegiance as Duncan attempts to guide man through the horror of existence towards an enlightened perspective.<sup>128</sup> But Duncan's vision never allows him out of the wood where Dante begins, because his journey is through the labyrinth of the mind and thus leads him to no place other than where he already is. And while Duncan is guided by his chosen scientists, Bondi and Cloud, in the first half of the poem, the only character to parallel Beatrice is the unnamed and vacuous guide who leads him through the Metropolis of the future. And she offers nothing but a tour of the 'arsehole of the universe' (Canto Fifty One, p. 39), and her body where Beatrice guided Dante towards an understanding of divine love. In Man divine love is bereft of conscious reasoning and offers no solution to the condition of human

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<sup>128</sup>Duncan's idea that through knowledge one can become wiser and therefore a happier, more whole character owes much to the Enlightenment where rational control of the emotional, and an understanding of scientific developments, were considered the basis for all moral, social and political interaction.

consciousness. While stating that 'there is always love' at several points throughout the poem, including Canto Sixty One, p. 104, and Canto Fifty Four, p. 69, love itself is a diversion from reason because it depends on the existence of an objectified other. Love cannot be useful to conscious advancement unless it can be utilised through conscious thought. At which point it ceases to be love.

From this it may be concluded that while Duncan carried forward some of the basic principles of epic writing, and the grand scale of the poem was certainly of epic intent, his poem does not strive to be a companion to the great epics through history. For example, there is no classical allusion, nor is there an evocation of muses. He is, however, conscious of the tradition he wishes to work against. As he says in his diary:

Tomorrow I'll start to rewrite the Galaxias Canto and see if I can improve it here and there but haven't much hope of doing so: The material is such that it either goes into Miltonic rhetoric or stays as gem like chemistry: I prefer the latter. Must keep it hard and not slip into being poetic. Ugh. For what I am trying to do is to give poetry back its lucidity and sense - missing since Pope, I'd say. There's a giant. His reasoning is so impeccable and his lucidity never falters. I must reread Pope and 'Vanity of Human Wishes' and 'London'. That's the stuff.

(Duncan's Diary of a Poem, entry dated 13/6/69)

Wishing to avoid Milton, and replacing Virgil with Bondi, Duncan strides through the Twentieth Century with the aid of Pope and the Age of Reason. And from Pope, Duncan clearly owes much to 'An Essay On Man', with its focus on Man's place in the universe, order, and the importance of reason for human understanding and conscience. 'An Essay On Man' concludes with a line which reveals the central theme of Man, and its regard for individual knowledge:

and all our Knowledge is, OURSELVES TO KNOW. (p. 279)

which is to say, that it is within the individual that all knowledge resides and that objective reality is only possible through the interpretation and reasoning of the individual subject. This is Duncan's main premise.

### *The Role of Women in Man*

The place for women in Man within the development of human consciousness is clearly delineated. Put most crudely, in this poem women do not participate within the development of reason, nor do they have the capacity for intellectual argument. To see how this is manifest in the poem it is necessary to examine the role of women in Part Three, the section of Man which sets out the behavioural instincts of mankind.

In Canto Thirty Seven there are two women. The first is the mother of the proto-human narrator, and the second is the 'lover'. This division between lover and mother is repeated in Canto Fifty One where the nubile woman guide says: "We eat to breed, we breed to eat" (p. 42). These two cantos offer the extremes of female development in Man. Canto Thirty Seven provides the basic understanding of women, and Canto Fifty One is a prediction of their future condition. In both cases women are seen only to eat, copulate, give birth and have men follow them around.

Between the past and future condition of women, there is another. That of the woman to whom Duncan, as written subject, explains and assesses the project of the poem and whether his intellectual journey has been successful. The woman has little interest in what he is saying, being more concerned with sex and food. 'Make love to me', she says, echoing a line from Doris Day's song 'Move over Darling', in Canto Sixty (p. 97), while in Canto Sixty One, Duncan breaks from his musing to accept lemon in his tea.





as to increase the potency of Duncan's intellectual pursuit. In this way women serve the higher aims of male consciousness while not being able to participate in such pursuits themselves. They are another obstacle to be overcome if consciousness is to develop.

When manufacturing an idea of creation, taking the persona of God as a written subject, Duncan describes the creation of Eve as 'compensation' for Adam and as 'a frivolous distraction' (Canto Fourteen, p. 9). This means that the seemingly naive title Man, is not, in this sense, so naive after all. The poem clearly states that the pursuit of the development of consciousness is male-specific and that for *all time* women have a role in life which is defined by their physical characteristics and not by their intellect. In other words, Duncan sees women as having little real significance in the evolution of mankind and that civilisation depends solely on how men rationalise the world and control their own sexual desires. For Duncan Man quite categorically means *man*.

### ***Stylistic Technique***

There are several facets of the thematic intention of Man which inform the poetic style. The first of these is the use of textbooks, specifically of scientific theory, as a means by which knowledge of the universe may be gained. Duncan's desire to present an informed view of the history of evolution and for the potential for consciousness to develop beyond the present day, leads him into a didacticism that is empowered by textual presence of his source material. Sections such as those dealing with chemical formulations authenticate his own line of thinking. At times the poem becomes an exegesis of particular scientific thinking. However, the dryness of detailed theoretical argument is tempered by the authorial intrusion of the



writing subject. This draws the objectivity of scientific theory back into the subjectivity of the cognitive subject. In this way the science which is appropriated into the poem forms the substance through which a poetic discourse may continue. In effect, Duncan is using the poem to justify itself:

None of this is the proper subject for poetry? Then what is?  
This the ribs: let others flesh them: find the rhetoric,  
Forge the imagery: the rest, cosmetics, decoration.  
(Part Two, Canto Sixteen, p. 45)

The meta-critical first line is tempered by the pathetic fallacy of the second, whereby poetry is defined as an Adam figure, waiting for a creator-poet to define the character. Duncan's claim is that before anyone can construct a human condition through poetry there must first be an understanding of what life is, namely through conscious awareness. It is this which he is attempting to offer. Poetry must therefore always be conscious of its own 'present' and by so being can construct itself 'correctly' without falling into what he sees (as Pound saw before him) as ornamental nonsense.<sup>129</sup>

The prose-like passages of the poem have only one intention and that is to communicate the ideas put forward by somebody else but nevertheless chosen by Duncan to serve his ideas:

It is carbon which holds the key.

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<sup>129</sup>Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1971) cites from Pound's Gaudier-Bzreska: A Memoir to elucidate Imagism:

the point of Imagism is that it does not use images *as ornaments*. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language. ('Poetry as Knowledge', p. 167).

While Duncan was in favour of the Imagist's removal of poetic diction and thus decorative language, he dislikes the image as being a thing in itself. For him the purpose of language is always to express the ideal and not merely to present a thing as it is. As he writes in his diary:

This morning I've started "Galaxias". Have written a dozen lines about poetry and given a kick at the Imagist school which for all their virtues (getting rid of poetic diction) confined poetry to literary subjects and with their concern for the detailed image, behaved like fowls with maize upon the ground, pecking from one irrelevancy to another. Not all of them, of course, no strictures here against TSE but the school of concrete imagery with nowt behind it, no vision beyond the thing itself. That's what I kick. ('Diary of a Poem', entry dated 3/6/69).

Duncan argues that going beyond 'literary subjects' into science frees poetry from self-obsession and provides it with an integrity and an intelligence that enables it to confront epistemological 'truth'.

For whereas other elements form compounds  
by exchanging electrons,  
Carbon alone achieves stability  
by either the loss, or the gain, of four electrons  
Which it need not transfer to another element  
but can share with them,  
And in that sharing  
form any of the twenty or so amino acid chains:  
(Part Two, Canto Seventeen, P. 51)

It is during these passages that Duncan moves closest to the original texts from which he is working as he necessarily replicates a given argument. The above quotation was taken in bits from Royston Clowes' The Structure of Life (1967) and reassembled to appear continuous. The section on carbon in Canto Seventeen can be seen to have originated from the following prose:

The carbon atom is unique among the simpler elements in requiring *either* the loss *or* the gain of *four* electrons to become stable. The successive removal (or acquisition) of up to four electrons becomes progressively more difficult. . . . Stability for the carbon atom is therefore acquired in an alternative manner which gives it its special position among all the other elements. Instead of transferring electrons, carbon atoms *share* electrons with other elements to form *non-ionic* or *covalent* bonds.  
(The Structure of Life, p. 58)

As a good summarist should, Duncan extracts the key terms and reproduces them in a stylistically similar way. The style of the original text can then be seen to dictate the style and tone of the poetry. Aware of this corollary, Duncan offers a counter-point whereby he justifies the science, and proves his poetic skill by recourse to his imagination. Such flights into the imagination are then rationally adjusted to reveal his newly acquired knowledge. An example of this can be seen further on in Canto Seventeen where science melds with Duncan's poetic sensibility and is then objectified to form a conclusion based on what is learned from both. This occurs in two sections which together illustrate much of Duncan's poetic technique in Man. I shall quote both sections and then comment upon them:

Within our bodies over a hundred thousand proteins formed into  
     peptide chains  
 By nimble enzymes, morticing molecules together,  
     catalysts which accelerate the reaction by detaching the  
     substrate molecule  
 Switching it to form a new molecular bond;  
     agility of a Breton lace maker  
 Making fifty thousand stitches per second, lace that is  
 The lace we are, curls of chestnut hair.  
 Queens have died young and fair. Helical chains  
 Of globular protein  
     strands in which disulphide bridges hold the coil  
 With H<sub>2</sub> as a hatpin.

Poetry is what is: beauty is what is: it is all order  
 Though we do not perceive the order.  
 Nothing can exist which has not its own cohesion:  
     beauty is whatever is.  
 Even her lying there? Even her lying there  
     with her lips slipping from her teeth,  
 And co-enzymes in maggots taking  
     kinetic energy from her decay?  
 From a universal view, a high hill I have not climbed to,  
     that is beauty too. But from my ditch  
 It is waste. Ugliness is waste.  
 Waste is order that's frustrated,  
 When the rose wilts unwatered, and what she grew to is taken  
     from,  
 And what I grew from is taken to.  
     So, let this amputated pianist play, I say:  
 I wasted what I loved,  
 I loved what I wasted.  
 Waste is what I am. (Part Two, Canto Seventeen, pp. 54-5)

Beginning with a description of the biological mechanics of the body, Duncan personifies, through pathetic fallacy, the activity of enzymes. Their 'nimble' quality enables them to act like carpenters in general building work, morticing the molecules together. The long lines carry the description forward while alliteration: 'morticing molecules', 'proteins . . . peptides'; and assonance: 'hundred thousand', 'nimble enzymes', 'reaction . . . detaching' sustain a poetic vantage within which the difficult science is revealed. The objective position of the biological description is therefore already flavoured by poetic syntax before the subjective imagination of the writing subject takes over to produce the analogy of the 'Breton lace maker'. Here the choice of

Breton as opposed to, say, Nottingham, is a return to the French troubadour poetry of Provence, via the trouvères of Northern France who imitated them. For the English the idea of a Breton lace maker is one which conjures pastoral industry, while the Nottingham lace makers lend themselves more to the Industrial Revolution and big cities. Breton lace makers can therefore be seen as a bow towards a tradition against mechanisation and urbanisation, as well as hinting at the tradition of French poetry which Duncan had already shown himself to be familiar with in The Mongrel.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, the use of 'morticing' rather than 'welding', evokes individual craft and not mass industry.

While the biological process remains constant in the first stanza it is increasingly invaded by the personal. The 'curls of chestnut hair' that are made from the action of enzymes belong presumably to Virginia Maskell, who was for Duncan, as the reflective and poetical line which follows says, a queen who 'died young and fair'. Poetry, subjectivity and the objective 'truth' of the chemical text are interwoven as if through the agility of a Breton lace maker. The internal rhyme of 'hair' with 'fair' sustains the poetry against the 'Helical chains / Of globular protein', although this itself has a poetic trace in literary tradition: that of Hellenism, which begins in ancient Greek literature and is revived continually through to the present. 'Helical' then puns on Helen (of Troy), Hellenism and even the sacred mountain of the muses, the Helicon, using the 'Queen' as a point of signification from which the pun receives its justification.<sup>131</sup>

The conflation of the 'lace that is' to 'the lace we are' is to show, once again how the biological construct of the individual is fundamental. All else follows from this position. It is the ribs upon which to hang the flesh. And with the 'molecular' informing the 'lace maker' the chemical and perceived reality are conflated in the last line, 'With H<sub>2</sub> as a hatpin', with its

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<sup>130</sup>Conversely this also links with Pound and his translations of Troubadour poetry.

<sup>131</sup>Duncan was especially interested in the Hellenistic Age, having used Apollonius' the Argonautica as the basis for his poem 'Hylas'.

consonantal chimes on the 'h' and the 't'. 'Hatpin' also becomes a motif in Man for the distraction women are to men, reoccurring in Canto Sixty in the ultimate lines '*You look crucified.*' / "... I am. By hatpins" (Part Five, p. 98).<sup>132</sup>

With the conflation of science, autobiography and a classical poetic tradition, Duncan juxtaposes the descriptive with the didactically critical. 'Poetry is what is.' The juxtaposition is the thematic foregrounding of poetics over life, but Duncan does not allow the argument to be lost. Block by block he constructs the edifice of his argument which will eventually turn in on himself with the concluding line 'Waste is what I am'.

The rhetorical repetitions of 'is' and 'what' enable the presentation of the reasoned argument that everything is ultimately 'order'. Duncan takes pains to reveal how science is an explicit form of ordered language, and that poetry, at its best, is a suppression of the self into ordered expression rather than self-expression (Canto Sixteen, p. 45). And the ordered nature shown by scientists to be apparent in the natural world, 'though we do not perceive the order', offers a means by which the individual can understand the universe. Duncan sees the need for an ordered universe to be the driving force behind consciousness. It was the force behind the construction of religion, myth and behind poetry too. Via his rationality man seeks an holistic idea of the world so that the individual himself may be whole. Science, because it sets out to prove the world through experimentation and given truth, is therefore more central for mankind than the theological which requires the precedence of belief over evidence. Therefore the cohesion which is shown by chemists to be present in molecules is for Duncan a metaphor for the whole of existence. The inability to perceive the order does not negate its presence. The poetical line, with its chimes, internal and end rhymes and metrics is effective because it does not lay them bare. And while Duncan is presenting this

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<sup>132</sup>Helen of Troy could also be seen as such a distraction, and her name occurs in Canto Sixty one where Duncan quotes from Marlowe's Dr Faustus: 'Make me immortal with a kiss . . .' then bathetically continuing 'No, no. I meant Helen, dear, not you' (p. 101).

argument he is rhetorically repeating the indicative 'is' and the dominant noun/transitive verb (both apply) 'order'. The repetition of beauty links the stanza back to 'fair Queens' and the synecdoche of 'curls of chestnut hair'. From here Duncan can tighten the tied threads of objective discourse and emotional subjectivity.

Where beauty is repeated twice, so the reality of the dead lover is twice repeated. But while her physical beauty is subject to decay and the ordering of nature, Duncan himself is not able to make the universal leap away from his emotions. The beauty of decomposition is too difficult when the subject is emotionally entwined with the decomposing person. The alliterative 'high hill' of crucifixion and self sacrifice is too painful to rationalise because the essence of an individual reaches beyond his/her chemical construction. Duncan sees the lover's suicide as antonymous to the natural order not because the fact of her death and the processes of decomposition can be shown, but because his subjectivity cannot allow him to see the event in any other way than a waste. Ultimately he gives over to his emotional self by constructing a rationalised knot which traps him into a tautology whereby he is inexorably bound to the dead woman. It is here that the subjective pronoun 'I' takes over to pull the poem into the reality of *his* grief: 'I wasted what I loved. / I loved what I wasted. / Waste is what I am.' And he is not 'love', because love has been consumed by the disorder ('order that's frustrated') of waste.

The juxtapositional construction of these two sections which seeks to reach synthesis is typical of the poem as a whole. There is constant fluctuation from descriptive into the poetic, passages of meta-criticism – which become self-referencing with regard to the poem itself – autobiographical material and, ultimately, the over-riding subjective position of the writing subject. The transition points are often marked by the occurrence of poetical devices such as assonance and rhyme, and it is these

devices which maintain the order of the poem and rein in the more intractable material summarised from reference texts.

Accumulating knowledge and tying in the threads of subjectivity, poetics and human consciousness, Duncan moves forward through the poem. However, the pull of his own subjective reasoning remains dominant. He learns 'facts' from his study journey, but he cannot gain knowledge while he stays the focus of his own attention. All he can see is himself staring back. The holistic dream remains a cycle of the self thinking of the self, and the tautological loops which seek a definition of the self through Socratic thinking (all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, Socrates is mortal) cannot provide the right external ingredients to satisfy the dream. What is left is a rationalised re-working of the writing subject's own solitude.

### *Conclusion*

Pound's famously reported statement that he had 'botched' the Cantos, his life's work, does not go unrecorded in Man.<sup>133</sup> In many of the interludes in which Duncan reflects on the condition of poetry and on his own endeavour, he refers to Pound's failure so as to provide a working comparison between Man and a 'similar' epic project in the Twentieth Century. He attacks Pound for his 'incoherent thought' (Canto Eight, p. 49), states that usury is 'not worth one canto' (Canto Forty Three, p. 7), and claims that Pound's slide into silence is his best poetic feat:

It is not that I control words,  
But they misuse me. I know of one poet who now foreswears them.

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<sup>133</sup>Kenner (1972) records Pound's disillusion:

His life's work, like Vergil or Kafka, he pushed from him ("I botched it"). The magazine *Epoca* printed an interview to that effect. It was quoted around the world. (The Pound Era, p. 556)

He speaks in silence. The best lyric he ever wrote. Epitaph for  
Ezra. (Part One, Canto Three, p. 20)

For silence to be considered the best lyric a prolific poet like Pound could write is a deliberate condemnation by Duncan of his poetic endeavour as the subject is entirely effaced from the writing. At the same time, by linking his own work directly to that of Pound by referring to Pound within the text of Man, Duncan constructs a comparative framework within which he can operate independently, while remaining close to the Cantos.

The ambiguous representation of Pound in Man, where he is brought to the surface of the poem as an example of a great writer only to be openly criticised, is a device which enables Duncan to assert his own subjectivity. By referring to Pound and Eliot, Duncan is able to show his personal relationship to the canonical modernist writers. 'I know of one poet' is a personalisation, as is the biographical reference of lunching with Eliot. This presentation of personal knowledge of the men behind the writing shows his access to the coterie in which the *ideas* behind the writing are discussed:

And I admit I find as much poetry in protein  
As you do, or did, in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Though it's  
a poem  
I admire as much as you did, all right, do.  
(Part Two, Canto Seventeen, p. 52)

These ideas, the personal philosophies of writers, once he has established knowledge of them, can then be commented upon to reveal his understanding of 'great writing' and to locate his own writing in relation to it. Validating his own writing within the poem is Duncan's way of ensuring that his work is considered only in relation to the highest achievements of twentieth century literature. This means that the writing process is already charged with a desire to produce a great work, thus suggesting that for Duncan, a great work is contained within its construction prior to any reception. And Duncan feels able to take from the works of others who write



beyond the poetic medium because he is the poet who makes the writing his own.

This requirement for ownership is located in the first written word, 'I', which marks a killed animal (the product of the written subject's personal endeavour). Duncan sees all writing as a means of subjective ownership (whether material or otherwise), and that it is necessary that the writing acknowledges that ownership if it is to be considered the work of a true poet.

Duncan is continually faithful to the notion that all activity is effectively a corruption of individual potential when activity negates potential development. He also remains true to the notion that the privileged are denied their rightful status because of the trivial machinations of political praxis. So, while denying the significance of praxis, Duncan uses the lives of individuals to emphasise an abstract notion of the condition of mankind. The Auschwitz Canto is used to reveal the barbaric potential within man, but also to underline the fundamental conditions of the human condition. This is achieved through bathos. By colloquialising Levi's account of Auschwitz, Duncan presents the Holocaust as if it were an everyday occurrence in England. In so doing he turns Levi's account around and takes possession of the event, lending Levi's book the human characteristics he himself has defined in Part Three. So, if Canto Thirty Six begins: 'First: thirst; / all else is after' (p. 13), Canto Fifty Four continues that primeval theme:

Thirst obliterates. Each reduced to his tongue; left to our thoughts,  
left to our thirst: the same thing.  
At the bottom. And here, at the bottom, not moral fortitude or  
spiritual belief  
Keep us going where we are going,  
But thirst and bladder: first thirst. You can always piss in your  
pants:  
Momentary warmth. (Part Four, p. 68)

Levi writes of thirst and despair in the following way:

It was the very discomfort, the blows, the cold, the thirst that kept us aloft in the void of the bottomless despair, both during the journey and after. It was not the will to live, nor a conscious resignation; for few are the men capable of such resolution, and we were but a common sample of humanity. (p. 23)

Where Levi sustains the dignity of a man recording personal experience and attempting an honest account, Duncan uses the story to magnify his conception of humanity. As with his poem *Judas* (1960), Duncan constructs the narrative to be 'everyday', and thus enhances the dangerous potential for such activities to be 'normal'. The flippancy of Duncan's language: 'you can always piss in your pants' manufactures an ethnocentric security which takes the writing away from the event and towards the attitude of the narrating subject, or, in this case, the writing subject because the written subject describes himself as an Italian. As Duncan is not Italian and Levi is, constructing a persona which is alien to the writing subject increases the awareness of the *adoption* of the persona, and so foregrounds the choices that the writing subject makes. This is then borne out in the writing. Levi, for example does not mention people copulating in the cattle trucks, but Duncan does, reintroducing the basic human desires presented in Part Three:

. . . Again, a cigarette lighter briefly  
Reveals an obscure agitation in a corner:  
The rhythmical rising and falling;  
The sudden convulsion, involuntary grunt: love  
There is always love. (Part Four, Canto Fifty Four, p. 69)

With love reduced to the basic instinct of sex, which, as later sections reveal, is only an instinct and a distraction, and with Levi's narrative taken into the schema of *Man*, Duncan subsumes event beneath subjective sensibility. This has disturbing side-effects. While Duncan is attempting to empathise rather than sympathise with the plight of the Jews, his use of bathos and general detachment from the actuality of the event allows the writing to slide from

the specificity of an individual's experience into an ambiguous and deliberately distasteful generality:

Have you ever seen a 100 frozen yiddis waltzing naked?  
Try it, for a laugh.

(Part Four, Canto Fifty Four, p. 73)

While the narrative persona has been clearly stated, this line conversely could be written by either a German or a Jew. However, in the light of most holocaust writing, the line is most akin to the inhuman attitudes of German guards of the concentration camps. The colloquial language is compounded by its insensitivity for the people themselves. The event has become so commonplace that those who should care do not. Human compassion has been eradicated by the dehumanising process of the camps to the extent that anything said is not unusual. But this account is from *inside* the narrative. And yet Duncan fails to consider that he has already falsified the account and made apparent his own control over the narrative persona. The result is an insensitivity which threatens to undermine his whole project. If the search for the true essence of human consciousness means the banal treatment of the horrific suffering of others, then what use is that search?

By self-consciously writing himself into the poem, Duncan remains in constant danger of serving an elitist, if not fascistic idea of humanity. He has already stated that his only concern is for consciousness and not the people (Canto Forty Three, p. 7) so the flippancy with which he presents mass murder does not present the event dispassionately. What happens is that the 'truth content' of the narrative is used for an end other than itself. This end, Duncan's intended destination, does not require engagement with the event but the event itself: *that* it happened, rather than the specificity of *what* happened. His argument that all history is based on such barbarity denies the

holocaust its twentieth century context and the part it has played in conditioning politics, morality, culture and aesthetics.

The distinction between Pound and Duncan is that while Pound's intention was arguably to reorganise world economics through poetry and political persuasion, Duncan attempts to wake the world from its unconscious state so as to offer a means by which future generations can evolve more successfully. Within his philosophy there is no overt racism, only a disdain for all those who fail, in his eyes, to live up to their potential. Because he does not believe in society as effecting the individual, and because he believes each individual has within himself the innate ability to achieve, regardless of circumstance, Duncan does not see his elitist ideas as in anyway insensitive or flawed. However, an entry in 'Diary of a Poem', indicates how his belief in eugenics enables him to dismiss all but the highest achievers:

It is strange how people with Bondi's intelligence who are volatile with scientific theory are so rigid in political dogma. They carry a whole lot of clutter and prejudices along with them and are quite unable to look at facts as such. He, for instance believes tenaciously in efficacy of education and environment and discounts inherited characteristics and genetic evidence. This is real prejudice. I told him his mind evolved from thousands of years of lucky haphazard breeding and was not a consequence solely of his education to which many thousands of morons had access only to remain morons. Why are people all people so terrified when I discuss breeding in relation to people? They are not frightened when I show them my horses which I've bred carefully for 30 yrs or my pigs . . . Maybe, evolution i.e. the Darwinian idea will show itself through this therefore the survival of the fittest (the fittest being those people or race which takes human breeding seriously?) I firmly believe it is more important to choose the right grandmother than choose the right school. . . ('Diary of a Poem', entry dated 3/7/68)

By espousing the idea of the unique individual being a product of evolution Duncan negates social responsibility. While he himself is content with the idea that he is not prejudiced against anyone, he remains blind to his prejudice against those who have not evolved according to his idealistic schema. The impact of this on Man is to reveal an undercurrent of elitist

principles whereby the development of consciousness is only possible within the few.<sup>134</sup> The intractability of self-consciousness as the only true consciousness reduces the world to a collective of isolated individuals whose only common ground with their fellow beings is that they are humans and not insects. It is, therefore, not surprising that Duncan admits that his project is a failure, because as an isolated individual he can discover nothing but his own consciousness. And as that consciousness is seeking to *understand* itself, he is thrown into a centripetal loop that overtly reveals this intent. In Canto Sixty One he comments that:

*Those who do not think of their thinking are insane.  
Those who do, driven mad* (Part Five, p. 104)

And his bitterness towards what he sees as the stupidity of humanity is absolute:

Human consciousness, the last sacred cow, the last of our Gods to go.  
Ten years looking at my looking. Saw the red light.  
    The more I searched, less I found:  
Wounds of memory, scars of imagination,  
    Vacant eyes staring back into vacuity. Little, so little.  
These depths are shallow. I warn you not to dive.  
I stood in the centre of this empty tent, the wind  
    Lifting the tarpaulins like the skirt of an elephant,  
The cords slack, the pegs lifting,  
    Then the pole broke, the marquee collapsed  
Upon me like a mantle, to be a shroud. (p. 104)<sup>135</sup>

In Man the optimism with which Duncan begins the poem quickly becomes an unremittingly fatalistic view of the human condition. Ultimately he can draw only one conclusion: that the only thing one can do with one's life is to live it. Consciousness, subjugated to a nihilism where

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<sup>134</sup>It is of no coincidence that his last collection is titled For the Few.

<sup>135</sup>The image of the tent echoes Pound's confinement in the Pisan Cantos, which culminate with the lines:

If the hoar frost grip thy tent  
Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent. ('Canto LXXXIV', The Cantos, p. 540)

nothing remains valuable except consciousness itself, is revealed as empty. The primacy of consciousness in Duncan's world view means that emotion is eclipsed and valueless. In believing that consciousness is objective and emotion is subjective and thus trivial, Duncan denies himself and the poem that other important human quality: the ability to feel, to be affected in ways that cannot be immediately rationalised. It is not, as Duncan contests, that emotions are a distraction, but are the part of our being that binds us as a species. But then, such thoughts of collective behaviour have no bearing on the aloof (and thus lone) figure of the hero/genius that Duncan celebrates.

Duncan is only concerned with what he sees as the highest conditions of man, and this remains true even in his historiographical writing in Part Four. By Part Five, however, the 'mantle' of his authority has become a shroud. And yet his perceived failure is not because he cannot find substance in consciousness, but because the project itself is self-defeating. To write the evolution of consciousness prescriptively is to always bring the project back into the stasis of the mind that consciously waits to receive, is consciously receiving, or consciously recording. This results in a vacuous, self-reflexive cycle.

The potential for a positive outcome from the last line of the poem: 'I say to my life, now live' (Canto Sixty Three, p. 112) is undermined by the tiredness of the writing subject. Effectively he has withdrawn from his journey into subjective memory conjured by solitude and grief:

Walking this beach alone,  
remembering how:  
her urchin life was brief:  
Vagrant, vagabond and thief;  
homelessness, her hearth;  
our furniture, is grief. (Part Five, Canto Sixty Three, p. 111)

And consciousness, far from being the tool by which greatness can be achieved: 'I am: God I could become' (Canto One, p. 13) ends up as being the cross upon which we are crucified:

Here's the nub, the rub.

What is this ache which asks within me?

*'Consciousness our Cross.*

*Wounds which we make, scars which we are.*

*Consciousness, our cross. Shoulder its  
burden*

*Carry as much pain as you can bear.*

*All in the pain, not in the comfort, not in  
despair.*

(Part Five, p. 110)

Having debunked religious notions of faith, it is to the mortality of Christ and the passion of his crucifixion that Duncan again returns. The desire to suffer and to view the self as victim therefore emerges in Man just as it had in all his previous collections. Duncan becomes a fallen hero, divested of his collective identity, melancholy and alone.

## Chapter Five

### For The Few: The Self and the Dead

*'How empty this crowded earth now is.'*  
*'Solitude 9', For The Few*

For The Few was published by Duncan's Rebel Press in 1977 and consisted of 26 'Solitudes' (two of which were published in Unpopular Poems), and 26 short poems.<sup>136</sup> It was his last collection of new poetry and his last attempt to convince his readers, the 'few' who would listen and the 'few' who would understand, that the only path to happiness is through love, and that only a developed consciousness enables men to rise above barbarous humanity. For this reason each the poems in For The Few has a clearly defined objective that seeks to define the human condition and attempt to resolve the contradictions present in Duncan's own mind.

Love, as a means to universal fulfilment, is explained in 'Epithalamium' as the only means by which the individual can escape the trap of personality and finally *be*. What is required is *to be for others* and not solely for the self. The individual remains unique, however, because groups lead to accusation, division and conflict. For Duncan the individual gains knowledge and consciousness of the world by his own means. This remains an irrefutable truism for Duncan. What is then achievable, and the considerations which drive Duncan to write 'conclusive' poetry, remain trapped in the division between 'the human' and 'humanity', in other words, what man is and how he behaves. So, while 'Epithalamium' claims that:

. . . Love is our only window:  
It is the glass through which our sad souls can see  
Briefly. (p. 52)

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<sup>136</sup>'Solitude 16' (p. 24) appeared as 'Solitude No 12' in Unpopular Poems, p. 14, while 'Solitude 24' (p. 29) was in Unpopular Poems as 'Solitude No 15', p. 16.



and that:

Through this window is our only hope  
Of our becoming (p. 52)

'The Survivors' sees a recurrence of holocaust atrocities as inevitable. This leads Duncan to the following conclusion:

It seems there are two miracles: one, man;  
The other: that he survive his humanity. (p. 44)

It is this generalised and irreconcilable conflict which forces Duncan to examine, time and again, the state of his own being in isolation from an alienating world. Believing that political power merely changes hands but does not alter (i.e., in the Orwellian sense, power is not a means but an end), Duncan seeks to find within himself what is common to all. This may then be articulated in poetic form. Always wishing to be understood with precision, he spells this out in 'Poetry':

to light up the caverns of your own being:  
showing your own world to you.  
Like a tiny nightlight, I am content  
if I can give even a shadow on the wall  
to you, or you. (p. 57)

And it is through poetry that consciousness is able to grow. The poet's clear consciousness, and his ability to articulate its understandings, allows the reader to develop beyond the empirical facticity of everyday life:

For length: a ruler; for weight, a balance;  
For human consciousness: poetry;  
it is the instrument of definition,  
The marking out of distinctions, the extension of territory  
which the mind can cultivate and colonise. (p. 56)

Thus Duncan defines himself: a conscious individual whose function as a poet is to communicate the world to others.

Within this overview, however, there still lies the complex and problematic construction of his own being. This becomes an indeterminacy that prevents him from accessing a precise truth. In attempting to reach an holistic view of himself, and thus present an holistic view of mankind (within the workings of the individual lie the workings of all individuals of which the world is ultimately composed), Duncan attempts to equate himself as thinking subject, with the noumenal world in which he can have no direct rational engagement. He can see the world, and experience it, but he cannot *be* the world that he knows informs his understanding of it. It is this problem which Duncan attempts to overcome throughout his poetry, and it is overtly present in For The Few, not least in the division between the intensely personal love poems of the 'Solitudes' and the wider range of the twenty-six other poems.

Of these other poems there are those that are a direct presentation of his divided self, there are others which attempt to draw lessons from particular individuals or events, and there are those which remain familial. Each of these groupings reveals particular aspects of Duncan's poetics as, broadly speaking, they deal in turn with: himself; people he knows and is directly affected by; and the general, or abstract, upon which he muses, and to which he proffers conclusions. Various thematic elements cross through all of these groupings, and there are many recurrences from earlier poems. An examination of these aspects of Duncan's writing will conclude this chapter and will follow a study of each group in its turn.

When Duncan writes of love or a love affair, he does not wish to capture a particular temporal moment, but to utilise aspects of a relationship and the person concerned to represent the totality of what may be likened to a Platonic form of love<sup>137</sup>. In this respect, Duncan seeks to gain meaning

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<sup>137</sup>Duncan has an immediate problem here, because any appearance of a form is only a reflection of the ideal. Later in the book Duncan will concede the impossibility of reaching the

through his reasoning mind so as to present particular truths. Such truths transcend time, space and event and are thus emblematic of the condition of love. For example, 'Solitude 12':

Only because you ask me, will I write:  
For words are now quite meaningless to me,  
who've wasted my entire life weaving such rags as  
this with them;  
So, do not value this or anything I wrote.  
Silence alone shall speak for me  
and give you the truth  
I never could express,  
but held within my heart  
and its distress. (p. 20)

A poem which rejects writing is a divisive means by which the poet can show the inadequacy of writing with respect to the 'truth' of the world in general. However, the poem still needs to be written if that message is to be presented. The meaninglessness of writing does not prevent Duncan from using two iambic pentameters (lines 2 and 9 / 10), to rhyme 'express' with 'distress', to alliterate 'w's, 'h's and 's's along and across lines, and to include the metaphor of 'weaving' for writing. In other words, the practice of poetry is far from redundant. Even if poetry can offer no absolute truth it can at least indicate this problem and, because this particular poem has been not only written, but also published, will continue to be present and to indicate what Duncan holds to be unerringly true. That there is truth is unquestionable, as is the fact that poetry can, because of the restrictions of language, only reflect and not be a truth in itself.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, 'Solitude 11':

How eloquent her leaf gentle eyes are,  
By comparison: Donne was dumb;  
Rochester reticent; Pound tongue-tied.

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real (ideal) through poetry, and instead will rest 'content / if I can give even a shadow on the wall' ('Poetry', p. 57).

<sup>138</sup>Duncan always believed that language was a tool and not an intrinsic part of human construction. Language, for Duncan, has no unique value apart from its ability to reflect the real, or, in the Platonic sense, to reflect the reflection of the real.

These opals are more articulate than  
Language; they can sing without notes;  
Plead without words; caress without fingers.

And what do her eyes say?  
They tell me what I cannot translate  
Before them poetry is silent. (p. 19)

Duncan proclaims the universal inadequacy of poetry by citing the three seminal figures in his life.<sup>139</sup> This triumvirate exemplifies spiritual love (Donne), earthly love (Rochester) and the modernist aesthetic (Pound) of which Duncan considered himself a part. Duncan's poems, therefore, claim that love and beauty, as associated with the object of his particular affections, are too pure for the clumsy workings of poets. And for the statement to have increased validity he necessarily chooses the same medium he describes as inadequate for the occasion. In other words it is the best that can be done, but even that is not enough.

Finally, on the point of abstracting the particular through poetry, where poetry suggests a metaphysical realm beyond its content, 'Solitude 10' presents the object of his affection as being the symbol for all women. However, the image of post-coital comfort is generalised through simile. Thus he extends the particular into the realms of the natural world and presents his lover's supine body as part of a pantheistic totality. To emphasise this still further, Duncan gives the reader the woman's name, but then describes her as 'woman', 'anonymous', merely one of a number in a species. What saves her from eternal anonymity is the poem itself, and the sensibility and understanding of the poet who creates it:

Lightly as willow  
    leans over a river;  
Gently as petals  
    fall onto a lawn, she lies  
with one knee over my thigh, her head

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<sup>139</sup>It may be worth noting that Duncan had published all three of these poets: Pound in *Townsmen* 1938-45, and editions of Dante and Rochester through the Rebel Press. This may be a reason why he omits Eliot from his list of great poets.

tucked into my neck, sleeping soundly  
So soon after. Who is she?  
Her name is Virginia  
But that is not who she is: she is woman  
Anonymous in sleep,  
Immortal in this now. (p. 18)

But Duncan is saying more. In fact he is saying that *all* women are saved from anonymity through their presence within the poem called 'Solitude 10'. The whole is encapsulated within the particular and the particular encapsulates the whole. The two are entirely interchangeable. 'Woman', therefore may be seen as an abstraction of woman, but not an ideal. Beauty and love, the qualities which may be perceived by the male to exist within women, can exist independently of language and thus remain unquantifiable, but 'woman' remains constant and so can be defined by the *actions* and *behaviour* of an individual member, as envisaged by the poet.

Throughout the 'Solitudes' sequences there is a continued attempt to harmonise love, nature and poetry. A further unity is explored between the sexes, which love unites into one soul, shared between two irreconcilable individuals. Such an absolute division leads Duncan to the pessimistic conclusion that love is 'suspended grief' ('Solitude 20', p. 27). Love is always transitory because the desired unity with the other person can never be wholly fulfilled. The consciousness of the writing subject is unique and no end of metamorphosis can alter this predicament:

You think this makes us equal: nothing will;  
You say there's no difference: in your doing this,  
Because I'm doing that. Let me tell  
You there is a difference: I am that difference.  
The proud stallion of my will was not made  
To pull this cart of damned equality;  
I was not born to argue or persuade.  
These are my hooves! That for humility!  
Now mount me, give me free rein, hold on tight,  
And arrogant we'll gallop over these equal lawns of night.  
(Solitude 17, p. 25)

Again, uniqueness, a wish for an aristocratic separation from the herd, is dependent upon the condition of the writing subject, for it is he that must not only be in control of the relationship, but of the writing also. Even at this late stage of his life, it is the desire to be outstanding that drives Duncan forward, and determines his writing.

'Solitude 17' reveals the tension between the female 'you' and the subjective 'I' as a power struggle. The uprising of the 'you', from its position of inequality, and attempt to catch up (through what suggests itself to be an affair) is crushed by the dominant force of the written subject. The first quatrain (ABAB) talks of the woman's desire for equality and is supplanted by the second (CDCD) which talks of the written subject, and concludes with the male as dominant in a rhyming couplet (EE). Equality is denied by a unity in which the 'you' complies to the wishes of the writing, and therefore controlling subject. It is he who is arrogant (as if self knowledge outweighs the negativity of the condition), but the 'you' becomes subsumed and thus part of that arrogance. Duncan metamorphoses himself into the masculine power of a stallion who shall then control the direction they are to take as a unified couple. The woman may seek equality, but only by doing as he says will she experience superiority. And because the male is always superior, equality is impossible.

Duncan writes his own experiences of love and reveals how they relate to him. Those who are the catalysts for this love are then described in ways which heighten this apperception. Solitude and the fleeting moments of harmony with another develop further the presence of the writing subject within his poetry. Comparisons with nature help Duncan to create an image of human love as being part of a natural order, but the persistent closures within the poetry reveal the extent to which the poetry, and Duncan's view of love, is conditioned. The poems tell the reader how Duncan is *in possession* of the various states and emotions he wishes to relay. At best they seek empathy, but because Duncan isolates himself from all others, this

cannot be achieved. What is finally presented is the degree to which Duncan as poet perceives his own love, not as a universal condition but as a personal predicament. It is Duncan's inability to sustain love and to find only loss and loneliness with which we are asked to sympathise. 'Solitude 2' reveals Duncan's desire for exclusion, his use of nature and his right of ownership over others:

As April perches  
On winter branches  
So she leafs  
Every twig of me;

And as May showers  
Its little flowers  
So her love  
gives my life to me;

May this brief summer,  
Now last for ever  
Let no one dare  
Shear this child from me. (p. 10)

The poem seems simple enough as it draws on the season of spring to show new love maturing. The symbiotic relationships perceived in nature provide the poem with a simplicity, a state of naturalness for the relationship between the old man of 'winter branches' and the young woman of 'child'.<sup>140</sup> But the end of each stanza betrays its intent. The poem describes the effect the woman has upon 'him' and concludes with a possessive threat. The child / lover entwined with the written subject in natural synergy becomes a possession not to be taken from him. Duncan's fear is not that the lover should leave of her own accord but that she be forcibly removed. The fear is of external influences destroying the order he has created. In this instance fear is levelled at another person, or people. Elsewhere the fear is of death breaking the union. Duncan's rational solution to the problem of infinite

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<sup>140</sup>Duncan was at this time involved in such an affair with Miranda Weston-Smith, with whom he co-edited *The Encyclopaedia of Ignorance* (1977), and *The Encyclopaedia of Medical Ignorance* (1984). Weston-Smith also edited Duncan's *Collected Poems* (1981).

separation through the death of one half of a loving unity is apparent in 'Solitude 15': it is mutual suicide. This action would prevent the pain of separation incurred by the death of love:

this is a solution  
to a problem which has no solution;  
and that way it would be death,  
not love which dies.

So dearest, let's take each other by the hand  
and hurl ourselves at him who hunts us,  
accepting the oblivion we've known so often  
within each other's eyes. (p. 24)

If one were to seek autobiographical references for the women of the 'Solitudes' sequence, it would be possible to attempt an educated guess as to whom he is referring at any one time. However, as all the women are described in their effects upon the written subject, it is impossible to distinguish one woman from the next. Ultimately, they are all wrapped up in the term 'woman', which can be defined as the effect females have upon the consciousness of the writing subject.

In the poems which follow the 'Solitudes' sequence, however, Duncan names individuals, as in 'For Rose Marie's Birthday' and 'Lines For My Daughter On Her Wedding Day', which includes the bitter lines: 'While she lives, this poet, / Not his poetry, is dead.' (p. 39). Now, these poems may well be occasional pieces, but the appellation suggests that for the love poems, there is no 'giving away' of the writing. It is, in fact, with the writing of his own self that the various women are emotionally complicit.<sup>141</sup> However, the naming of Duncan's wife and daughter are not concessions to their individuality, but accusations of personal neglect. The poem 'For Rose Marie's Birthday' shows Duncan asking metaphysical questions about the

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<sup>141</sup>Remember that Duncan records the name Virginia in 'Solitude 10' but then erases it for the sake of constructing a generalised position.



essence of the world, using many of the natural images to which he frequently returns:

. . . Who lifts the linnet,  
Throws the lark high  
To splash this wilderness with  
its waterfall of song?

Whose hand designs  
web the spider weaves?  
Who lends the panther stealth,  
springs the tiger,  
frights the fallow deer? (p. 36)

From this he progresses to ask questions of the universe (his subject in Man), personifying and gendering the galaxy as if the sexual posturing which is presented between wife and poet is echoed by the stars:

What starts light on its way,  
turns Andromeda,  
plaits the comet's tail  
grooms the sun's great mane? (p. 36)

And from this to art:

How did Schubert find?  
Who focussed Rembrandt's eye,  
Guided Gaudier's quick hand  
till form leapt from stone? (p. 36)

In asking for the answer to what force lies behind the construction of the universe, the natural world, and creative genius, Duncan is searching for the metaphysical lode stone, the philosopher's gold. What is now absent from the poetry is the recourse to Christ as the answer to such questions.<sup>142</sup> Instead the focus is on the woman who refuses to tangle herself with such imponderables as those which disturb her husband:

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<sup>142</sup>Duncan does not offer God as an answer to these questions, because for Duncan there was no God, only Christ who was a man who became a god, through selfless love, compassion and sacrifice.



her independence. The poem closes with a plea that she be able to bloom as a 'rose', but behind that plea is the presence of himself as the gardener.

The poem intimates that his daughter should be given her freedom out of deference to her father, for it is he who is present at the end of the poem. It is possible, therefore to read the poem not as a celebration of the daughter, but as an epitaph for the father, perhaps best seen as a sacrificial offering:

May love find tenderness;  
Life learn gentleness;  
And weeds and men retreat  
Before this rose, he planted.  
In the night. (p. 39)

The daughter, more than anything, is a product of the poet's imagination, 'a vision sought'. He metamorphoses her into a rose and sustains her through his poetry, even though he himself is proclaimed dead.

For the Few continues Duncan's project of self-revelation. Poetry, as he says in the opening of 'Poem Written at the Request of a Political Group', is 'not a description, not an answer, but a question' (p. 42). A poet, therefore, like a philosopher or scientist, is a questioner. And only through such people can consciousness reveal truth so that those who are unconscious can be brought to life.<sup>143</sup> This Duncan sees as his mission and it underlies all his poetry, not least in those poems which are directed at specific targets. It is with these poems that Duncan attempts to produce ineluctable truths about the condition of mankind. For example, the pedagogic poem 'Post Script' defines the universe, and all life within it, as being in a state of constant flow, thus personally reaffirming Heraclitus' famous doctrine of the world being in a state of flux and ordered through reason:

Physics has no tenses.

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<sup>143</sup>The proclamation in the opening canto of Man: 'I am the only conscious thing / In an unconscious universe' and the oft used line 'not all the dead are buried' are recurring themes throughout Duncan's poetry.

Time and space do not exist.  
The only reality is: flow. (p. 54)

While the poet himself, by travelling throughout the universe of his imagination is, in 'The Poet' (as he was in Man), able to make the blind see. By continually confronting 'the dark labyrinths of his own mind' so as to bring back 'simplicity' 'from its complexity' the poet is able to conquer the unconscious and altruistically give it to the reader:

His conquests made you heirs to an Empire;  
Though his map leads you nowhere but  
where you are. (p. 55).

Here both the poet and the reader are defined and conditioned. The reader receives the gift of conscious awareness; to realise what he thought he didn't know, and consequently gains dominion over the world. The poet, through questioning and exploring all aspects of existence, is the one who provides this dominion, effectively handing over the Empire of the mind to the reader.

Such hyperbolic claims restrict and conceptualise the world, but For the Few also passes judgement on specific cultures. In the poem 'In Delhi', Duncan attacks the Indian people as well as what he sees as the herd instinct of mankind. By using Gandhi as a figure of potential improvement, Duncan represents his subsequent assassination as a sure sign that the people of India, perhaps as humanity's representation in that part of the world, do not wish to develop. The attack is on the masses on behalf of the individual, as if the masses conspire to bring down the great and the good as a basic tenet of *their* philosophy:

It is a habit of mankind to turn dangerous men  
Into innocuous religions,

And so castrate them. The Untouchables  
Are still Untouched. The land

Still possessed by those who do not cultivate it.  
The Mahatma, a disappointed man. (p. 51)

This simplistic precis of Indian history does not question the subject, but attacks the object. When Gandhi becomes the figure of worship he falls victim to the fate suffered by Christ, Duncan's other 'disappointed man'. Christians are therefore also condemned for their worshipping and for not practising Christ's teaching and following his commands.

The Irish are similarly attacked by Duncan for what he sees as their complicity with invading forces. In the poem 'In Dublin' Duncan describes the Irish as in a hopeless situation. At a time when Northern Ireland was deeply fractious, Duncan parodies the political complexities of national identity. But what is interesting in the poem is not the old joke of the Irish being the Irish's worst enemy, but Duncan's use of the word 'final'. This he uses to rhetorically close the poem. In other words, Duncan's pronouncement upon the Irish situation is the last word, and thus no more needs to be said.

Poetry remains the articulation of an individual sensibility, so that the poet and his writing are inextricably linked. One signposts the other, so that if poetry is in the questioning the question is the poet. Hence the concluding lines of 'Rogo Ergo Sum' which, as its title suggests, is concerned with self identification:

What is this consciousness  
I write and rave about? This awareness—  
I notice others haven't got? What precisely am I?  
I am this question. The answer is that question.  
This question: that is me. (p. 53)

The contradiction of a question being an answer frustrates the reader and prevents the poetry from reaching further than its own author. If to question is enough, then Duncan fulfils that obligation, ironically providing the answer. In this way he empties the poetry of direction which may function

beyond its own presence and ties it to the specificity of the abstract notion of asking. So, while content is clearly present within Duncan's poetry, indeed he writes on issues as diverse as pig farming and the formation of the universe, because the parameters are set up not by the existence of these things, but by the conscious reasoning of the poet, it is that which remains foregrounded. In order to define his own self through writing, Duncan becomes transfixed by the most obvious aspect of art: That it is the creation of a person. Now, as to the degrees of influence placed upon the artist, that is the stuff of critical scrutiny and the persuasion of the artist as he constructs. For Duncan, however, the artist is always a potential genius who constructs his work independently from the social world. And it seems as though the stronger the desire to be received as an artist, the further from society one must drive oneself in order to succeed. It is, therefore, no mere coincidence or post-Churchillian jingoism that drove Duncan to title his last collection of poems For the Few as by so doing he was able to show his distance from the populace, and his conscious understanding that his writing would only be received and understood by a select minority.

A final consideration is Duncan's repeated use of specific images throughout the course of his poetry. On one level, this is a simple question to answer. They were favourite images, which, for Duncan, were succinct and reached neatly to the truth behind what he wanted to say. For example the rising lark is a sexual image, drawn from its mating ritual, whereby it rises directly into the air before descending at a similar rate. Together with the thrush and the linnet, it encapsulates an aspect of nature which, because of its naive simplicity, uncomplicates human relations. Yet, Duncan, the pragmatic farmer, is often literal when describing the natural world. Therefore, the metaphor chosen to represent a human quality exists first and foremost as part of a natural world which is distinct from the human. This is because it is unconscious and instinctive. Where humans are unconscious and instinctive, there remains the conscious reasoning of the poet to make

the comparison between the humans and animals, and with it the necessary distinction which separates them.

What Duncan requires from his animal images is a quality inherent to the animal. So, while linnets 'rise', are light and fly free, panthers and tigers, claw, spring and are stealthy hunters. Duncan uses the qualities of panthers and tigers to typify the male seeking its female - usually signified by 'fallow deer'. The energy is lustful and essential and Duncan draws upon the hunter / hunted image (as he does with the other repeated images of assiduous spiders, proud stallions, flowers and lawns) as a leitmotif for his presentation of the human and its relationship with the natural world. By the time he writes Unpopular Poems (1969) the animal metaphors have become compacted into direct adjectives. The movement is one from personification, as in 'The Mongrel':

Does the terror of the tiger's tooth  
Tear through the horse's dream? (The Mongrel, p. 26)

to simile in 'Solitude 12' of The Solitudes:

I love you as a tiger loves its prey,  
intently, fiercely (p. 24)

until finally, the quality which Duncan perceives as being that essential to the animal is strong enough to be always present within the use of the animal in writing and so the animal can be used as an adjective:

In the forest of my dreams  
My fierce desire  
Tigers her movements. (p. 32)

Seeing human qualities existing in nature is not uncommon, nor is the consideration of the degree to which human is essentially bestial. The verb 'Tigers', however, seeks to compress the metaphor and the action so as to

intensify the relationship between lover and dangerous, exotic predator. In the mind / body duality Duncan sees humans as preternatural animals, whose bestial instincts are suppressed by the superiority of consciousness. So, by drawing upon the instinctive behaviour of animals, Duncan is able to show that consciousness and rationality are able to confine the wild functions and order them to the point where they can be recognised but not feared.

Of the many other repeated phrases and images: 'not all the dead are buried'; 'it rains behind my eyes'; 'Earth, I am in love with thee'; 'not very encouraging'; 'crucified by hatpins' etc., there is one which typifies Duncan's relationship to poetry and to the content of his art: the severed hands. Originally drawn from direct experience in which he claims to have picked up a child's hand thinking it a glove, during the Second World War, the image first appears in The Mongrel as a dedication for 'Mea Culpa': 'for an unknown child whose severed hand lay like a glove on the floor (*A bombed house – Brixton, 1945*)' (p. 76). In 'Air Raid' in The Solitudes the anecdote appears as a simile:

In the hall at No. 21  
Where my aunt received anyone who was somebody,  
A white glove like a severed hand lies on the floor.  
(The Solitudes, p. 54)

By the time of Unpopular Poems, the image of the severed hand and its metonym for the dismemberment of families and of the destruction of war, is abstracted to the point where 'blind hands' act:

Across the desert of the day  
My blind hands  
Weep for her presence. ('Song' Unpopular Poems, p. 24)

The hands are severed from the poet and then personified. Their blindness becomes a symbol of their, and consequently Duncan's, impotence in the face



of solitude. In Man the severed hands relate to the artist and the way art is dismembered, indeed castrated by society:

But let the amputated pianist play,  
The legless dancer leap across the floor,  
The painter daub beyond his canvas,  
And listen to that decapitated cock  
Crowing for a dawn that can never come  
except in our imagination.  
(Man, Part One, Canto Two, pp. 16-17)

For the artist to have his hands removed is to render him incapable of working, a disaster for a man who identifies himself with his writing:

What am eye? Am I this name? That's certainly not me, or even  
mine.  
This clumsy, stubby hand? A glove passed down  
for me to hand on resentfully?  
(Man, Part Four, Canto Fifty Six, p. 82)

The fear of amputation, artistic castration (if not the fear of sexual as well as artistic impotence) haunts Duncan and the image persists, but now personalised. Canto Fifty Five of Man, articulates this dilemma:

I saw that order was order was order,  
that reason, even the wrong reason, was reason,  
And I cupped my hands round the candle of intellect  
before the gale blew it and my hands away,  
As I mumbled an improvised prayer:  
Not to feeling, but to thought,  
Not to freedom, but to barbed wire. (p. 81)

In For The Few the poet's hands have been removed altogether and replaced by the 'unseen gentleness of the typist's fingers', 'The Poet', p. 55). The hand that designs the universe in 'For Rose Marie's Birthday' is no longer the severed hand of the poet. His poetry exists as part of a continuum as an attempt to answer the question of life, i.e.. that to live is to be conscious of living.

Whichever tropes and schemes Duncan used in his poetic career, they were used to discover the meaning behind existence, to find why we do what we do, as he saw it. This he saw as the task of poetry, and continued to do so in spite of his increasing awareness that to do so was a futile task. The penultimate poem of For The Few , 'The Envoi', shows Duncan's tiredness:

From words, may sanity deliver me,  
from Poetry, finally rescue me,  
of its meaningless babble:  
*I've scrawled enough, enough.* (p. 61)

But he continues for one more poem. It is as if, against his wishes, the poetry continues to demand that it be written. And Duncan, as always, obliges, writing the self, however ironically, into its substance:

Forgive  
my talent  
which gave offence  
to all who lacked  
my genius, my sense. (p. 62).

## Conclusions

This thesis has paid close attention to each of Duncan's publications so as to describe how an engagement with the poetics of Pound and Eliot encouraged him to work out his own aesthetic within the European poetic tradition. Some aspects of Pound's and Eliot's poetics were attractive to Duncan: the high prestige of Dante and poetic forms inherited from medieval and renaissance Italy, the mythic method which Eliot had identified and which Duncan first adopted in early poems like 'Hylas' and then radically adapted through his focus on the Christian myth. The 'impersonality' of modernism is perhaps reflected in Duncan's later impatience with 'subjective hosannahs', or poetry which is simply self-expressive of the author's private emotional life.

Pound's project of a 'poem including history', of working through his view of cultural and economic history towards what Pound saw as a just society, is completely re-invented by Duncan who uses the sciences, physics, chemistry, biochemistry, and then evolution and anthropology in his own epic of human development.

In order to show how Duncan dramatised himself as the 'lone wolf' who perceived consciousness as the single most important human quality, it was necessary to develop the theory of the written and writing subjects. This was done so as to reveal how Duncan used the moment of writing to express the degree of his conscious control over the poetry, binding together its authorship with the conveyance of its meaning. While this results in a reductive loop that returns to the subjectivity of the author, Duncan tempers this by presenting ordinary experience as reflecting what he sees to be innate qualities of humanity, and thus general truths. It is unfortunate, however, that Duncan never seeks to qualify these innate qualities. In this way, Man is occupied with exemplifying what Duncan sees as the unavoidable continuation of human barbarity. Human development, on the other hand,

is shown to exist only within the intellects of a carefully selected few. It is this problem of attempting to achieve change through individual action that occupies Duncan's poetry. Throughout his poetic career the idea of individual greatness dominates, and central to it is his own subjectivity. It is through this and this alone that the world becomes conscious. Man is the culmination of this quest for consciousness as it seeks to encompass, with Biblical scale, the history of the universe, from what is scientifically understood of its origins, through mythical and theological stories, to the most advanced position of civilisation: namely Duncan's consciousness. In this way he becomes the spokesman for humanity.

But as Duncan seeks to use his self-consciousness to conjure truth about the world it paradoxically drives him into isolation from it. Unable or unwilling to break with the irreconcilable dichotomy between himself and the world, Duncan becomes increasingly concerned with the mirror of his own and deeply critical self.

Duncan's proclaimed status as 'lone wolf' also helps secure his isolation from poetic developments in the second half of the twentieth century, although there is a connection between this focus on the self and the 'confessional' poetry that is so influential in recent poetics. The writing subject behind his poetry does not write confessional poetry where the subject is seen as interacting with the world in any fated way, but rather sees the world as that which impinges upon the desire to reach beyond the extreme temporality of any moment. By going beyond everyday reality, Duncan attempted to attain universal truth.

In this way, emotional experience is developed beyond actual relationships and into intractable metaphors and religious parallels. Such a parallel is the one Duncan draws between his love for different women and Christ's love for God and humanity. To do this, Duncan represents Christ as a man, for it is when he is seen as such that the qualities which set him apart from the rest become most visible. Again, Christ becomes a figure who is

identifiably different from the mass of humanity. In paralleling himself with Christ, Duncan shows how he also is close to, but separate from, the world. This creates the distance he requires to construct his unique and self-determined authority.

The project of cultural development which he learned from Pound can be seen to drive Duncan's poetry throughout his career. In The Mongrel this is most explicit with his reworking of European medieval poetry, and his emphasis on the European poetic tradition. Man was perhaps an inevitable development toward the epic tradition and a final attempt to provide an holistic understanding of humanity.

Duncan's poetry is testament to the modernist desire to change culture. With his upper-middle class status this was never going to take the form of collective revolution. His only course of action, therefore, was to be bold enough to dramatise himself as an individual with the wisdom and vision to produce the means by which humanity could forever rid itself of its barbarous nature.

And yet the didacticism Duncan employs to impart meaning prevents a dynamic from occurring between the poetry and the readership. The reader is expected to receive and to learn, and not to interpret, and it is this which may produce the final stumbling-block between Duncan and his recognition as a central figure in twentieth century poetry.

There are many areas of investigation that Duncan's poetry excites. A study, for example, of Duncan's poetry and drama together (beyond the scope of this thesis) would no doubt produce many insightful results. A developed analysis of Duncan's portrayal of women could not only examine the poetry itself, but may go on to describe how the pervading patriarchy of much of the twentieth century governs the poetic presentation of gender.

Operating in Duncan's poetry is a language of subjective control, which he himself does not acknowledge. Therefore, the degree to which Duncan is writing within social and linguistic constructs, in comparison with his own

belief in the solitary actions of the individual, could be unravelled. This itself asks questions of Duncan's own subjectivity. How important an effect did the early loss of his father have upon his self-definition? The sustained belief in clear consciousness suggests a fear of loss of control. In an age where it was important for men to be 'men' in the social world, Duncan no doubt felt the pressure of his masculinity, especially as his childhood was governed by women. Male role models, many of them powerful, were always outside of his immediate family. The need, therefore, to prove himself was perhaps strongly felt.

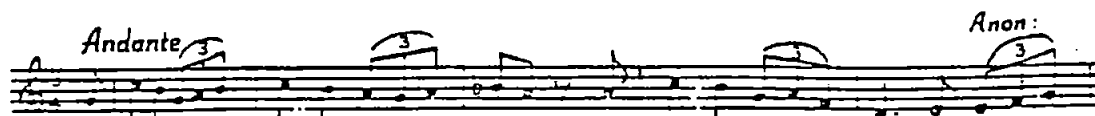
Work could be done, therefore, that examines the effect of major literary figures on their 'apprentices'. Pound promoted many poets, including Eliot, Basil Bunting, Louis Zukofsky and Duncan. Duncan, it is clear (and clear because he makes it so in his poetry) was always conscious of his mentors. However, he tended to acknowledge them by association rather than literary influence. Indeed, he is often at pains to attack the poetry of those who could be described as his literary fathers.

This thesis is a sustained analysis from which further critical directions can be taken. As almost no such analysis existed it was necessary to examine Duncan's most significant poetry so as to provide a careful and considered rendering of a remarkable poetic career. It is hoped, therefore, that this thesis will invigorate further study and allow Duncan's poetry to continue to be analysed within the critical framework of twentieth century literature.

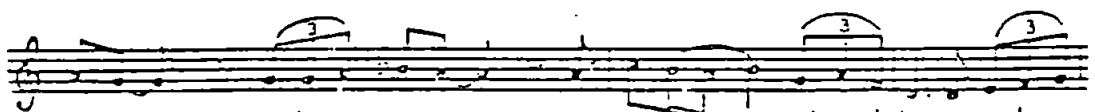
# Appendix

## Portuguese Song Fifteenth Century

### Mi Pensamiento. My Thoughts.



*Mi pensamiento al hu-mo se le pa-re-ce*    *porque al pa-so que sa-be se-des-va*  
 My heart burns away slow-ly. Its smoke <sup>sears</sup> my eyes.    At your step it burns fier-cely: De-sire cla-  
 With the slow eyes of the so-ul I gaze at yo-u,    With the quick eyes of the mi-nd I dis-  
 My pat-i-ence is fin-ished. Pre-tence has di-ed.    When with just looking at you — I was sat-



ne-ce            se des-va-ne-ce            My pensa-            miento al hu-mo se le pa-  
 ri-fies.            De-sire cla-ri-fies.            My hear-            t burns a-way slow-ly. Its smoke  
 se-mble.            I dis-sem-ble            With the slo-w            eyes of the so-ul I gaze at  
 is-fied.            I was sat-is-fied.            My pat-i-ence            is fin-ished. Pre-tence



re — ce  
 sears my eyes  
 y — o — u  
 has died

Mi pensamiento al humo  
 se le parece.  
 porque al paso que sabe  
 se desva necc.

Con los ojos del alma  
 Te estoy mirando.  
 y con los de la cara  
 disimulando

Ya se acabó aquel Tiempo,  
 Todo se acaba.  
 Que con sólo mirarte  
 Me alimentaba

My heart burns away slowly  
 Its smoke sears my eyes.  
 At your step it burns fiercely.  
 Desire clarifies.

With the slow eyes of the soul  
 I gaze at you  
 With the quick eyes of the mind  
 I dissemble

My patience is finished  
 Pretence has died.  
 When with just looking at you.  
 I was satisfied.

Trans. by Ronald Duncan.

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