

Blake, Duncan, and the Politics of Writing from Myth

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Duncan's Reading of Blake

1 WILLIAM Blake and the twentieth-century American poet Robert Duncan have a natural affinity.¹ Both were profoundly interested in the penetrative mobility between the temporal and the eternal. They also have an affinity as poets who used their mythopoeic forms to explore the ethical boundaries between self and other and to relate that exploration to the violent politics of their respective historical moments. For Duncan and his coterie, Blake was yoked with Whitman; they were old male bards of the prophetic tradition, mingling visionary poetics with homosexual and homosocial freedoms.² This article argues that if we look at the way Duncan read Blake and we read both poets alongside each other, we arrive at a better understanding of the involvement of politics with hermetic vision.

2 Influenced by Yeats and Ellis's ground-breaking 1893 edition of Blake's work and conditioned by his own occultist

upbringing, Duncan read Blake as a poet of hermetic vision.³ For Duncan, Blake sees clearly into the essential truth of his own time, and this insight carries a deep social responsibility. In *Roots and Branches* and *Fictive Certainties*, Duncan draws from his sense of an occult Blake to deepen his own exploration of the poetic textures of personal experience. In *Bending the Bow*, he takes his reading of Blake beyond the personal and poetic implications of occult mysticism toward an intensely ethical political engagement. This does not represent a rupture from the concerns expressed in *Roots and Branches* and *Fictive Certainties*, but a development. In both instances, Duncan comes into his creative potential thinking about Blake in terms of touch. The act of touching something, or someone, had a particular personal significance for him as a signifier of both intimacy and reality. At the age of three he was hurt in an accident in the snow and became cross-eyed so that he saw double. In *Roots and Branches* he spoke about the effects of his injury in metaphysical terms: "I had the double reminder always, the vertical and horizontal displacement in vision that later became separated, specialized into a near and a far sight. One image to the right and above the other. Reach out and touch. Point to the one that is really there."⁴ Duncan implies that if we can touch something, we can verify its quiddity and its reality. It is reassuring to touch because it confirms a connection and dispels an illusion. Touch therefore becomes a way of envisioning the world and confirming the relationships that exist within it.

3 So, Duncan started to think about the metaphysical significance of touch at a very early age. The ethical dimensions followed naturally from a sense of touch that had already become associated with vision. In his poetry, Duncan uses the extended conceit of touch and the provocations offered by the extremes of violence and tenderness in order to explore the ethical relationship between self and other and the interface between the personal, political, and poetic implications of that relationship. The intimacy of touch also becomes a way of imagining poetic influence and Blake's impact on Duncan's own sense of poetic identity. The extended conceit is vital to Duncan's repeated return to the ethics of boundaries and boundary crossing. The metaphor

1. For other essays and books detailing this affinity, see Robert J. Bertholf, "Robert Duncan: Blake's Contemporary Voice," *William Blake and the Moderns*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) 92-110; David Annwn, *Hear the Voice of the Bard! Who Present, Past, & Future Sees—Three Cores of Bardic Attention: The Early Bards, William Blake and Robert Duncan* (Hay-on-Wye: West House Books, 1995); Edward Larrissy, "Two American Disciples of Blake: Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg," *Blake and Modern Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 108-24; and Jerome McGann, "Art and Error: With Special Reference to the Poetry of Robert Duncan," *Modern Language Studies* 27.2 (spring 1997): 9-22.

2. Duncan's coterie was, by his own admission, a boys' club. See Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 175-76.

3. *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*, ed. with lithographs of the illustrated "prophetic books," and a memoir and interpretation by Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats, 3 vols. (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893).

4. Robert Duncan, "A Sequence of Poems for H.D.'s Birthday, September 10, 1959. Finishd October 24, 1959," *Roots and Branches* (New York: New Directions, 1964) 14.

works because it emphasizes boundary as a real and tangible distinction and because it offers ways of transgressing that distinction.

4 Duncan's reading of Blake therefore suggests the discovery of a relevant and restorative romanticism with which to address the modern world. Kristin Prevallet has written that, for Duncan and his contemporaries in the San Francisco Bay Area, romantic identification provided a utopia; it helped form an imaginary community where they could live free from the intolerances of mainstream America.⁵ In the early 1950s Duncan started publishing in the *Black Mountain Review* and in 1956 he taught at Black Mountain College. Like Blake, Black Mountain's founder, John Andrew Rice, thought everyone was born an artist but some were oppressed by the public world. Black Mountain was established in order to provide an escape where people could reassert their artistic nature. The central challenge facing Black Mountain poets was arguably to reinvent romantic poetics for contemporary American existence.

5 Fed up with what he perceived as the narrowing of vision in the modern world to a "theater of the absurd,"⁶ a stage where atomic disaster and the end of humanity were the only stories seen by the reasonable anti-mythopoeic mind, Duncan found hope in Blake. Duncan claimed that

in England, the divine Blake broke through the confines of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rationalist poetics with his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, blasting that model of self-righteous and reasonable men, the Deist, and howling against the first factories and machineries of his own day's versions of what [Rudolf] Bultmann considers to be the modern scientific man for whom: "it is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."⁷

Blake appealed to Duncan because he seemed to be both of this world and another.

6 Recalling his introduction to Blake by the poet Helen Adam, Duncan commented: "I was already a convert to the Romantic spirit, and myth in that spirit is not only a story that expresses the soul but a story that awakens the soul to

the real persons of its romance, in which the actual and the spiritual are revealed, one in the other."⁸ As Robert Bertholf has argued, Adam's reading of Blake in Duncan's poetry seminar proved an important turning point for Duncan, at least partly because it came at a moment when he was thinking about Charles Olson's essay on "Projective Verse."⁹ Adam had brought the "Introduction" to Blake's *Songs of Experience* as an example of great poetry to a class that Duncan ran at Black Mountain. The poem begins:

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, & Future sees
Whose ears have heard,
The Holy Word,
That walk'd among the ancient trees.¹⁰

It chimed remarkably well with Olson's statements about contemporary poetics. Olson claimed: "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings."¹¹ Duncan must have heard the echo of Olson's poetic definitions reverberating in Blake's call to hear the prophet-artist, whose particular quality of inspiration ("breath" or "breathing") arises out of his privileged position as listener. And the awakening that Duncan describes is also very much in tune with Olson's question: "What stance toward reality brings such [projective] verse into being[?]" Olson argues that the degree to which the projective involves a stance toward the reality outside the poem as well as a new stance toward the reality of a poem itself is a matter of content. He writes:

If the beginning and the end is breath, voice in its largest sense, then the material of verse shifts. It has to. It starts with the composer. The dimension of his line itself changes, not to speak of the change in his conceiving, of the matter he will turn to, of the scale in which he imagines that matter's use. ... What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is "objectism," a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature, to be as shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it. Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as

5. Kristin Prevallet, "Introduction," *A Helen Adam Reader*, ed. with notes and introduction by Kristin Prevallet (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 2007) 19.

6. Duncan, "The Truth and Life of Myth," *Fictive Certainties* (New York: New Directions, 1955) 5.

7. Duncan, "The Truth and Life of Myth" 27-28.

8. Duncan, "The Truth and Life of Myth" 31.

9. Bertholf 99.

10. William Blake, "Introduction," pl. 30, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. with introduction and notes by Andrew Lincoln (Princeton: Princeton University Press/William Blake Trust, 1991).

11. Charles Olson, *Projective Verse* (New York: Totem Press, 1959) 3.

ego, of the “subject” and his soul For a man is himself an object If he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share.¹²

- 7 The two-way revelation between the “actual” and the “spiritual”¹³ that Duncan describes as pertinent to his appreciation of Blake is present in Olson’s conclusions about the poetic function. In the attention he pays to the reality outside the poem, the field of composition, Olson blurs the distinction between spiritual and actual existence, imagining them, as Duncan does, in dialogue with each other. The simile he uses to describe the relation of man to experience is drawn from the natural world and suggests an intimacy with the actual. But Olson’s subsequent claim that “[man] is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force” imbues the natural or actual with a sense of the cosmic. In the end Olson arrives at a poetic ideal that resonates deeply with Blake’s prophet-artist: “his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share.” It is important that Duncan was thinking about Olson’s essay when he was introduced to Blake, not only because of the emphasis that Olson places on the interplay between the aural and the oral, but also because of the attention he gives to the place of the actual in visionary poetics.
- 8 If Duncan’s response to Blake was heavily conditioned by his reading of Olson, it was also typically American in aligning Blake with Walt Whitman. In 1868 Algernon Charles Swinburne had claimed that “the points of contact and sides of likeness between William Blake and Walt Whitman are so many and so grave, as to afford some ground of reason to those who preach the transition of souls or transfusion of spirits,” and the comparison was taken up enthusiastically by readers on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁴ Duncan continues the association between Blake and Whitman. In his essay on Whitman, he writes:

Taking his Self and his Law, Poetics and Politics, not in the architecture of an Other World, but in an identification with the creative forces working within masses and populations, the poet was to work toward the Wedding of the Ideal and the Actual, even as Blake had proposed a poetic marriage of Heaven and Hell in the Actual. Whitman saw within the actuality of These States the idea of an America

latent and at work. Not a poetry commemorative of an established order or a poetry striving to perfect an order out of chaos, but a poetry creative “in the region of imaginative, spinal and essential attributes, something equivalent to creation ... imperatively demanded.”¹⁵

- 9 Duncan presents Whitman as the exemplary democratized prophetic voice, seeking an “identification with the creative forces working within masses and populations.” In doing so, he implicitly extends the principles of hermetic vision to the political sphere. As the eternal is realized within the temporal, the “creative forces” find their active and disruptive embodiment in the “masses and populations.” This passage shows the extent to which Duncan’s sense of Whitman was informed by his reading of Blake, and vice versa. It is from Blake, read through Olson’s lens, that Duncan derives his understanding of the poetics of the polis. He was clearly aware of how deeply resonant the word “States” is for a reader of Blake. In the same essay he writes:

Once we read the United States as belonging to the greatest poem, the race of all races, and we hear Whitman speaking of Americans throughout the population of Man—every place and any place and time of Man—then, underlying these United States and this America, comes a mystery of “America” that belongs to dream and desire and the reawakening of earliest oneness with all peoples—at last, the nation of Mankind at large. It is this that informs Whitman’s enthusiasm for America. In the language of Poetry, of “the greatest poem,” we rightly read him in the light of Blake’s visions of America, direful as they are, the States are seen by the poet as states of Man, and what is happening in the Revolution happens, in Blake’s world, not because the colonies are English but because they are colonies of Man. The drama he reads in his figures of fire and outrage and imprisonment and volcanic release is a drama “of all nations at any time upon the earth.”¹⁶

- 10 Taking his cue from Blake, Duncan uses the word “States” to describe the political and poetic character of America. “States” refers to the governmental organization of America, the Blakean contraries of “Heaven” and “Hell,” the Whitmanesque “Ideal” and “Actual,” and the states of Blake’s fourfold vision, which combines reason and imagination, sense and emotion. Duncan would also have known of Blake’s claim that “the Imagination is not a State:

12. Olson 10-11.

13. Duncan, “The Truth and Life of Myth” 31.

14. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868; London: Heinemann, 1925) 300-01. For more on the connection between Blake and Whitman, including Whitman’s own ambivalent reaction to it, see Linda Freedman, “Walt Whitman and William Blake: The Prophet-Artist and Democratic Thought,” *Transatlantic Traffic and (Mis)Translations*, ed. Robin Peel and Daniel Maudlin (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013) 133-55.

15. Duncan, “Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman,” *Fictive Certainties* 166-67.

16. Duncan, “Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman” 170-71.

it is the Human Existence itself”¹⁷ His reference to “the actuality of These States” therefore exploits the Blakean resonance of changing vision. Whitman’s “Wedding,” like Blake’s *Marriage*, suggests tension and distance as well as mutual opening, exchange, and bond. Duncan’s philosophic commitment to the Blakean mantra “Without Contraries is no progression” gives an optimistic urgency to his reading of Whitman. It is no accident that Duncan returns insistently to the moment of touch. As for D. H. Lawrence, who called for a Whitmanesque “democracy of touch” in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the moment of touch was always charged with political and ethical meaning.¹⁸ Touch defines influence; touch defines marriage; touch defines the poetic gesture implied in “something equivalent to creation”; and touch defines the imperative demand that will not leave you alone. Duncan’s focus on touch provides a way of thinking about the relationship between hermetic vision and political engagement because it draws our attention to the permeable boundary between self and other.

Writing from Myth: Blake’s Influence and the Texture of Experience

- 11 If the binary of self and other seems too rigid and modish, I find my use of it redeemed somewhat by Duncan’s own claim that the “fictional form operates to move the poet and the reader into an ‘other’ space in the reality of which actual space fades.”¹⁹ Otherness, for Duncan, suggests a creative range of meaning and possibility and a textured density of experience. The binary therefore resists static interpretation. Its terms are complex, but this complexity serves to intensify rather than unbind their structural opposition.
- 12 The insistent touch of the other, or “poetry . . . ‘imperatively demanded,’” is described in “The Truth and Life of Myth” as the basis for an understanding of poetry as an embodied medium: “The mythic content comes to us, commanding the design of the poem; it calls the poet into action, and with whatever lore and craft he has prepared himself for that call, he must answer to give body in the poem to the formative will.”²⁰ The bias that Duncan places on this idea of the poet as a romantic prophet-artist, speaking the truth

of myth, lies in his sense of what it means to “give body in the poem.” The first thing to understand is that poetics, for Duncan, introduces an interface between the body as a poetic text and the poetic text as a body. In other words, the poetic text, summoned by the “formative will,” is inextricable from the texture of experience.

- 13 Before I elaborate on the way that this thinking conditions Duncan’s reading of Blake in *Roots and Branches* and *Fictive Certainties*, it is necessary to understand more about the terms on which he came to know of the English painter-poet—and to admire him as much as he did. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readings of Blake frequently characterized him as an occult or mystic poet.²¹ Raised by theosophists, Duncan came naturally to a vocabulary of correspondences. His adoptive parents were followers of Madame Blavatsky, avid readers of Swedenborg, and devotees of the occult. Duncan explains their faith:

For my parents, the truth of things was esoteric (locked inside) or occult (masked by the apparent), and one needed a “lost” key in order to piece out the cryptogram of who wrote Shakespeare or who created the universe and what his real message was. From the theosophy of the 1890s my maternal grandmother had passed from Spiritualism to become an elder in an Hermetic Brotherhood, similar to and contemporaneous with the Order of the Golden Dawn to which Yeats belonged. Not only stories and books, but dreams and life itself, were to be read in terms of contained and revealed messages, even as in our time works of art, dreams and daily life are read by devotees of psychoanalysis, or as the People of the Book—Jews, Christians and Moslems—have always read God’s intent in the world, in history, and whatever written record. For theosophists, psychoanalysts, and the converts of revealed religions, it is not the story that is primary but the meaning behind the story.²²

- 14 For Duncan, the problem with this approach arises out of the very nature of narrative appreciation, whereby the sensitive mind is opened to the nuances of human emotion and interaction: “The truth of a story is not rooted in wisdom but in the sense of the drama of life.”²³ Here again, we see the way his thinking developed along lines compatible with, and influenced by, Olson, who also claims: “[the

17. William Blake, *Milton* pl. 32*, *Milton a Poem and the Final Illuminated Works*, ed. with introductions and notes by Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi (Princeton: Princeton University Press/William Blake Trust, 1993).

18. D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928; London: Penguin, 1994) 75. Lawrence’s “democracy of touch” echoes the ideas put forward in his essay on “Democracy” (1919), where he argues for a restoration of Whitman’s democratic vision, which he defines as “a struggle to liberate human beings from the fixed, arbitrary control of ideals, into free spontaneity” (“Democracy,” *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988] 61-83 [quotation at 78]).

19. Duncan, “The Truth and Life of Myth” 29.

20. Duncan, “The Truth and Life of Myth” 13.

21. See, for example, Yeats and Ellis, Aleister Crowley, Theodore Roethke, and H.D.

22. Duncan, “The Truth and Life of Myth” 3.

23. Duncan, “The Truth and Life of Myth” 4.

stance of projective verse] may, the way things look, lead to a new poetics and to new concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge.”²⁴ Duncan explains: “As I continue to be involved with the reading of Plato, not only myth but truth itself is disturbing, the actuality of time itself disturbed by the reality of what is happening.”²⁵ Although Duncan thought in terms of correspondence, he was well aware of the disruptive nature such correspondence could take, and the vocabulary of dramatic action was one way of expressing the human significance of that disruption.

- 15 Blake was a key player in Duncan’s conscious exploration of derivation and poetic expression. Duncan’s sense that events and individual poems happen as expressions of an ultimate poetry that disturbs the actuality of time with the reality of what is happening at its core bears close relation to his sense of Blake’s inspirational quality. In “Man’s Fulfillment in Order and Strife,” Duncan claims: “We must go beyond the sincere into the fiction whose authors, Blake tells us, are in Eternity. We must set up in the midst of the truth of What Is, the truth of what we imagine.”²⁶ The particular implications of the reference to Blake, itself the starting point for Duncan’s “Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake,” will be discussed in more detail later in this section. But there is a general sense in which Duncan’s claim illustrates the kind of visionary poet he thought Blake was and the work that such poetry could do in the modern world. It is essential that “the truth of what we imagine” is to be set up “in the midst of the truth of What Is.” As with Blake, the place and purpose of Duncan’s visionary poetics are always intrinsic to the world of events.
- 16 Duncan received from his occultist parents an education that encouraged him to read poetry as a sign system that enclosed, in however difficult a manner, spiritual truths. But he was equally concerned to sustain individual freedoms and the idiosyncracies of present identities in combination with a lasting sense of eternal truth or meaning. He put it brilliantly in “Towards an Open Universe”: “Our consciousness, and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity.”²⁷
- 17 Duncan’s “Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake”²⁸ works precisely because Blake’s aphoristic style (as used in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example) has a deceptive simplicity and universal applicability that allow Dun-

can to sustain the “dancing organization,” in this case expressed through the metaphor of musical variations, of his poem. One of the fundamental creative principles of musical variation is the plainness of the original tune. Musical variations allow for the exploration of register. You can move from the sublime to the ridiculous by radical changes in musical accompaniment, but the melody will still be recognizable. Similarly, the aphoristic (if not straightforward) quality of Blake’s lines allows Duncan to explore what they might mean in different moods, contexts, and modes of being. Like a melody, the dicta provide the basis for an exploration of register. Like a musical accompaniment, Duncan’s tone is constantly shifting around them. Duncan’s attraction to variation is that of Hermes, god of poets and thieves. A good composer comes into his own creativity more completely in the presence of others. Duncan draws his poetic power from the same activity. It is not just what Blake says but the way he says it that stimulates Duncan’s meditation on the texture of experience. In the claim they lay to the absolute, the dicta “Mental Things are alone Real” (from *A Vision of the Last Judgment*) and “the Authors are in Eternity” (from Blake’s letter to Thomas Butts, 6 July 1803) also invite an interrogation of their status in the compromised conditions of living life. These conditions make up the drama that Duncan finds lacking in a mythopoeic imagination that focuses only on wisdom and truth. It is here that the dialogue he has with Blake starts to creep toward the ethical, as his poem engages with the actuality of human suffering as part of the poetic texture of experience.

- 18 One of the most poignant moments in Duncan’s poem occurs at the start of the second section.

How long dare I withhold myself
my Lord withholds.

I shy a glance that he too shies.
The authors of the look
write with our eyes
broken phrases of their book.

Examining the shared emotional positions of devotion and desire, Duncan explores the implication that Blake’s dictum “the Authors are in Eternity” has for human beings. The scene pivots on an uneasy negotiation of authorial agency. The self-will, volition, and trembling energy of the first line both compromise and are compromised by cosmic writing. In “The Truth and Life of Myth,” Duncan not only implies

24. Olson 3.

25. Duncan, “The Truth and Life of Myth” 5.

26. Duncan, “Man’s Fulfillment in Order and Strife,” *Fictive Certainties* 112.

27. Duncan, “Towards an Open Universe,” *Fictive Certainties* 78.

28. Duncan, “Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake,” *Roots and Branches* 48-53.

admiration and support of Blake's dictum, he goes as far as to suggest it as a basis for understanding his poetic texture. Here, Duncan shows us the darker side of the mythopoeic vision. This is about disconnect and distance longing to be bridged. There is distance in the opening act of withholding and there is also distance between the authors and the actors, who are paradoxically striving for authorship of their actions.

- 19 Throughout the poem, touch is both the desired cohesive function—"touch, touch, / complete me such a world as I contain"—and something that true cohesion would inevitably transcend as otherness becomes an inescapable part of being.

I recognized in you my own presence
beyond touch, within being.
What could I reach, reacht as I was?

The authors are in eternity.

Duncan makes this tension the *modus operandi* of his poetic engagement.

I am the author of the authors
and I am here. I do not dare
rescue myself in you
or you in me.

One could take from this poem a sense that authorship is both surrender and command. What I take from it is a sense that appreciation of the possibility of such poetics must also be combined with sensitivity to the human position. So, Duncan oscillates between an attitude that connects Blake with a Whitmanesque delight in the natural and cosmic man ("such a world as I contain" surely evokes Whitman's celebratory "I contain multitudes") and an attitude that acknowledges the tension and constraint inherent in dictation and the importance of existential variation. What is real, for Duncan, is *felt* as real, returning us again to the significance of touch as we are then touched by the suffering, separated lovers.

- 20 So, Blake affects Duncan's meditation on the texture of experience not only because his aphorisms provide the textual basis for poetic variation but also because, as a vital figure in Duncan's conscious exploration of poetic derivation, he contributes to the problems that Duncan perceives in his own poetic process of becoming. These problems center on the desire for touch and the paradoxical awareness that touch confirms the externality of the other and does not go far enough. "Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake" ends:

We wait, two Others, outside ever
our eternal being

That is

here, in this sad tableau too,
(for us, unwilling actors)
rapture.

The authors are in eternity

That is

in thought intensely between us,
restraint that acknowledges

the lover's kiss.

In the poem's final scene, self is relegated to the position of other. Duncan's explorations of the meaning of Blake's dicta in different registers of experience—registers that include such polar extremes as "Come, eyes, see more than you see! / For the world within and the outer world / rejoice as one" and "You talkd of 'freedom,' / and I saw / how foreign I am from me"—finally arrive at an embrace that is conditioned by separation. Moreover, the feeling of separation is derived from the paradoxical inaccessibility and direct imposition of myth "That is / in thought intensely between us." Duncan's line breaks intensify the gulf through the suspension of breath while at the same time indicating a gasping desire for it to be bridged.

- 21 The "restraint that acknowledges / the lover's kiss" leads us to a further affinity in the attention that Blake and Duncan pay to formal boundaries. Both delight in the poetic binding of their productions at the very moment that they explore notions of freedom and expression. Both are simultaneously bound to form and bound to unlocking it. An example can be found in Blake's "The Garden of Love":

I went to the Garden of Love.
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not, writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore,

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.²⁹

29. Blake, "The Garden of Love," pl. 44, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. Lincoln.

This poem gains its power from the pleasurable nature of the binding rhymes and rhythms, which deliberately conflict with the subject matter. As a poet, Duncan, like Blake, understood the vital possibility of constraint. Blake cannot do without the “briars” in the last line. “The Garden of Love” wears this symbolic crown of thorns in its formal constraints. This poem makes a far more subtle point than the one frequently attributed to it. It is not simply about the evils of organized religion; it is also about Blake’s poetic debt to organization. The choreography is unsettling because the verse mimics the encircling motion of the priests. While the narrative suggests condemnation of the church, the poetry participates in a necessary sacrifice of freedom to artistic form. Blake knew that lineaments are necessary to produce good art. In the mature work of *Jerusalem*, he aligns outline with “Visions of Imagination.”³⁰

22 This is not to say that Blake is writing in support of the church. Clearly this would be absurd. It would also make the poem much weaker. But the poem does display the deep ambivalence that characterizes his attitude toward boundaries and the nature of the relationship he creates between freedom and form. Of course such a relationship draws attention to different kinds of form. There is a difference between the oppressive form of the church of history and the enabling form of artistic imagination. But Blake, like Duncan, is not blind to the points of contact. The “briars” find their echo in the “desires” of the same line. On the one hand this encourages an interpretation of oppressive authority limiting the passions. But it also implies equivalence; it hints that “briars” are, in some way, “desires” or desired. Blake sets up a carefully choreographed dance between freedom and form, the eternal world of spirit and the present world of bodies and facts. Boundaries are about relationship, but they can also be about imposition and constraint. The trembling hands in Duncan’s “Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake”³¹ denote one such boundary; the stifling restrictions of party politics and organized religion denote the other. The point of contact can be summarized in the varied experience of touch, which ranges from caress to attack.

23 Duncan’s “My Mother Would Be a Falconess” deploys a rhythm that, like the bird it describes, reaches out toward the dangerous circumference of its being while retaining an anchor in the familiar. Let’s take the opening stanza:

My mother would be a falconess,
And I, her gay falcon treading her wrist,
would fly to bring back
from the blue of the sky to her, bleeding, a prize,
where I dream in my little hood with many bells
jangling when I’d turn my head.³²

The rhythm created by the repetition of “I” (echoed in “fly,” “sky,” and softened and modified in “I’d”), the alliterative “bring back ... blue ... bleeding ... bells,” “would ... where ... when,” and the modification of sound in “falconess” and “wrist,” “hood” and “head,” bind the breath that is thrown forth in a projective reading of this verse with the memory and echo of sounds that have already been uttered. The echoing repetitions and variations create a strong incantatory rhythm rooted in the familiar that exists in vital conflict with the momentary bid for freedom represented in the falcon’s flight and rhythmically suggested by the poem’s push outwards. There is, of course, a beautiful symmetry with the subject matter. The falcon’s flight is dictated by the falconess. He not only flies at her bidding, he goes to do her murderous work. And he also draws blood from her. The boundaries of his flight are therefore defined by blood. The edges are dangerous, vicious; they are also a necessary condition for movement.

24 Duncan’s and Blake’s shared preoccupation with boundary, with the tangible, bloody evidence of birds and briars, starts to map the common ground in their sense of vision. To “set up in the midst of the truth of What Is, the truth of what we imagine” breeds conflict. The penetrative mobility between the present and the eternal and between form and freedom is a basis for understanding poetics as a hermeneutic of the world of relationships and binary oppositions. In the following section I will suggest that the concerns I have been talking about in *Roots and Branches* become overtly political in *Bending the Bow*. This is evident not only in the penetrative violence of “My Mother Would Be a Falconess,” which Duncan wrote after nights reading Blake’s bloody images of rape in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*,³³ but also in Duncan’s “Up Rising,” which is itself indebted to Blake’s *America*, and in his more general introductory remarks on the grotesque state of American democracy.

30. Blake, *Jerusalem* pl. 74, *Jerusalem*, ed. with introduction and notes by Morton D. Paley (Princeton: Princeton University Press/William Blake Trust, 1991).

31. See section 7, lines 5-7 (*Roots and Branches* 52).

32. Duncan, “My Mother Would Be a Falconess,” *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 52-54.

33. Duncan, “A Lammas Tiding,” *Bending the Bow* 51.

Poetic Lore and Political Engagement

25 One way of understanding the interface that Blake and Duncan set up between personal, poetic, and political formation is through the idea of the grotesque, a form that embodies an uncomfortable otherness. For Geoffrey Harpham, the word “designates a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language.”³⁴ The grotesque belongs to the liminal realm. The scene is one of metamorphosis or transition, the self’s process of becoming, its fight with an excess of self that it would like to name other. The grotesque form is consequently at odds with itself. Harpham describes it as indicative of an idea too big for form, but it seems to me to be precisely the integral and constitutive relationship between form and idea that makes it such a useful concept to apply to the points of contact between Duncan and Blake. The grotesque form gives the appearance of struggle precisely because it is so difficult to combine two dissonant modes of being in a single formal expression. But, precisely because of its uncomfortable dissonance, it is a useful theory with which to read these poets’ conceptions of self (in dialogue or romance with the self’s own emanations, influences, and otherness), poetry (expressive of a greater poetics), and politics (as related to normative and deviant notions of individual and national behavior).

26 In his introduction to *Bending the Bow*, Duncan writes:

We enter again and again the last days of our own history, for everywhere living productive forms in the evolution of forms fail, weaken, or grow monstrous, destroying the terms of their existence. We do not mean an empire; a war then, as if to hold all China or the ancient sea at bay, breaks out at a boundary we name *ours*. It is a boundary beyond our understanding. Now, where other nations before us have floundered, we flounder. To defend a form that our very defense corrupts. We cannot rid ourselves of the form to which we now belong. And in this drama of our own desperation we are drawn into a foreign desperation. For our defense has invaded an area of our selves that troubled us. Cities laid waste, villages destroyed, men, women and children hunted down in their fields, forests poisoned, herds of elephants screaming under our fire—it is all so distant from us we hear only what we imagine, making up what we surely are doing. When in moments of vision I see back of the photograph details and the daily body counts actual bodies in agony and hear—what I hear now is the desolate bellowing of some ox in a ditch—madness starts up in me. The pulse of this sentence

beats before and beyond all proper bounds and we no longer inhabit what we thought properly our own.³⁵

In this rendering of the grotesque, or “monstrous,” contemporary condition, it is both impossible and undesirable to ignore the slipperiness with which Duncan shifts between political, personal, and poetic positions, emphasizing their interdependence. For if this passage is a description of contemporary American democracy, which has compromised itself by its aggressive actions in Vietnam, it is also a psychological exploration of this condition at an individual level (“our defense has invaded an area of our selves that troubled us”) and a meditation on the poetics of experience (“the pulse of this sentence beats before and beyond all proper bounds”).

27 Theorizing about the grotesque, Margrit Shildrick suggests that “we are always and everywhere vulnerable precisely because the monstrous is not only an exteriority. ... what is at issue is the permeability of the boundaries that guarantee the normatively embodied self.”³⁶ As the otherness of the grotesque is poetically encoded or figuratively embodied in the normative self, the relation between self and other is such that “the encounter with the strange is not a discrete event but the constant condition of becoming.” “Both are in play, then,” she argues, “on a plane where conceptual logics cannot be distinguished from the corporeality of becoming in the world.”³⁷ To make this less abstract we might consider the way that Blake and Duncan present the body, and particularly the differential body (gay, black, gendered), as intrinsic to the ontological and ethical processes of self and nation. As Duncan’s opening to *Bending the Bow* illustrates, when the monstrous becomes a way of reflecting on the self, it is at once disturbing and progressive. America’s engorged body politic refutes the binary of self and other that Duncan perceives to be driving its actions in Vietnam. Duncan’s presentation of America’s monstrous democracy therefore demands a reappraisal of normative identity and a reassessment of political activity.

28 For Shildrick, the grotesque draws attention to the discursive nature of embodiment and attests to the vulnerability and unpredictability at the heart of the process of becoming. It is this emphasis on indeterminacy and process that makes her theory of the grotesque body interesting in relation to Blake and Duncan. As we have seen, Blake and Duncan posit the body as a poetic field and poetry as an embodied medium. Duncan claims: “This poetry, the ever forming of bodies in language in which breath moves, is a

34. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 3.

35. Duncan, *Bending the Bow* i.

36. Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002) 1.

37. Shildrick 1.

field of ensouling. Each line, intensely, a soul thing, a contribution; a locality of the living.”³⁸ Blake’s characters are a testament to the discursive nature of embodiment, their forms created visually by his varied illustrations and linguistically by the politically charged ways of seeing exemplified in his skillful manipulations of genre. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, a poem that Duncan read repeatedly, the body of Oothoon becomes a locus for interrogating the sentimental and voyeuristic qualities of feminine antislavery writing, the association of prophetic utterance with masculine violence, and the place of the marginalized in poetic speech. Blake’s and Duncan’s shared sense of poetry as an embodied medium is evident in the former’s complex cast of mythological characters and the latter’s repeated emphasis on the poetics of lived (and necessarily embodied) experience.

29 In Blake’s *Visions*, the body comes under attack; its integrity is compromised and its status overdetermined as individual figures are represented both visually and verbally in multiple and sometimes contrasting ways. Oothoon, for example, appears as muddy-colored, light, pinkish, and brown as Blake furthers his concern with modes of perception and representation.³⁹ Our attention is drawn to the idea of threatened boundaries through forcible bodily penetration. There are multiple rapes. The first clear rape, carried out by the slaveholder Bromion, deflowers the gentle Oothoon, “the soft soul of America,” within the first twenty lines of the poem. The rape is noticeable for its suddenness. Its violence lies in the breathtaking speed with which it occurs and the amputated nature of Blake’s description. The verb is monosyllabic. The phrase is abrupt: “Bromion rent her with his thunders.”⁴⁰ It stands in stark contrast to the undulating luscious feminine rhythms of the opening fifteen lines, which describe the chained sexual passions of England’s women as they “sigh” toward America. From the opening lines, which refer to the curvaceous “mountains” and “valleys” of the daughters of Albion, to the “wander[ing]” of Oothoon as she travels in loose fashion through the “vales” of Leutha, to her journey over the rolling waves as she moves toward Theotormon after symbolically plucking the flower from Leutha’s valley, Blake’s writing dwells on the soft curves and gentle motion associated with feminine seductive power. The rape by Bromion forces itself on the poem, halting this flow of feminine al-

lure. Oothoon is left prostrate and still: “on his stormy bed / Lay the faint maid.”⁴¹ Oothoon’s immobility heightens the contrast with the wandering movement of earlier lines.

30 In one sense Blake rehearses a rather familiar trope of rape as colonial domination and possession, aligning the female body with the land. He takes it further, however, by suggesting a gendering of poetic utterance. While Oothoon wanders in Leutha’s vale, the poetic movement is characterized by yearning desire. When she is raped, Blake’s diction becomes violent and abbreviated. This rape is not the first suggestion of violence in the poem, nor is it the last. When Oothoon “pluck[s]” the flower from the valley of Leutha, her action invites comparison with Bromion’s. This is more than understandable, given the way the loss of female virginity was described in contemporary literature. In some cases, the description closely mirrored that of rape. When Fanny Hill loses her virginity in John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, for example, she is subject to “fierce tearing and rending.”⁴² Even as she plucks the flower, Oothoon remains open to sensual experience. This paradoxical meaning is carried in the sexually suggestive act of deflowering that simultaneously signals the rejection of sexual experience. It is important to the voice that Oothoon finds later in the poem that she retains this openness. Virginity, here, is not false modesty but innocence and possibility.

31 After Bromion rapes her, Oothoon figuratively calls a second rape upon herself as a means to redemption from the first:

I call with holy voice! kings of the sounding air,
Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect,
The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast.

The Eagles at her call descend & rend their bleeding prey;
Theotormon severely smiles. her soul reflects the smile;
As the clear spring mudded with feet of beasts grows pure
& smiles.⁴³

The rape by Bromion turns Oothoon’s body into a cage. This is reflected in her inability to cry: “Oothoon weeps not. she cannot weep!” Her body encloses itself and it is only through violent and bloody penetration that she can unlock it. The following plate accentuates the suggestion

38. Duncan, *Bending the Bow* ii.

39. For example, she is brown in object 9 of copy F and pink in object 9 of copy I; dark in object 9 of copy P and light in object 5 of copy A (all in the *William Blake Archive*).

40. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. 4, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. with introductions and notes by Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi (Princeton: Princeton University Press/William Blake Trust, 1993).

41. Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. 4, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi.

42. Quoted by Caroline Jackson-Houlston, “‘The lineaments of . . . desire’: Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and Romantic Literary Treatments of Rape,” *Queer Blake*, ed. Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 156.

43. Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. 5, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi.

of a second rape. Oothoon lies upon her back, head and arms flung back, legs slightly splayed and chest lifted up toward the ravenous bird in a clear indication of sexual invitation. The eagle's beak protrudes sharply as, wings splayed in downward flight, he plunges it into Oothoon's proffered flesh.

32 Oothoon's summons, "I call with holy voice," assumes the power of the bard, introduced in the opening to *Songs of Experience* as the prophet-artist who "Present, Past, & Future sees." Oothoon presents herself as passive, but she has the decisive power of voice, while Theotormon ineffectively weeps on the threshold. Her voice occupies the space that Theotormon refuses to fill with love for her. But without Theotormon's love and without sexual fulfillment Oothoon's words become repetitious: "I cry, Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love!"⁴⁴ Her song is iterative, its generative potential frustrated by the bind of shame that keeps Theotormon from fulfilling her desires.

33 In Blake's illuminated book, the image of Theotormon's eagle penetrating Oothoon appears under his only speech. The juxtaposition of Theotormon's passive bemoaning of his own sorrow and his eagle's violent activity is striking. The eagle acts as he cannot. Like the daughters of Albion who can only "weep" and "eccho," Theotormon denies his own power for decisive action, existing in a position of liminality that Oothoon powerfully rejects.

34 Oothoon's bardic imagination offers another way of seeing, and one that has a direct bearing on Blake's own conception of the political importance of the prophet-artist. Oothoon calls the eagles to rend her flesh in order that she may "reflect, / The image of Theotormon." While her self-inflicted rape is a potentially aggressive act of self-harm, it makes her into a vehicle for truth. She is offering to tell the suppressed story of the poem and, in bringing the marginalized Theotormon center stage, she hopes to recover his love. At this moment Oothoon's "holy voice" might redeem the status of narrative, which is under scrutiny in this poem. Her violent act suggests both a reinscription of her "bleeding" virgin state of openness and possibility and a reconfiguration of form:

The Eagles at her call descend & rend their bleeding prey;
Theotormon severely smiles. her soul reflects the smile;
As the clear spring mudded with feet of beasts grows pure
& smiles.

44. Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. 10, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi.

45. Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. 5, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi.

46. Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. 5, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi.

47. Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. 5, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi.

In this further degradation of her flesh, Oothoon takes on a shifting color, which makes us think of dark and light skin. In one sense, this indeterminate color emphasizes the fluid condition of her soul which, like a "clear spring," "reflects" Theotormon's smile. However, it also configures Oothoon's love in terms familiar from colonialist discourse. We see through the eyes of the daughters again as Oothoon's core appears white.

35 Introducing the prophetic mode in conjunction with tropes familiar from contemporary antislavery writing furthers Blake's concern with modes of seeing and the politics of representation. Oothoon's cry for freedom is an attack on received forms of perception:

Arise my Theotormon I am pure.
Because the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly black.
They told me that the night & day were all that I could see;
They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up.
And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle,
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot
burning
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.⁴⁵

"They told me," Oothoon repeats, lamenting the mental chains that taught her to see nothing other than the time-bound world of sense experience, to live from day to day guided by physical want and fear. Striking out against her oppressors, she stakes her claim to freedom in terms that emphasize her newfound ability to perceive a reality other than the temporal and locate meaning in figurative language.

Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye
In the eastern cloud: instead of night a sickly charnel
house.⁴⁶

Theotormon, the cause of her present sorrow, remains caged. His ability to distinguish and find meaning is nullified by shame and grief.

To him the night and morn
Are both alike: a night of sighs, a morning of fresh tears.⁴⁷

36 Reading Blake's *Visions* in order to find "the poetic lore of what America is" and writing "My Mother Would Be a Falconess" in a semi-automatic state, Duncan claimed that he had constructed a poem about poets:

And, searching out the poetic lore of what America is, I
had been reading Blake's *Vision of the Daughters of Albion*
these last few nights just before going to sleep. "With what

sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?" I had read, and I said to myself, yes, there are bloody men, and I am not one of them but of chicken-kind, for I would never draw blood. Which goes to show one should be careful of vain self-delusions entertained at bedtime. For now my dream would have me a hawk. And, hearing my account, Jess comments: "Especially since chickens do draw blood." Whereupon, I recall those horrible cannibalistic hens I tended at Treesbank, that needed only the first sign of blood that might be left after egg-laying to tear at each other, bloody not from hunger but from malice, like so many poets furious in their pecking order.

*Do I draw blood then chicken-wise
And hide myself in a hawk's disguise?*⁴⁸

37 The vocabulary of violence, which he derives from Blake, relates to political, poetic, and sexual power. It is political because it is about the violence of domination and futile aggression, which provides a rather pointed reflection on America's actions in Vietnam. When Duncan writes in "My Mother Would Be a Falconess" "it seemd my human soul went down in flames," it is hard to ignore the image of the American fighter plane crashing into Asian soil. It is poetic because it negotiates the difficulty of finding a place for individual voice free from the mother tongue and mothering or smothering forms of language:

I would be a falcon and go free.
I tread her wrist and wear the hood,
talking to myself, and would draw blood.

And it is sexual because of the unsettling evocation of rape where the gay poet-falcon's "pierc[ing]" beak implies virginal deflowering as well as the daily plundering of life.

38 Duncan would have known that the Egyptian sun-god, Ra, creator of the world, had the head of a falcon, and that he symbolically died each evening, crossing the boundary to the underworld, and was brought back to life in the morning. He would have been familiar with the ancient superstition that animals cross between realms more easily. So, for Duncan, with his defining interest in hermetic vision, choosing the falconess and falcon to represent the mother-son relationship is unlikely to have been accidental. Like Blake, he was more than able to relate cosmic and personal boundaries and boundary crossings on the same plane. In a clear echo of Blake's *Visions*, the violence of Duncan's poem suggests rape:

When will she let me bring down the little birds,
pierced from their flight with their necks broken,
their heads like flowers limp from the stem?

48. Duncan, "A Lammas Tiding," *Bending the Bow* 51.

The deliberate double meaning of "bring down" and "pierced," together with the simile in the last line, elides the difference between murder and deflowering rape. In the next line the pent-up aggression of Duncan's poet-falcon turns on the mother, the origin of self, from which it cannot break free: "I tread my mother's wrist and would draw blood." Duncan takes from Blake the sense that rape can figure both as a symbol of oppression and as a source of controlling power. He also takes from Blake a desire to bring violence and ugliness center stage and confront their meaning and relevance. I have suggested that Blake's poem opens our eyes to the possibility of poetic power sourced not in generic sentimental and sighing visions, but in the disruptive prophetic mode, vividly rendered in Oothoon's second, self-willed rape and gloriously upheld in her discovery of the revelatory and liberating capacity of figurative language. Duncan is in dialogue with Blake on the possibilities of freedom through violence and the concomitant notions of futile henpecking poets and colonial oppression.

39 Before I remark on "Up Rising," I want to venture a few suggestions as to the connections a mind like Duncan's or Blake's, prone to repeated interfaces, analogies, and discursive ways of imagining, might have drawn between the penetrative quality of hermetic vision (in which one might find "the poetic lore of what America is") and the violent penetration expressed in their images of rape. Reading "My Mother Would Be a Falconess," we are left with a strong sense that if Duncan found a poetic lore governing the actuality of American society in Blake's *Visions*, it was a lore of grotesque being. In the theoretical framework established at the start of this section, I suggested that the grotesque scene is one of metamorphosis or transition, the self's process of becoming and its fight with an excess of self that it would like to name other. As Blake and Duncan posit a discursive interchange between the body as a poetic field and poetry as an embodied medium, the grotesque state of the raped body becomes a way of thinking about poetic utterance and the power of voice. Oothoon claims the unwanted otherness of Bromion as a part of herself and a source of poetic power when she calls upon Theotormon's eagles to rend her flesh. Duncan makes a similarly uncomfortable move when he brings the falcon's violence center stage in his poem.

40 If we return for a moment to the binary of self and other and the profound awareness of boundary and boundary crossing that I have argued mattered both to Duncan's appreciation of Blake and to the broader poetics of which this appreciation was a part, we can see that otherness is both an unwelcome and invited intruder on the notion of self

and essential to its formation. Here again, I think there is a very important sense in which Duncan's poetry interrogates and problematizes the claim for visionary poetics that he makes in "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife." That is, "We must go beyond the sincere into the fiction whose authors, Blake tells us, are in Eternity. We must set up in the midst of the truth of What Is, the truth of what we imagine."⁴⁹ Duncan makes us think differently about Blake's dictum because he never lets go of the tension it involves.

- 41 The eagle is, of course, also a symbol for America. Duncan consciously inherits Blake's dialectic between spirit and society, thinking about the way such penetrative violence might take on a particular significance in the context of contemporary American foreign policy. By this I do not mean to suggest that Duncan simply reiterates the familiar trope of rape as colonial oppression, though to some extent this trope haunts his writing, as it haunts Blake's. The rape imagery in "My Mother Would Be a Falconress" is part of a more abstract poetic and political concern with threatened boundaries. At the beginning of this section I cited Duncan's opening to *Bending the Bow*, where he comments on the monstrous state of American democracy: "We enter again and again the last days of our own history, for everywhere living productive forms in the evolution of forms fail, weaken, or grow monstrous, destroying the terms of their existence." This apocalyptic sense of an ending lacks the redemptive quality of light that will emerge out of darkness. Duncan calls the quality of imagination into question by implicating it as a part of the problem in his opening to *Bending the Bow*:

Cities laid waste, villages destroyed, men, women and children hunted down in their fields, forests poisoned, herds of elephants screaming under our fire—it is all so distant from us we hear only what we imagine, making up what we surely are doing. When in moments of vision I see back of the photograph details and the daily body counts actual bodies in agony and hear—what I hear now is the desolate bellowing of some ox in a ditch—madness starts up in me. The pulse of this sentence beats before and beyond all proper bounds and we no longer inhabit what we thought properly our own.⁵⁰

The monstrous state of America is reflected in a monstrous poetic that is blind to the narrative of murder and destruction, blind to a narrative it does not want to acknowledge. Imagination, in this sense, is devoid of the penetrating prophetic function that Duncan then ascribes to "moments of vision." Such moments, and the "madness" they gener-

ate, threaten the normative identity of the self and force an ecstatic embodying of the other.

- 42 The poetic that governs Duncan's engagement with Blake therefore has direct relevance to the nature of his political engagement. Duncan castigates contemporary American democracy because it denies this poetic. He suggests that America's actions in Vietnam, which reflect the failing of American foreign policy to consider the way democracy might resist the violent perpetration of North American hegemony, pervert and destroy the democratic system that they are meant to protect. They are fighting "to defend a form that our very defense corrupts." The impact of such defense is to close off evolution and destroy the very life and energy that are essential to the kind of redemptive, restorative, and ethical democratic vision that Duncan finds in his reading of Whitman, Blake, and Olson.
- 43 The relationship between Duncan's poetic lore and political engagement is reciprocal. "Up Rising"⁵¹ is one of a series of poems about war originally published as "Passages" in a separate publication titled *Of the War*. The war in Vietnam provides a way of thinking about conflict, that is to say the binary principle that I have argued is fundamental to Duncan's poetic texture, just as the binary, the permeable boundary between self and other, provides a way of thinking about the war that is happening in Vietnam and the meaning of America, which is under scrutiny as a result. In "Up Rising," Blake features as a writer of hermetic vision who offers a way of imagining the fundamental principles of America as they appeared at the moment of national inception, "in figures of fire and blood raging." But the following line begins "... in what image?" as if Blake's "figures" can't fully embody the violence and horror of an America grown so fat on its own despotic idea of democracy that its "ravens eagle" knows no bounds and cannot satiate its destructive hunger for human flesh. The horror that Duncan perceives in contemporary foreign policy tests the principle of hermetic vision even as it contributes to his understanding of the texture and meaning of such vision through struggle and conflict.

Conclusions

- 44 The lament that opens *Bending the Bow* mourns the destruction of form as evolutionary process and discursive embodiment. Such form attests to the importance of permeable boundaries and an ethic rooted in the relationship between self and other. We have seen how and why Blake mattered to Duncan in this context, in terms of both poetic

49. Duncan, "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife" 112.

50. Duncan, *Bending the Bow* i.

51. Duncan, "Up Rising," Passages 25, *Bending the Bow* 81-83.

texture and political engagement, and how Duncan makes us think differently about Blake's dicta and violence as a result. Duncan comes into his creative potential thinking about Blake in terms of touch. And touch defines the boundary of self both by reinscribing it as a real and tangible distinction and by offering a way of transgressing that distinction. In this way Duncan takes our understanding of Blake beyond the personal and poetic implications of myth toward an intensely ethical and political engagement.

- 45 The dialogue that Duncan has with Blake is part of a larger pattern in Blake's American reception, where the English poet-painter both matters to a Whitmanesque tradition of mythic self-definition and helps expose the tensions inherent in that tradition. For Duncan, poetry, and particularly the romantic prophet-artist, needed to address and restore the meaning of American democracy. Filtered through Olson's lens, Blake becomes part of the restoration of a Whitmanesque dream. Contemporary democracy, with its troubling exclusion of the other and a perceived tendency toward individual stultification as opposed to liberation and expansion, seems monstrous by comparison. In his experiment in life-writing, titled *The H.D. Book*, Duncan claimed: "Where a democracy is composed of a people in which the individual conscience and nature is not liberated, so that a common standard or consensus of the majority rules and not the union of each in free volition, the state is already totalitarian."⁵² Duncan maintains the importance of the prophet-artist in the preservation of democratic individualism at a time when the very values of democracy and community seem hijacked by commercial and technocratic interest. He writes:

The beauty of the poem, the poet's sense of beauty, in itself, that cannot be bought and sold. Beauty, in a society based upon commodity-profit is ambivalently praised and despised. The popular mistrust, the industrial and commercial mistrust, opposes and destroys where it can individual sensitivity, as out of place in the "democracy" of big party politics or in the "community" of the modern city as individualist architecture with its romantic and expressive form, even ornament, is in the plans of the new functionalism.⁵³

Duncan's use of quotation marks around "democracy" and "community" indicates the corruption of the terms he holds in such high esteem. For it is in democracy and community realized in the intimacy and density of his poetry that Duncan finds hope for society. And while it is fair

to say that he participates in the making of an American myth of Blake that is fundamentally optimistic in its desire to co-opt the English painter-poet into a restorative romantic vision, Duncan is also sensitive to the limitations of that vision and, like Blake and Whitman, he has doubts as to the capability of the prophet-artist to work within society and effect social change.⁵⁴ "... in what image?" he asks his admired Blake, can we begin to embody and therefore address the grotesque state of our nation?

- 46 After Duncan published *Bending the Bow* he pledged to keep away from the world of publication for fifteen years. His friend and contemporary poet Michael Palmer explained the decision in the following way:

The story is well-known in poetry circles: around 1968, disgusted by his difficulties with publishers and by what he perceived as the careerist strategies of many poets, Duncan vowed not to publish a new collection for fifteen years. (There would be chapbooks along the way.) He felt that this decision would free him to listen to the demands of his (supremely demanding) poetics and would liberate the architecture of his work from all compromised considerations.⁵⁵

This move reveals "My Mother Would Be a Falconress" to be as much about Duncan's frustrations at restrictions on his poetic freedom as it is homage to the revelatory power of the prophetic voice. Perhaps in retreating from publication, and therefore implicitly from society, Duncan felt he could better serve it in the end. But such a move also illustrates an inability to realize the dialectic between spirit and society that was fundamental to his sense of himself as a poet of hermetic vision, and also to his identification with Blake. This anxiety haunts Duncan's reading of Blake, as perhaps it haunts the Whitmanesque myth of America that Blake helps Duncan reimagine, shadowing the visionary enterprise with the struggle and disillusionment felt by the very poets who most wanted to sustain it.

52. "From *The H.D. Book*, Part II, Chapter 5," *Sagetrieb*: Robert Duncan Special Issue 4.2-3 (fall and winter 1985): 42-43.

53. "From *The H.D. Book*, Part II, Chapter 5" 49.

54. Whitman's concerns appear strongest in his 1871 work *Democratic Vistas*. Blake's anxieties surface throughout his canon but perhaps the best example is in *Vala*, where the prophetic function is recognized as a "delusive Phantom."

55. Michael Palmer, "Ground Work: On Robert Duncan," <<http://jacketmagazine.com/29/palmer-duncan.html>> (last accessed 19 July 2011).