

Promoting “a community of thoughtful men and women”: Anarchism in Robert Duncan’s *Ground Work* Volumes

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FOR PEOPLE FAMILIAR WITH THE WORK OF ROBERT DUNCAN, discussing him as a political poet likely brings about a quick reference to his vitriolic attack on the Vietnam War. This attack is epitomized in his famous (and perhaps infamous) mid-1960s poem “Up Rising, *Passages* 25,” in which Duncan openly equates President Johnson with Hitler and Stalin as members of “the great simulacra of men” (*Bending* 81), before going on to describe (in grisly detail) the horrors of America’s use of napalm on the Vietnamese people. However, Duncan’s poems from this era are not my focus; instead, I will argue that the poems of Duncan’s last two books, *Ground Work: Before the War* and *Ground Work II: In the Dark* (published in 1984 and 1987, respectively), offer a much different and potentially more resonant type of political poetry. Specifically, I would like to suggest that the writing in the *Ground Work* volumes is effective political poetry because it avoids (for the most part) the oppositional, polarizing attacks found in his Vietnam War-era poetry. Rather, in these later works, Duncan abandons these attacks in favour of a poetry that creates, through both its form and its content, a model of political anarchism, a subtly didactic model that he hopes the reader will follow and consequently enact in her daily life.

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Before discussing Duncan's personal belief in and use of political anarchism, I would like to provide a brief overview of anarchism. Such a definition is necessary in order to both differentiate anarchism from other political movements, particularly Marxism (especially since the border between certain strains of anarchism and Marxism is rather permeable at times), as well as to set the stakes for why the acknowledgement of Duncan's anarchism, overlooked or undervalued by most of his commentators, is crucial to understanding the fundamentally political nature of the *Ground Work* volumes.

Most briefly, anarchism can be defined as a political system where a community works together without having or needing an overarching governmental system. The anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin nicely summarizes the basic principles of anarchism:

The anarchists conceive a society in which all the mutual relations of its members are regulated, not by laws, not by authorities, whether self-imposed or elected, but by mutual agreements between the members of that society, and by a sum of social customs and habits—not petrified by law, routine, or superstition, but continually developing and continually readjusted, in accordance with the ever-growing requirements of a free life, stimulated by the progress of science, invention, and the steady growth of higher ideals. No ruling authorities, then. No government of man by man; no crystallization and immobility, but a continual evolution—such as we see in Nature. (quoted in Woodcock 22)

The first thing to note is that Kropotkin's emphasis on natural, organic evolution sets anarchism at odds with utopian thinking, since utopias are places of static perfection. The second and more important thing to note is that Kropotkin does not view *any* state system (be it democratic, communist, or any other form) as just. This is where anarchism and Marx's version of socialism part ways, even though they share many of the same tenets and originally were factions within the same socialist movement, the International Workingmen's Association (now generally known as the First International). Anarchists reject Marxian socialism precisely because the latter still supports the notion of a state government; Mikhail Bakunin voices the anarchist refutation of Marx's socialism quite succinctly:

No state, however democratic—not even the reddest republic—can ever give the people what they really want, i.e., the free self-organization and administration of their own affairs

from the bottom upward, without any interference or violence from above, because every state, even the pseudo–People’s State concocted by Mr. Marx, is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals, who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves. (“Statism” 338)

The result is, as Noam Chomsky states, that “anarchism may be regarded as the libertarian wing of socialism” (123).

Anarchists are also against democratically elected governments, which, like socialist governments, they believe offer only a different hand on the stick. Anarchism’s focus on the necessarily free individual might at first seem aligned with democracy, but anarchists reject democratic institutions “because they mean that the individual abdicates his sovereignty by handing it over to a representative; once he has done this, decisions may be reached in his name over which he has no longer any control” (Woodcock 30). Along these lines, then, anarchists reject even so-called direct democracy because the minority, the individual, must submit to an external (and thus artificial) force: the will of the majority (31).

Kropotkin focused his particular version of anarchism, which he labeled anarchist communism, around the concept of the local commune, such as “the communes of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries [that] had succeeded in emancipating themselves from their lords, ecclesiastical or lay” (Kropotkin 33). He stressed that “The common possession of the instruments of labour must necessarily bring with it the enjoyment in common of the fruits of common labour” (32). Consequently, Kropotkin championed an anarchist communism that would function without any form of official government, a system in which, since “everything is interdependent, [with] each branch of production knit up with all the rest, the attempt to claim an individualist origin for the products of industry [would be] absolutely untenable” (31); the result is that Kropotkin, as an anarchist communist, argued “we cannot hold with the collectivists that payment proportionate to the hours of labour rendered by each would be an ideal arrangement” (32), instead preferring the guiding principle of “*to every man according to his needs*” (33). (Although sometimes attributed to Marx himself, this phrase was first used by the French socialist politician and historian Louis Blanc in his *The Organization of Work*, published in 1840—several decades before Marx popularized it in his 1875 “Critique of the Gotha Program.” Rather than a purely Marxist slogan, socialists in general—including many anarchists—often use this phrase.)

Kropotkin's anarchist communism provides a particularly useful bridge to Robert Duncan's use of anarchism, since, as Robert J. Bertholf has shown, Duncan was familiar with and extremely interested in Kropotkin's writings.¹ In "Decision at the Apogee," Bertholf quotes a letter Duncan wrote to Pauline Kael, dated 10 July 1944, in which Duncan states he has "started reading the Kropotkin again and got into bed reading Kropotkin and got up in the morning walking to work reading Kropotkin" (9). In the same article, Bertholf also gives an excellent account of Duncan's anarchist beliefs:

That the individual is free to act as long as his actions do not impinge on the freedom to act of other people is a basic principle of anarchist position.[...] The second principle is that essential freedom means living in a society without government. Structured government is corrupt, an institution based on the greed for power to maintain itself, mainly coercing people and taking away their individual freedoms.[...] These are the principles of anarchist thought that appealed to Duncan, plus a third: the necessity to destroy present social and economic systems in order to create new kinds of organizations in which the freedom and integrity of the individual will flourish. (4–5)

Duncan's personal support of anarchism is generally well known by his readers. As far back as 1945, in an article written for the magazine *Direct Action*, Duncan openly argues for what he calls "anarchist Robinhoodism," stating that anarchist communes are a necessity for a fair society and that "Anarchism must have its own black market. 'To each according to his needs' must not be a promise which anarchists hold out for the future—it must be a demand which they make upon the present" ("Ten Prose Pieces"). This belief in Kropotkinian anarchism also underlies Duncan's stance in

¹ To the best of my knowledge, Duncan never overtly references Kropotkin in any of his published poetry; however, Duncan gave a reading at the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, in which, in an earlier version of "The Multiversity, Passages 21," immediately after the lines

Where there is no commune,
the individual volition has no ground.
Where there is no individual freedom, the commune
is falsified (BB 71)

he includes the line (removed from the version of the poem in *Bending the Bow*) "Kropotkin working on his new ethics in the short light of the Bolshevik winter" ("Multiversity"), explicitly connecting the concepts of commune and ethics with Kropotkin.

his essay “The Homosexual in Society,” where (in spite of his own open homosexuality) he passionately argues against “homosexual cult[s]” (40) and all other exclusionary groups: he states that “my view was that minority associations and identifications were an evil wherever they supersede allegiance to and share in the creation of a human community good—the recognition of fellow-manhood” (38). The fact that Duncan published this essay three times (in 1945, 1959, and 1985), each subsequent time adding commentary expanding on and underlining his anarchist support for the communal over the exclusionary, goes to show Duncan’s longstanding attraction to anarchist thought.

However, when it comes to Duncan’s poetry, this underlying political anarchism often goes unnoticed. Perceptive critics of Duncan’s work, including, among others, Norman Finkelstein and Nathaniel Mackey, consistently overlook or give short shrift to the importance of anarchism in Duncan’s personal ideology and in his poetry, generally preferring to focus on Duncan’s mysticism. Finkelstein, for example, argues that

Duncan is a religious poet: for him, the prophetic poet inherits from the religious and philosophical traditions of the past all that is necessary to bring spiritual insight or gnosis (which includes a renewed understanding of the social and political conditions of history and of one’s own time) to his readers. [...] Duncan’s own concept of form derives from a syncretic theosophical tradition that includes Neoplatonism, Christian and Jewish kabbalism, and gnosticism, all of which share an emanational vision of creation. (342)

While Finkelstein’s point about the religious aspect of Duncan’s poetry is valid, it is also an extremely limited way of approaching Duncan’s work. To view Duncan through the lens of only his religious mysticism is to overlook other important aspects of his ideology. To be fair, Finkelstein does open up his analysis to other areas, arguing at one point that “it may be said that Duncan’s understanding of poetry is derived equally from linguistic, psychoanalytic, and religious/theosophical sources” (368). Here again, though, there is no mention of any of Duncan’s philosophical forebears, in spite of Duncan’s references over the years to figures such as Alfred North Whitehead, Roland Barthes, and even the then relatively little known Jacques Derrida.² Moreover, Finkelstein completely excises

² Duncan discusses Whitehead in a number of interviews and articles; Duncan had copies of Barthes’s *Elements of Semiology* and *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology* in his personal library (Robert J. Bertholf, “Preliminary Checklist

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Duncan's studies in politics, although Duncan was well versed in both Marxism and anarchism; as Ekbert Faas notes, Duncan was a devoted reader and sometime contributor to magazines such as *Direct Action* and Dwight Macdonald's *Politics* (147–48).

Likewise, Nathaniel Mackey, in his long study "Gassire's Lute: Robert Duncan's Vietnam War Poems," overlooks or ignores the importance of anarchism to Duncan's stance against the Vietnam War. Although he fully acknowledges the political nature of Duncan's poetry, Mackey misinterprets Duncan's politics as a desire to be monarchical, rather than anarchistic, arguing that "In Pound we see a poet hankering to get into government, wanting to dictate policy, to wield decision-making power, to sit in smoke-filled rooms. In Duncan we see not so much an eye to the actual grind of political authority as a Shelleyan sense of the poet as actual, though unacknowledged, king" (77) and that "A sense of the oppositional character of poetry, the sense of it as 'a rival government' or 'another kind of nation,' is one that Olson and Duncan share" (91). Even when confronted by Duncan's critique of Marxism, Mackey either ignores or doesn't realize Duncan's implicitly anarchistic stance:

Duncan's vision is as dialectical as that of any Marxist. Still, I recall him once remarking in conversation that what he could not subscribe to in Marxism was the idea that there could be an end to a dialectic. Non-teleological, his sense of time is that it's double-jointed. The war is both a sign of the times and "an eternal sentence." He adopts the Heraclitean sense of war as a cosmogonic, ever-active fact of life, the "Father of all" throughout all of time, but the historicity of our twentieth-century conflicts does not entirely fade from view. (113)

Interestingly, Mackey chooses to chalk up this resistance to Marxism solely to Duncan's mysticism; instead of recognizing this resistance as at least partly due to anarchism's fundamental rejection of Marxist socialism, thus making Duncan's position at least partly political in nature, Mackey turns only to Duncan's mysticism as a way of explaining away Duncan's critique.

Part of Finkelstein's and Mackey's oversight in regards to Duncan's anarchism has to do with a shared implicit belief that mysticism and poli-

of Robert Duncan's Reference Library," found in *Jacket* 28); he mentions Derrida in passing in two letters to Chris Edwards, dated 28 April 1977 and 30 May 1978, remarking in the latter that "Derrida I think hostile to the spirit of poetry as such" ("Here at the Last Minute").

tics are separate entities. In fact, Duncan's mysticism and his anarchist politics are intricately linked, constantly supporting and flowing into and out of each other. At their base, both anarchism and Duncan's mysticism stress open-endedness and non-hierarchical equality. Certainly, Duncan himself saw no need to place barriers between the two; as he states in "The Homosexual in Society,"

For some, there are only the tribe and its covenant that are good, and all of mankind outside and their ways are evil; for many in America today good is progressive, their professional status determines their idea of "man" and to be genuinely respectable their highest concept of a good "person"—all other men are primitive, immature, or uneducated. Neither of these perspectives was acceptable to me. I had been encouraged by my parents, by certain teachers in high school, by friends, through Socialist and Anarchist associations, and through the evidence of all those artists, philosophers and mystics who have sought to give the truth of their feeling and thought to mankind, to believe that there was an entity in the imagination "mankind," and that there was a community of thoughtful men and women concerned with the good of that totality to whom I was responsible. (38–39)

For Duncan, it is precisely this moral basis that connects his political (socialism, anarchism), philosophical, and mystical interests into a rather organic whole; both anarchism and mysticism spring from, pay respect to, and remain engaged with this "community of thoughtful men and women."

A good example of how an intelligent reading of Duncan's work suffers from a lack of acknowledgement of Duncan's political anarchism is Clément Oudart's recent article "Genreading and Underwriting: A Few Soundings and Probes into Duncan's *Ground Work*." Oudart's piece is intelligent and perceptive, and it does very valuable work exposing the "key texts" that underwrite the *Ground Work* volumes: Oudart shows Duncan's complex interlacing of references to and quotations from texts by, among others, Gérard Nerval, Stéphane Mallarmé, Sigmund Freud, Charles Baudelaire, and Ranier Maria Rilke in several of the poems in the *Passages* series contained in *Ground Work*. Oudart argues that "Duncan's radically open form is predicated upon a dual practice of reading writings and writing readings[...]. Evolving a genetic-based poetics of derivation [...], Duncan foregrounds a writing process anchored in the layering of

countless readings and re-readings of master or hyper-texts that in turn underwrite [what Duncan termed] the 'grand collage.'"

Oudart, however, completely overlooks the political aspect of Duncan's openly derivative, assemblage-based poems.³ The decision to write assemblage poems is inherently anarchistic for Duncan, in that it brings a community of voices, a community of knowledge, into the poem. It is important to note that Duncan views this community of voices in his poetry as his personal chrestomathy, a viewpoint which he openly states in *Bending the Bow's* "Orders, Passages 24":

Down this dark corridor, "this passage," the poet reminds me,
and now that Eliot is dead, Williams and H.D. dead,
Ezra alone of my old masters alive, let me
acknowledge Eliot was one of them, I was
one of his, whose "History has many
cunning passages, contrived corridors"
comes into the chrestomathy. (78)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *chrestomathy* as "A collection of choice passages from an author or authors, *esp. one compiled to assist in the acquirement of a language*" (emphasis added). The multiple quotations from other authors that Duncan includes throughout his poetry are not just shining examples of the best and brightest but, literally, those important passages that have assisted him in acquiring his poetic language, his poetic voice. The chrestomathy, in other words, acts as a community of educators, writers with whom Duncan has interacted (literally, in the cases of Pound, Doolittle, and Williams, but also figuratively, with others whose works Duncan attentively studied) in order to develop his own voice. This community acts, I would suggest, similarly to one of Kropotkin's proposed anarchist communes: unregulated, unreified, constantly evolving, Duncan can, without mediation, interact with each educator/writer in order to take

³ I have somewhat reluctantly chosen the term *assemblage* to refer to Duncan's practice of writing poems that openly acknowledge their derivational debts to other authors, myths, cultures, religious beliefs, etc. As I mean it, assemblage does not directly refer to the related visual arts practice of combining various (usually found) objects into a sculpture or three-dimensional painting (à la Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Cornell); instead, the term should suggest the poem as a gathering place for disparate elements, and so it is meant to be a term large enough to include all of Duncan's derivational writing practices, such as direct and indirect quotation, palimpsest, allusion, and collage, while still acknowledging that Duncan himself necessarily and consciously adds his own ideas, beliefs, and emotions into the assemblage.

according to his needs. Moreover, the idiosyncratic nature of the chrestomathy allows Duncan to place seemingly unrelated writers in concert, thus implicitly displaying the interdependent nature of all writers/writing. Duncan's chrestomathy, then, functions as an *anarchistic* community of educators.

Even more so, Duncan conceptualizes language itself and words themselves as communal entities, open equally to everyone and therefore communal and anarchistic in nature, as he shows in the poem "Go, My Songs, Even As You Came to Me":

Go, my songs, then in zealous
liberality, no longer mine,
but now the friendship of the
reader's heart and mind
divine; find out,
as if *for*, in every soul
its excellence, as if *from* me
set free. "My" songs ?

the words were ever ours each thought
his own, and, if he sought
to find them his,
caught up his meaning in their
zealous liberality! (*Ground Work* 122)

The questioning of his individual ownership of language in the question "My' songs?" and the emphasis on the idea that the words "were ever ours" lay bare Duncan's argument that language itself is an anarchist-communist construction, shared by and co-created by individuals who must link any attempt to control words with the knowledge that such control is only momentary and insignificant when compared to the words' "zealous liberality." Duncan's position that language is a communal entity is again notably similar to the ideas of Kropotkin, who was, as I've mentioned earlier, the anarchist philosopher Duncan most admired. Kropotkin stressed the communal nature of *all* creation:

There is not even a thought, or an invention, which is not common property, born of the past and present. Thousands of inventors, known and unknown, who have died in poverty, have co-operated in the inventions of each of these machines which embody the genius of man.

Thousands of writers, of poets, of scholars, have laboured to increase knowledge, to dissipate error, and to create that atmosphere of scientific thought, without which the marvels of

our century could never have appeared. And these thousands of philosophers, of poets, of scholars, of inventors, have themselves been supported by the labour of past centuries. They have been upheld and nourished through life, both physically and mentally, by legions of workers and craftsmen of all sorts. They have drawn their motive force from the environment.

(15)

If, as Duncan believes, all language is owned and created by all individuals, then all utterances are also necessarily the community's, not the individual's, and can be used by anyone. Consequently, Duncan's emphasis on assemblage in general and on quotation specifically is a way for him to employ and subtly endorse socially and politically anarchistic ideas in the very form of his poetry without necessarily explicitly espousing anarchistic dogma.

In this particular poem, the anarchism is further supported by the fact that "Go, My Songs, Even As You Came to Me" is part of a series of poems ("Dante Études") and by Duncan's subtitle, which notes that the poem was written "after Robert Adamson's opening song in his *Swamp Riddles*" (GW 121). In Duncan's use, serial poems function as an example of a textual anarchist-communism community, where the individual pieces work together without an overarching structure in order to create a greater whole. Pieces can be read separately, as individuals, and they make sense; however, the poems take on greater resonances when placed in community with each other. As Joseph Conte argues, in a serial poem "Each poem is complete in itself, an event enacted; but in the context of the series, each is but a part of the ongoing process, and thus incomplete" (*Unending Design* 53). Individual poems in the series, like individual people in an anarchist-communism community, are simultaneously both freely independent and necessarily intertwined with each other.⁴

⁴ Stephen Collis, in his recent book *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good: Poetry, Anarchy, Abstraction*, makes a similar point about serial poems in general and Duncan's use of the serial poem specifically, stating that Duncan's serial poems are "expressions of an anarcho-communist poetics [that] are themselves part of a complex structure that is itself formally anarchist" (109). Working from similar sources as I have, particularly Conte, Collis arrives at a fascinating and illuminating discussion of poetry and anarchy in the work of Phyllis Webb, but he also intelligently discusses Duncan's anarchism throughout the book. However, Collis intentionally or unintentionally overlooks the anarchistic nature of the *Ground Work* volumes in his discussion, instead focusing primarily on Duncan's critical writings and his Vietnam War-era poems, consequently arguing that *Bending the Bow*, the book those poems appear in, is "the book that gives [Duncan's] fullest expression of poetic anarchism" (94).

As for Duncan's open acknowledgement that he based the poem on a piece by Adamson, this is only one of many places in the *Ground Work* volumes where Duncan points out the practice of assemblage that underpins his poetry. For Duncan "Human learning is not a fulfillment but a process, not a development but an activity" ("Pages from a Notebook" 16); along these lines, then, Duncan takes up other writers' works not just as a personal chrestomathy but also in order to continue the processes that the earlier writers began. Assemblage, consequently, functions as a way to extend writing processes beyond an individual writer, as a way to highlight all poems as part of what Duncan refers to in the introduction to *Bending the Bow* as "a poetry of all poetries, *grand collage* I name It" (vii). For Duncan, writing assemblage-informed poetry creates an anarchistic community of writers stretching through space and time, linking all humanity together at a basic level of non-hierarchical equality. Or, as Duncan put it

My perspective would go throughout time and the present world of man as it extends into an acknowledged nature of our being. In this order I am fascinated by boundaries, by the fact that the real has just those boundaries we are willing to imagine. In my work I do not conceive of image as leading to image, of a stream of consciousness or associations, nor of the development of images, as the primary form, but of the coexistence of many figures: a plurality of boundaries means a multiphasic image of What Is. And to extend that imagination, I study the sciences of Man and His superstitions, I gather in wherever it speaks to me His testimony of experience, searching to have a more and more multitudinous image of what Man is, and a more and more various resource in His being. ("Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife" 137–38)

What some readers and critics could dismiss as mere quotation is, to Duncan, a fundamentally political move, in that it opens up an anarchistic community of voices in his poetry; once more, the result is that there is no one author, no one dominating will driving the poem forward to a specific goal, but, rather, the poem works to bring to light the processes and communal activity of human experience. In his article "A Dante Etude," Stephen Collis makes the point about the anarchistic underpinning of Duncan's poetic form quite eloquently:

Poetry is a gift of the *givenness* of language and no poet holds property rights over it, but owes it his or her service and

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responsibility. Poetry is radically communal, and the modernist development of collage—the quoting poem parading its “reading writing”—is one expression of this. The politics of Duncan’s poetic form is thus not only anarchist, but anarcho-communist [sic], and the presiding “anarchist prince,” if there is one, is Peter Kropotkin and his anarchist-communism.

Several other aspects of anarchism run throughout Duncan’s *Ground Work* volumes. Firstly, there is the preponderance of serial poems in the two books; as I’ve argued earlier, serial poems, by their nature, are anarchistic because they call into question the boundaries between the individual and the surrounding community: Do we treat the series as one collective whole, or as a group of individual poems loosely based around the same subject? Serial poems, however, offer an even greater challenge to boundaries and closure. As Joseph Conte explains,

The series describes the complicated and often desultory manner in which one thing follows another. Its modular form—in which individual elements are both discontinuous and capable of recombination—distinguishes it from the thematic development or narrative progression that characterize other types of the long poem. The series resists a systematic or determinate ordering of its materials, preferring constant change and even accident, a protean shape and an aleatory method.... [T]he series describes an expanding and heterodox universe whose centrifugal force encourages dispersal. The epic goal has always been encompassment, summation; but the series is an ongoing process of accumulation. In contrast to the epic demand for completion, the series remains essentially and deliberately incomplete. (“Seriality” 36–37)

In other words, serial poems emphasize the openness of the writing and expose the arbitrary nature of textual closure. Moreover, the individual pieces of the series maintain an anarchistic non-hierarchy by avoiding the implicit hierarchy found in the traditional logic behind textual combination, that of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, a logic that implicitly places the earlier piece in a position of greater power over the latter.

In addition, due to the amount of time taken between composing the individual pieces, series offer an even stronger example of textual anarchist-communism, since the introduction of diachronic time into the writing process allows the poet to enter into dialogic conversation with her or his own work. Duncan’s most radical of serial poems, the *Passages* series, works also to deny the easy boundaries of Duncan’s books, since

the *Passages* poems appear scattered throughout Duncan's final three books of poetry (*Bending the Bow* and the *Ground Work* volumes) and because the series has no core subject connecting its pieces: there are love poems, mythopoeic metapoems, anti-war poems, death poems, and all are connected through the *Passages* subtitle. Such a lack of cohesion may lead some readers to think that Duncan embraces formal chaos, but in fact it is his deep belief in an unknowable, organic, anarchistic order that exists in all of creation that allows him to place such disparate elements in relationship to each other. As he states in his essay "Towards an Open Universe,"

Central to and defining the poetics I am trying to suggest here is the conviction that the order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him or upon his own language is trivial beside the divine order or natural order he may discover in them. To see, to hear, to feel or taste [...] comes about in a formal organization so complicated that it remains obscure to our investigation in all but its crudest aspects. To be alive itself is a form involving organization in time and space, continuity and body, that exceeds our conscious design. (6)

Implicit in this statement is Duncan's anarchist belief that an attempt to impose order is actually an attempt to warp life away from the organic order it always already contains and to which it adheres. To set elements of life in resonance, which is how Duncan treats his poems in his later books, is to expose an order that underlies all of creation; as he says in the poem "The Dignities (Passages)," "Acknowledged in each part moving immediate in-dwelling song comes from co-operate / the whole proposes itself in assorted keys" (*GW II* 58). Thomas Parkinson argues that this order underlies the entirety of the *Ground Work* volumes as books and that Duncan's acceptance of this order allows him to fundamentally alter his conception of a book of poetry from his earlier, more intentionally cohesive volumes:

Duncan in his omnivorous way takes all proper names and all language of poetic tradition and everyday life as part of an unending vocabulary of potential forms. Duncan extends the possibilities of the modernist poetic to a field without bounds.

I deliberately invoked the "field" and with it Duncan's carefully unified and structured book *The Opening of the Field* because *Ground Work* presents a differing set. With *Roots*

and *Branches* and *The Bending of the Bow*, *The Opening of the Field* paid obeisance to the modernist concept of the book, Yeats's *The Tower*, Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Stevens's *Harmonium*, Williams's *Spring and All*—the list is indefinitely extendable, but all these works can be subsumed under the notion of the intended and integrated. *Ground Work* does not so insistently stick or hang together.[...] The inclusive book *Ground Work* [...] composes an aggregate or conglomerate. (60)

Duncan's inclusiveness, his "omnivorous" borrowings and extensions on other writers' texts, his trust that the material in the *Ground Work* volumes will hang together without any obvious overall theme or structure, comes from his growing belief that all of creation is intrinsically connected; for this reason, the poet does not need to exert any overt control to shape his text, since the material will necessarily interrelate but in such a way as to allow for gaps that deny any easy closure for the book as a whole.

In order to be responsive to this organic order flowing through all of creation, the individual must open herself to the influence of others but also to the underlying order of language itself, which is what Duncan means when he states, in "At Cambridge An Address to Young Poets Native to The Land of My Mother tongue" (and the anarchistic underpinning of this title should not be overlooked), "From the language I do not know to speak the voice not mine to speak speaks to me" (*GW II 20*).⁵ The individual must open up to the influence of the community, in this case the community of language and those writers who simultaneously both create in language and recreate language itself; language represents the fruition of anarchist labour, since it is the result of untold individuals working together to shape something larger than any one individual could create or control.

All of this, then, shows the underlying political ideology of Duncan's later poetry, in that the poems enact and attempt to normalize the concept of anarchism for the reader. Without explicitly dealing with "political issues," the poems model a way of existing as an anarchistic community (a community of voices, a community of individual poems, a community of words) that Duncan implicitly hopes will open up the reader to allowing and even practising anarchism in her daily life. If this point perhaps shifts Duncan's poetic project toward didacticism, I believe that shift is accurate

5 This openness to the order of language also helps to explain Duncan's many references to the "Master or Rime" and the "Lord of Passages": as I read them, they are not monarchical, active figures, but representations of the underlying order that informs language.

because the teaching and normalizing of anarchism was a fundamental part of Duncan's overall aesthetic and political ideology. Duncan's didacticism is most obvious in his Vietnam War poems from *Bending the Bow*,⁶ but it is also subtly omnipresent in the formal choices of both *Ground Work* volumes.

Before making that argument, it would be helpful to address didacticism's position within anarchism in general and within Duncan's work specifically. Although perhaps counter-intuitively, anarchism as a philosophy generally maintains a respect for the individual that allows for (and, at times, even encourages) didacticism; Mikhail Bakunin explains the position that individual authority maintains in anarchistic thought:

Does it follow that I reject all authority? Perish the thought. In the matter of boots, I defer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult the architect or the engineer. For such special knowledge I apply to such a "savant." But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the "savant" to impose his authority on me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and censure. I do not content myself with consulting a single authority in any special branch; I consult several; I compare their opinions and choose that which seems to me soundest. But I recognize no *infallible* authority, even in special questions; consequently, whatever respect I may have for the honesty and sincerity of an individual, I have no absolute faith in any person. Such a faith would be fatal to my reason, to my liberty, and even to the success of my undertakings; it would immediately transform me into a stupid slave, the tool of other people's will and interests. ("God and the State" 229)

Looked at in light of Bakunin's argument, it is reasonable to argue that Duncan's didacticism actually flows directly from his anarchism—Duncan implicitly expects readers to come to his work with a respect for his authority, yet, as did Bakunin, Duncan also expects individuals to be able to decide for themselves the extent to which they should heed any expert's

6 Although nearly all of the *Passages* poems from *Bending the Bow* didactically offer insight into the nature of reality and the best way to interact with that reality, the Vietnam War poems ("The Multiversity, *Passages* 21," "Orders, *Passages* 24," "Up Rising, *Passages* 25," "The Soldiers, *Passages* 26") most directly and openly assume the hortatory tone usually associated with didacticism.

opinion. Consequently, I believe that Duncan's didacticism actually displays his respect for his reader, enacting Duncan's belief that the reader can decide for herself whether or not Duncan's ideas and opinions are valid. Rather than asking for blind devotion, Duncan instead expects the reader to critically engage with his ideas, to, like Bakunin, exercise her individual liberty of reason when confronted with didactic authority.

Working alongside this respect for the reader's intelligence is a sense in Duncan that he himself is only part of a bigger, interdependent system, or, as he puts it in "Where It Appears *Passages 4*,"

Statistically insignificant as a locus of creation
I have in this my own
intense
area of self creation,
the Sun itself
insignificant among suns. (*BB 15*)

Duncan, then, claims no special insight or knowledge, since he is merely one individual, one poet, amongst countless others. This refusal to view his own ideas as somehow privileged again offers him a platform from which to teach; if his is only one voice in a multitude, it becomes the audience's job to decide if Duncan's ideas are correct. Since Duncan as an anarchist claims no special place for his writing, he feels free to express his personal ideas and beliefs completely.

Furthermore, Duncan repeatedly stresses in his writings his position as an inheritor of a great body of knowledge from the past. Because Duncan is a recipient of others' thoughts and ideas, just as the reader is the recipient of Duncan's thoughts, he openly acknowledges his borrowings. This inheritance consequently means that Duncan, in many of his didactic moments, is merely passing on the knowledge of others. As he states in "As in the Old Days *Passages 8*,"

the ones of the old days
•
will not be done with us
but come to mind •
thought designing for their sake
chariots and horizons •
from which they come
towards us
ever • (*BB 24*)

Duncan believes himself to be a *conduit* of knowledge at least as much as he is a provider of knowledge. His position as author is partially that of one who must relay the important insights of other writers to the reader.⁷

This focus on relaying information, on acting as a link in an anarchistic chain of communal creativity extending far into the past (and implicitly extending far into the future, where Duncan intends other writers to take up and extend his writing in a similar fashion) underpins Duncan's three long serial poems contained in *Ground Work*: "Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn's *Moly*," "A Seventeenth Century Suite in Homage to the Metaphysical Genius in English Poetry (1590–1690)," and "Dante Études." All three series declare their debts to other writers in their titles, with the former connecting Duncan not only to his friend and contemporary Gunn but, through Gunn's rewriting of Circe's use of moly to transform Odysseus' men, back to Homer's *Odyssey*. In fact, Duncan ends this series with a form of poetic abdication; in "Rites of Passage: II," the last poem in the series, the speaker tells his son that "where my youth was, now the Sun in you grows hot, your day / is young, my place you take triumphantly" (*GW* 69), thus implicitly encouraging the reader to take up the poet's craft and continue the work. (And, given Duncan's love of puns, it seems reasonable to infer that the title of this poem also punningly suggests the passing of the torch from author to reader.) Likewise, "A Seventeenth Century Suite" constantly foregrounds Duncan's debt to other writers, with the series subtitled "being imitations, derivations & variations upon certain conceits and findings made among strong lines"; moreover, most of the individual poems in the series are immediately preceded by the seventeenth-century poem that inspired Duncan's own writing. In this context of diachronic and dialogic creativity, lines such as these, from Duncan's "from George Herbert's *Jordan (II)*" set the entire series within the framework of communal, anarchistic creativity:

Likewise, "A
Seventeenth
Century Suite"
constantly
foregrounds
Duncan's debt
to other writers.

7 Looked at in light of these ideas, Duncan's precise description of how a reader should engage his work, spelled out most clearly and most rigidly in the introduction to the first *Ground Work* volume, does not pose a problem. Although Duncan does partially limit the reader's ability to exercise her liberty of reason when he explains how he intends the poems to be read (for example, stating that on "p. 3 Where the verse turns on the pronoun 'Her', as in line 2 'or I overheard Her', there is a demi-caesura, a hesitation (in which we hear 'Her' as object turn into possessive adjective 'Her roar')" ("Some Notes on Notation"), this limitation merely allows the reader to fully encounter the author's expertise; as author, Duncan claims the right to expect his readers to respect his craftsmanship, as well as the right to explain his ideas in particular detail—but he implicitly does not expect the reader to unthinkingly agree with him.

If we but trust the song I know
its course is free
and straight and steady goes to work its good;
it needs a trust unquestioning,
a burning without smoke,
a heat transparent in its constancy.
This fire's to be a simple fire
that would so burn.
I do not suspect its source. My will
goes with its coursing where it will,
and every word in every turn
is so. (*GW* 79)

An author must trust the song, transhistorical and essentially unknowable, rather than any particular author's manifestation of the song. The individual authors, though they are necessary parts of the continuum, must make themselves subservient to that continuum, that communal whole. As Kropotkin's anarchist communism requires, then, the individual simultaneously maintains individual autonomy while understanding that the responsible individual chooses to work in concert with others toward the betterment of the community as a whole. "Dante Études" again stresses the anarchistic, communal nature of Duncan's creativity, as the preface states that the études are "Studies, in the sense of my reflecting upon my readings and study of Dante's texts.[...] I draw my 'own' thought in reading Dante as from a well-spring" (*GW* 94); the result is that the series is truly a matter of "self-creating in concert" (*GW* 96).⁸

Even more than these serial poems, however, the most profound example of Duncan's commitment to textual and political anarchism in the *Ground Work* volumes comes in the poem "In Blood's Domaine," itself an unnumbered poem from the other serial poem in the *Ground Work* volumes, the *Passages* series. As a poem in which Duncan openly contemplates his own approaching death, along with the deaths by disease of Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Swift, Pound, and Rilke, it would at first appear that the poem is an act of lamentation. In his introduction for the recently published one-volume collection of the *Ground Work* volumes, Michael Palmer, for example, describes "In Blood's Domaine" as "one of the darkest and strangest of the *Passages*" and states that in the poem "We have

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of anarchy in "Dante Études," see Stephen Collis's articles "A Duncan Etude: Dante and Responsibility" and "Another Duncan Etude: Empire and Anarchy."

arrived at the heart of darkness, where Form has been infected by ‘scarlet eruptions,’ and where another language prevails” (xiii); likewise, Norman Finkelstein argues that “Baudelaire appears [...] along with Nietzsche, Swift, and Rilke, in the terrifying section of *Passages* called ‘In Blood’s Domaine,’ which [Michael] Davidson accurately describes as ‘a scene of invasion’” (361). I disagree, however; I view the poem not as a lament for death but as a celebration of death as a necessary part of life. Reading the poem in this way, as I will explain, requires an understanding of Duncan’s anarchist beliefs, which underpin his feelings toward death.

In the poem, Duncan deals with the human body’s seemingly imminent and inevitable decay, as “The Angel Syphilis [...] looses its hosts to swarm / mounting the stem of being to the head” and “The Angel Cancer crawls across the signs of the Zodiac to reach its / appointed time” (*GWII* 67). Likewise, “Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Swift,” he tells us, “are not eased into Death,” and “black the infected blood / gushes forth from Rilke’s mouth, from his nose, from his rectal canal” (*GWII* 67–68). However, these threatening bodily disruptions are tempered in the speaker’s opinion by a different view of death: after the description of Rilke’s physical disintegration, the speaker states “Lovely then / that Death come to carry you away from the moment of this splendour / that bursts the cells of your body like a million larvae triumphant” (*GWII* 68). Death, then, is not the fearsome enemy but, rather, a provider of relief from the ill body, a body that can no longer maintain its integrity against the insidious elements of syphilis, cancer, and tuberculosis. The speaker has no antipathy toward death, as death is a release from physical decay. But, more importantly, the speaker also refuses to view the insidious agents of decay, the “Angels” of cancer, syphilis, and tuberculosis, as evil or unnatural. Instead, the speaker presents these angels as elements of life that the speaker both respects and accepts as necessary. Syphilis, then, brings “spirochete invasions that eat at the sublime envelope,” but, most importantly, these invasions are “not alien, but familiars”—and here the multiple meanings of the noun *familiar* are appropriate: “1. A member of a person’s family or household.[...] 2. A person with whom one has constant intercourse, an intimate friend or associate.[...] 3. A familiar spirit, a demon or evil spirit supposed to attend at a call” (“Familiar,” def. B). Put together, then, these familiar, internal invasions are neither good nor evil; the speaker both knows them and accepts them as natural elements of the physical body. Likewise, the Angel Cancer “crawls across the signs of the Zodiac to reach *its / appointed time* and bringing down the carnal pride bursts into flower” (*GWII* 67; emphasis added). Cancer is not something alien but is something intimately part

Once again,
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of the human body; it is neither foreign nor ugly as it flowers in the body. Duncan confirms his acceptance of cancer as an aspect of life in his essay "Pages from a Notebook": "Medicine can cure the body. But soul, poetry, is capable of living in, longing for, choosing illness. Only the most fanatic researcher upon cancer could share with the poet the concept that cancer is a flower, an adventure, an intrigue with life" (15). Perhaps even more importantly, cancer combats the body's carnal *pride*—which the *OED* defines as "an excessively high opinion of one's own worth or importance which gives rise to a feeling or attitude of *superiority over others*" ("Pride" def. 1.a; emphasis added)—and so cancer functions as an agent of anarchism by working against pride's hierarchical nature. The "Angels" bring death, and death, to put it bluntly, levels all individuals.

Once again, it is Duncan's anarchism that underlies the speaker's acceptance of the insidious elements; if, as anarchists hold, non-hierarchical equality is an organic characteristic that exists in the natural world, then this equality must stretch beyond the human world—all creatures are, if not equal, then equally necessary in anarchistic thought. In "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," Duncan expresses this opinion quite eloquently in relation to notions of evolution and death:

[M]y search for a poetry that was not to come to a conclusion, a mankind that was in process not in progress, or let's say a picture of life—of the nature of life itself—in which no species would be an advance on another, leads me on to a view of language, world and order, as being in process, as immediate happening, evolving and perishing, without any final goal—the goal being in the present moment alone. Here the future and the past are created, destroyed, created. I cannot see evolution as leading upward to Man; any more than I can see the Australian bushman as backward or primitive or the New York sophisticate as advanced or civilized or—as many see it—brutalized. The contemporaneous elephant, the contemporaneous amoeba are not evolving towards man or fulfilled in man; any more than the Australian might be improved to be educated as a New Yorker, or the New Yorker improved to be educated as a bushman. (113–14)

Returning to the poem, the syphilis that "looses its hosts" and the cancer that "bursts into flower" may bring a leveling death to the human, but they are also agents of life: "these Angels / are attendants of lives raging within life, under these Wings we dread / viruses, bacilli come home to live in us" (*GWII* 67, 68). The death of a human being by these natural causes, in other

words, is merely the creation of life on another scale, and Duncan's anarchist belief in non-hierarchical equality requires that he not see a human life as more worthy than the life of the various viruses, bacilli, etc., that live off of the dying human body. Even more so, Duncan describes death as an act of rebellion, in which the physical body rises against and overthrows the mind; death is described as "the undoing of Mind's rule in the brain" (*GWII* 67). In his essay "Poetry Before Language," Duncan expands on this notion of the mind as the tyrannical ruler of the body, saying that before language "this divinity of the minding brain had not begun; and in the happy concourse and democracy of what we do not mind, hand, arm, leg, foot, finger, stomach, bowels, liver, heart, lungs, brain, skin and bone made their way *together*. There was no sense of anything, not even common sense; all sense was in the senses" (60–61, emphasis added). As I read it, Duncan uses the term *democracy* here not to imply the governmental system but to bring the term back to its Greek origins of "the authority of the commons"—a commonality of equals. Therefore, instead of a ruling mind, at first "there was inner communications" directly between the different parts of the body, without the intrusion of the mind: "Scratch me, right hand, the buttock said" (61). Once language develops, the mind's rule over the body is ensured:

We begin to mind what we eat, go into, fuck, excrete. We say we are *consciously* scratching our buttocks. When there are no words, we say we scratcht [sic] *unconsciously*. Consciously means that the monitor is checking out the communications circuit to feed his own admonitions. With psychoanalysis the monitor takes over even the genital operations to check them out, and, going on to the earliest systems, begins to command a conscience of mouthing, stomaching, digesting and shitting. You will see that I find this minding the store presumptive. In the height of this presumption word-communications are sent out that have no origin at all between the parties concerned. The brain contrives a confusion of feedback messages, orders "from the hand" or "from the cock" are counterfeited. (61)

Duncan's choice of words throughout this quotation is illuminating: the dominating mind checks out communications, takes over, commands, contrives a confusion, and counterfeits messages, all in order to feed its own admonitions. The mind, as Duncan portrays it here, is a tyrant, a government that unfairly uses and abuses its populace, in this case the physical body itself. Consequently, death's "undoing of Mind's rule in the brain" is an anarchistic rebellion, in which non-hierarchical equality is

restored to the elements of the physical body. True, this equality results from the death of the individual, but, as I've just argued, this death also results in the creation of new life in a myriad of different organisms.

Working alongside the anarchistic belief in non-hierarchy is the equally anarchistic distrust of purity and pure beauty. Toward the end of the poem, Duncan writes

Would you forget the furnaces of burning meat purity demands?
There is no ecstasy of Beauty in which I will not remember Man's misery.
Jesus, in this passage — He is like a man coming forward in a hospital theatre—
cries out: I come not to heal but to tear the scab from the wound you wanted
to forget.
May the grass no longer spread out to cover the works of man in the ruin of
earth. (*GWII* 69)

In these lines, Duncan argues that it was the Nazis' drive for purity that brought about the Holocaust. Purity, a utopic goal if ever there were one, necessarily requires the creation of a hierarchy, where the mythically pure are elevated above everyone and everything else; purity implicitly demands that all of creation be judged according to a manmade and therefore artificially imposed schema. Duncan offers the Holocaust as proof that hierarchies are dangerous and artificial and that they must be broken down in favour of the anarchistic, non-hierarchical equality of all living things. Moreover, these lines also implicitly argue that death is not the business of man; for Duncan, only a death by natural causes upholds his anarchistic philosophy. Underlying Duncan's earlier attack on the Vietnam War, for example, was his opinion that violent death is an imperialist action, in that one individual or one group of people physically dominate a different individual or group. For Duncan, death should be natural and result from what he sees as the natural anarchistic decay and subsequent conversion of the physical body into new forms of life. The poem also shows Duncan's shift to a much more subtle didacticism. Rather than hectoring the reader about the evils of American politics, Duncan focuses throughout the poem on teaching the reader a new way to imagine death and so to come to grips with death as a part of life. These lessons are underpinned throughout the poem by Duncan's anarchistic acceptance of non-hierarchy, his refusal to view his life (or any other form of life) as superior to any other.

Although there is no political haranguing in "In Blood's Domaine," unlike in Duncan's Vietnam War-era poetry, the political element remains as strong as in his earlier writings. What Duncan does in a poem like "In Blood's Domaine" (and, I would argue, throughout the entirety of the

Ground Work volumes) is to constantly enact an anarchistic praxis through the community of authors he creates with his use of assemblage and quotation, through the serial nature of his writings, and through the often subtly anarchistic content of the poems. Moreover, the poems in these later books maintain a consistent but very subtle didacticism, as Duncan repeatedly guides the reader through series after series of poems that work to naturalize the fundamental beliefs of anarchism—non-hierarchical equality, process, interdependence—for the reader, in the hopes that the reader will acknowledge and accept anarchism as a viable, ethical practice. Duncan, then, did not retreat from politics in his post-Vietnam War era poetry; instead, he continued to work on spreading his support for political anarchism through a non-oppositional stance, a stance that attempted to normalize anarchism’s fundamental tenets for his readers, primarily through the inclusive, non-hierarchical forms of the later poems. Obviously, it is possible that the reader will neither understand nor act upon these anarchistic tenets, but Duncan’s faith in the omnipresence of anarchistic, non-hierarchical equality allows him to hope that many of his readers will understand and will want to join the “community of thoughtful men and women concerned with the good of that totality” to whom—in my own opinion, as well as in Duncan’s—we are all responsible (“Homosexual” 39). Rather than hectoring the reader with righteous jeremiads as he did in his Vietnam War-era poetry, Duncan creates in the *Ground Work* volumes a textual anarchist-communist community, a community that includes Duncan himself, the diverse writers from whom he quotes, language itself, as well as the reader. The form of Duncan’s later poetry works to tear down the boundaries between individuals in order to show that “What is complete but rests in the momentary illusion” (*GW II* 70). The result is, I think, a more effective, more subtle, less confrontational, and less off-putting political poetry in his *Ground Work* volumes than in his earlier, much more obviously political poetry.

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