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CANON POLITICS AND
EXPERIMENTAL WRITING:
THE EXAMPLE OF L'ENCRE SYMPATHIQUE
OF ROBERT DUNCAN'S H.D. BOOK

I have a problem with anthologies of American literature: instead of building bridges, they seem to reinforce the divisions among the various canons. Of course, the *Bradley-Beatty-Long*, the *McMichael*, the *Norton*, the *Heath*, the *Harper*, or the *Prentice-Hall* anthologies have all been born of a clearly definable ethos and have targeted definite audiences with a specific purpose. Some focused on what one might call the traditional core canon, others have (re)discovered works of cultural groups formerly marginalized or silenced, while still others have invited avant-garde experimental writers. Historically, for decades the old canon was competing with the canon of representation, but then the two basically merged, growing into that expanded canon which is current and accepted today. However, on the whole both tend to ignore the third, finding it difficult to come together over shared concerns. To put it more bluntly: avant-garde experimentation and subsequent membership in the experimental canon often prevent recognition in the current expanded canon even when experimentation articulates, in addition to playfulness and indulgence in form, those very principles which representation seems to profess.

Overlappings and the mixing of canons are rare, and such gestures seem to come only from editors of avant-garde anthologies—like Donald M. Allen's now classic *The New American Poetry*, which published avant-garde writers who were from various "new" ethnic and social groups (Jewish, black, Italian, Irish, gay), thus realizing a radical and

a multicultural canon at once. Similarly, the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry*, edited by Paul Hoover, and *Poems for the Millennium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, are unusual in that they both cover a socially diverse avant-garde. The CD-ROM *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, edited by John Hollander, is exceptional in its even-handedness within its historical context.

There is another issue here too: while these avant-garde anthologies are inclusive of social diversity, anthologies—such as the Heath project—with the explicit mission to represent social diversity do not seem to reciprocate this commitment: they are more closed to experimenters, whether from socially hegemonic or marginal positions. It seems that neither the classical canon, nor the canon open toward social representation allow room for poetic/linguistic experimentation or acknowledge strangeness and difference—unless domesticated or straitjacketed. At the beginning of the twenty-first century this makes for a most paradoxical situation: the avant-garde tradition, which all through the past centuries escaped provincialism by opening to the international scene and other art forms, is, on the home front, still suffering massive exclusion.

I want to illustrate my point with another example, the otherwise groundbreaking collection of courses and syllabi *Reconstructing American Literature* edited by Paul Lauter. Here the whole experimental canon is missing from the sixty-seven thoughtfully crafted syllabi included in the volume which purports to be “a tool in a larger effort to change the teaching of American literature” (*Reconstructing* xi). Clearly, Lauter’s aim is to place the canon of representation next to the old canon; this is how the long subtitle runs: *Courses, Syllabi, Issues—so that the work of Frederick Douglass, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Agnes Smedley, Zora Neale Hurston and others is read with the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and others*. However, by excluding the works of, say, Gertrude Stein, e. e. cummings, Muriel Rukeyser, Vachel Lindsay, Sidney Lanier, Mina Loy, Lorine Niedecker, Else von Freytag-Loringhoven, Djuna Barnes, Jack Spicer, and many many others, Lauter perpetuates the exclusionary treatment of “American Literature” which he had earlier found impermissible. The *Heath* anthologies,

which basically collect the texts listed throughout the syllabi of Lauter's *Reconstructing*, do not throw a wider net either: they collect Tillie Olsen but not Charles Olson, John Williams but not Jonathan or Shirley Williams, Saunders Redding but not Laura Riding, Tomás Rivera but not Kenneth Rexroth, Ernest Gaines but not William Gass.

The avant-garde/experimental tradition—although often radically realizing principles such as multiculturalism, the representation of difference in terms of gender, race, sexuality, disability, pluralism of text, voice, language and experience—is still denied canonization within the context of social and political representation. This seems to be so in spite of the fact that there is no theoretical reason which would justify the separations between the experimentalists and the canon of representation: both were born out of resistance to mainstream ideology and as a response to monoculturalism, including the monologism of the classical canon, and they both embrace pluralism. As such, the canons of representation and experimentation should, in principle, share the fundamental desire to revise the “old” mainstream canon. However, contrary to widely articulated perceptions, the real fault line does not lie between the “old” and the “new” canons, but rather between the canon of representation and the avant-garde.

I find this point a significant weakness within contemporary theorizing of the canon: criticism's privileging of “content”—and literature's contexts, frames, objective historical forces—and the minimizing of attention to internal formal-textual features. In this frame literature is being read primarily for the information it conveys, for what it says in terms of referentiality, contextual relations, and the grounding of the text. Such culturalist reading is the least helpful when it comes to literature where the literary medium is more than a vehicle to the message socially situated and contextualized: the experimental tradition. Culturalist criticism seems to be at a loss when it comes to texts where form and language do more than simply convey the message, where they themselves act as engenders of experience.

Behind this marginalization of form I see a disinclination to connect experimental poetics with social-political agendas. As if the particular attention to the medium of writing implied the inability to write in a socially relevant way too. As if social force and political message depended on a transparency of form and language. As if socially



meaningful writing had to be, by nature, directly referential to the world, at once non-experimental and straightforward. As if full engagement with the world by definition excluded formal experimentation.

II

In what follows I would like to discuss Robert Duncan's *H.D. Book* as an example of how experimentation can provide means of addressing the social content and context. I will try to show how Duncan uses palimpsestic experiment in order to provoke cultural resonance around the meeting point of text, gender, and sexuality.

I have chosen Robert Duncan's *H.D. Book* for several reasons. It disrupts the separation of intrinsic (formalist) and extrinsic (social, historical) methodologies and the underlying separation of the inside-outside polarities. It questions the grounds for the marginalization of form by offering direct relevance to social practices. It reinstates the potential for an experimental focus on textuality to enact a cultural critique, and offers an example that defines experimental writing as of direct political relevance. Duncan uses gender and sexual identity as elements of his language experiment, while at the same time articulating a rather strong social and political message. Duncan should be situated in the generation of post-World War II poets and artists who developed their "aesthetics of spontaneity," to use Daniel Belgrad's term, to challenge the predominance of "Anglo-American traditions in the name of a more pluralistic and inclusive definition of American culture" (40). Social, gender, and sexual consciousness played a very important part in this aesthetic, serving as a vehicle of their outsider status to all forms of cultural authority. The Oakland day-laborer's orphaned son raised by adoptive parents, Robert Duncan wrote the first treatise on gay identity in 1945, "The Homosexual in Society," to give voice to marginalized social and sexual identities.

1. BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE:
WOMEN AND WOMEN'S WRITING

Nearly two decades after the poet's death, Robert Duncan's *H.D. Book* is still unpublished in its entirety. The curious and insistent reader,

though, may have access to 80% of the text, approximately—perhaps. It is difficult to know. (Even the pirated editions are incomplete.)

The ambiguities around the publication seem to parallel Duncan's insistence on process and contingency. At every stage of its publication *The H.D. Book* was organically *incomplete*, that is, unfinished and unfinishable; so at no stage can it, will it, be final and definitive. With the various (often international, intercontinental) searches and inter-library loans one has to perform in order to locate, hold, copy, and read the published chapters, the reader becomes physically and psychologically part of the process of the book and participates in its multilayered and palimpsestic nature. A bound and purchasable book object, although certainly a major literary event, would perhaps go against the questing and uncovering process, the poet's own "digressive followings of impulse and searchings for content" (*H.D.*: 11.4:53–54). "Unless we follow," Duncan insists, "unless we follow thru the work to be done, there is no other way of understanding. Participation is all" (11.2:33).

Originally, Duncan tells us, was the idea to present H.D. with a book of homage in 1962 (Faas 14). But the serial work soon grew into an ambitious project which "tells of coming alive through poetry" (Faas 16). As a piece of "admirative" criticism, to use Sherman Paul's term (171), it was to articulate the voice of his "own loving in the voice of the poem" (*H.D.*: 1.2:27).

The H.D. Book exhibits a strong note of interdisciplinarity and intertextuality, interweaving autobiography, philosophy, history, criticism, psychology, and other fields and disciplines. Indeed, linearity is resisted and single authorship is questioned as boundaries are constantly being crossed between Duncan's "original" texts and those that he appropriates, books he reads and books he writes, inside and outside, dominant and muted, hidden and scripted. Duncan is entering into personal communication with all his "imaginary kin" (*H.D.*: 11.1:114), into an "alliance life might make in love with other lives revealed in men's works" (1.1:9).

Men's, Duncan says, but in fact he is primarily interested in *women's* works; it is *through* women's writings that he intends to expand a formerly privileged polarity, men's, and complete a previously divided image of literature, self, mind, and world towards some desired wholeness.

The dominant topos of this open-ended grand collage clusters around the concept of the “feminine”: women and womanhood appear in their many variations. The hidden scripts of the women in his life, the “loving companion of women,” the female literary canon, the sympathetic woman reader and the sympathetic reader of women, female revelation, female genius, “femality of God,” “female glamour,” the theatricalization of the female body, femininity as performance, female sexuality, sexual duplicity, creative androgyny,” and “homoEros” all emerge from hiding. In *The H.D. Book* Duncan uncovers these hidden scripts by what I would call “performative sympathy,” or imaginative sympathy, because not only does he relate to his female predecessors emotionally, he actually tries on their identity in a performative manner. Duncan’s work is “adaptation” in the sense J. Hillis Miller uses the term: “a performative speech act that undoes the done in a new act of enunciation, annunciation, or just nunciation” (*Pygmalion* 243).

“All the chapters of Part I, Duncan says, “have to do with women in my life” (Faas 17). They are predominantly women who opened for him the world of female intellectualism and also offered a glimpse into the sphere of female sexuality usually hidden from young boys and older men alike.

These were women who themselves liked to perform gender and sexuality in a playful game of identity. Among these women were the “companions,” Athalie and Lili; the Rosicrucian grandmother and Aunt Fay; writers and poets like H.D., Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Edith Sitwell, Dorothy Richardson, Laura Riding, Brhyer, or Louise Antoinette Krause. The English teacher Miss Keough is remembered for linking reading with desire, for ushering young Robert into the possibility of a physical pleasure in the text. This is how Duncan relates the learning from Miss Keough of a loving, sympathetic, reading of H.D.:

I had found . . . a new teacher who brought me to Love—a new master over Poetry in the work of H.D. [. . .] My first teacher had given me a key to my future resource. She had presented the work that was worthy, and the work was to be the ground of Eros. For that winged bright promise that the soul seeks in its beloved appeared to me in the life that the sensitive inner consciousness

of Lawrence, Virginia Woolf or H.D, had found for itself in their writing, thriving there hidden from the careless reader, surviving the scorn and even hatred of the antipathetic reader, a seed that would chance somewhere, sometime, upon the ground that awaited its revelation, for the reader who would not misunderstand or revile but who would come to find therein his own kindred life. (*H.D.*: 1:2:34)

Part II, called “Nights and Days” or “A Daybook,” takes the genre of a reading journal or book of books, recording in 1961 the reading process of H.D.’s *War Trilogy* (Duncan’s term for *Tribute to Angels*, *The Flowering of the Rod*, and *The Walls Do Not Fall*, H.D.’s three books written and/or published in the early-/mid-1940s). “It follows ten days of day-by-day living with that book,” Duncan says in an interview. “So it is really a demonstration of how you live with a poem as an exercise involving your dreams and all things happening during the day and so forth. In other words, you take H.D.’s *War Trilogy* as the text to which everything refers, whether it’s dreamt or lived or meditated” (Faas 17). The topos of the war extends to the war between the sexes and to the war in literature between men and women, while reading experiences, dreams, and meditations melt into one another.

Most probably Duncan had no intention to create a canon as we understand the term today; but while he attempted to capture the complexities of mind and world, he did articulate and bring together certain fields of intellectual traditions that today we associate with canonicity. Indeed, the canonizing impulse is quite forceful here as he creates his precursors. By recovering the repressed tradition of female creativity, especially within Modernism, he expands the Modernist canon. However, instead of replacing this male polarity with a female polarity, *The H.D. Book* throws a wide net: “Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, Dame Edith Sitwell, H.D., Mary Butts, coactive in the avant-garde of the nineteen-twenties with Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence and Williams” (*H.D.*: 11.9:55). *The H.D. Book* is, he says, “relating [. . .] how I had then perhaps a special estimation not only of the masters of that art but of its mistresses, so that certain women writers instructed as well as inspired me” (1.2:27).

My very strong feeling which has not changed at all is that all those women, Virginia Woolf, and H.D. and others who are even more doubted, like Gertrude Stein and Edith Sitwell, are of the same order as Stevens and Williams and Pound and Joyce. (Faas 16)

We should not forget: the date is still 1961—decades before the expansion of the canon we take for granted today.

2. THE UNSEEN WRITINGS REVEALED BY THE “SYMPATHETIC INK”

Duncan’s attraction to the hidden and “un-understandable things” (Faas 6) stems, we know, partly from his adoptive parents’ practiced hermeticism. Already as a child he learned to look behind things, behind the veil and bead curtain hiding the inner chamber of the temple of Thoth. He was fascinated, as he says, “with the movement of meaning beyond or behind meaning, of shifting vowels and consonants—beads of sound, of separate strands that convey the feeling of one weave” (*H.D.*: 11.2:38). In *H.D.* he recognized a similar fascination with “anagrams, cryptograms, / little boxes, conditioned / to hatch butterflies” (*The Walls Do Not Fall*).

In order to uncover “meanings beyond meaning,” not only does he read texts that lead him to other texts, but he also writes over the palimpsestic layers of hidden texts. Moreover, his performance of overwriting makes these hidden texts visible. Somewhat the way children hungry for mystery use lemon juice and candle light to make a hidden writing appear to the eye, Duncan uses the chemistry of sympathy, or “feeling together,” as its etymology suggests. The hidden, muted, and suppressed script is being written over by what the French call *encre sympathique*, a “sympathetic ink,” and becomes readable. “Language becomes throughout,” he writes, “a ground of suggestion and association, a magic ground, weaving of phrases echoing in other phrases, a maze of sentences to bind us in its spell, so that we begin to be infected with the sense of other meanings and realms within those presented” (*H.D.*: 1.3–4:90).

H.D.’s *Palimpsest* is among the several previous writings showing through the textual layers of *The H.D. Book*—as if they were Chinese boxes within Chinese boxes (Part 1, Chapters 3–4). Composed in

1925–26, the three stories—“Hipparchia,” “Murex,” and “Secret Name”—take place in Rome. “circa 75 B.C.,” London. “circa 1916–26 A.D.,” and Egypt. “circa 1925 A.D.” The stories, just like Duncan’s own reflections, are concerned with levels of time, identity, and place. “In the writing an underwriting is immanent,” he explains. “Each fiction stands in the place of others, and the attentive reader may find traces or ghosts of the writing of Hipparchia [of Rome] in the reading of Raymonde [of London] or of Raymonde in Helen Fairwood [of Egypt]” (*H.D.*: 1.3–4:84). Time, place, and character are of one process here, as forms in transition, but containing in them all past dimensions and representations. Image is unearthed from underneath image, as “war and adultery are written one on top of the other” (1.3–4:89). America, England, Rome, and Greece form the multilayered set of localities. Raymonde Ransome of “Murex” is an over-writing of Helen of “Secret Name” (herself with an “undermind” and “overmind”), as well as of Hipparchia, the Greek in Roman exile. “The poetic truth,” Duncan writes elsewhere, “has to do with the existence of a real unity or creation seeking its fullness in many personae, in many places, in many times” (11.10:53).

Behind a Botticelli there was another Botticelli, behind London there was another London, behind Raymonde Ransome there was (odd and slightly crude but somehow ‘taking’ *nom-de-guerre*) Ray Bart. There was Ray Bart always waiting as there was behind the autumn drift and dream-anodyne of mist, another London. A London of terror and unpremeditated beauty. A London of peril and of famine and of intolerable loveliness. Behind London there was the London of darkened street lamps . . . , behind a mist and drift of anodyne in an Italian background of small and precise little pin-cushion pink roses, there was another Italy, another Venus, another realm of beauty never to be apprehended with the senses. (1.3–4:89)

Duncan questions the solidity of identity in these stories, and brings in further layers of time and place. He understands that beneath America lie England-Rome-Egypt, and beneath Hilda are the selves of Raymond-Helen-Hipparchia. The sympathetic reading of the world transgresses boundaries of text and gender, uncovering buried, hidden, or suppressed layers of thought, language, feeling, wishing, dreaming, and experiencing.

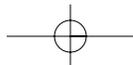


Palimpsestic awareness allows for the experience of processes with multiple layers and connections. As chief vehicle of immersion into this palimpsest, sympathy is Duncan's means, as Michael André Bernstein and Burton Hatlen put it, to "coexist with the world" (115). Such a text becomes a "continuous present" (*H.D.*: 1.6:8), where the boundaries of time dissolve: "history itself, no longer kept within the boundaries of periods or nations, appears as a mobile structure in which events may move in time in ever-changing constellations" (1.6:26).

Duncan sees this awareness of multilayered experience in *H.D.*'s writing as well, especially in the *War Trilogy*. Here too, landscape is of "a multiple image, in which the historical and the personal past, with the divine world, the world of theosophical and poetic imagination, may participate in the immediate scene" (*H.D.*: 11.4:33). Just as the imperfectly erased previous texts of *palimpsestos* remain partly visible underneath the reinscriptions, here it is the 1920s that evolve into "a meeting house," Duncan says, and make "the haunting suggestion of another dimension of the content or form" (11.4:37).

Such perpetual, Chinese box-like deferral of "content" raises the question of originality. For the further the poet digs into the past, the less "original" his own writing shall be. "I took thought from her thought," Duncan writes in connection with *H.D.*, "I took heart in her heart. . . . In working on *The Venice Poem* in 1948 I first realized I was not original but derived my spirit in poetry. Taking my cues from adopted parents" (*H.D.*: 11.7:66). Of course, Duncan liked to consider himself a "derivative poet," who took pleasure in crossing textual boundaries and identities toward some "wholeness." Robert Bertholf, in the 1988 special Duncan section of *American Poetry*, quotes the poet's comments following his reading of "The Regulators" in Buffalo, 1982:

For years I've written of myself being a derivative poet having no identity in myself, having identity in the community, and I have acknowledged and known that it is some kind of illusion of the artist that the individual poem is given and carried out in a form in itself because it is a secret real form was not in itself, but in poetry at large. My keenest interest would be in the whole life of poetry. (Bertholf 41)



3. SEXUALITY, CELIBACY, ANDROGYNY

Duncan evokes a company of women, and claims membership with the group. By performing sympathy, he adopts these women as his true companions, and adopts their identity as well. Disrupting the binary gender framework, he shows that certain types of cultural behavior usually associated with femininity in the heterosexual context can be appropriated by bodies of any kind of biological markings (male, female, or other less intelligible gender formations). Biological differences between Duncan himself and the women appearing in *The H.D. Book* become irrelevant. He joins their company, and thereby blurs boundaries between sex, gender, and desire.

Toying with alternative gender and sexual roles, he evokes women in his life in a kind of “lesbian continuum,” to use Adrienne Rich’s term, to include a variety of his experiences with women, including emotional, intellectual, sexual, and creative experiences. By turning to lesbian writers—like H.D., Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, Brhyer, Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf—Duncan prioritizes desire as the link establishing sympathies. Femininity indeed becomes a site of subversion and multiplicity.

In H.D.’s persona Duncan recognizes his own commitments and inclinations: an interest in the mythical, psychic, and poetic underworld, symbolic language, the pull of mystery cults, the cult of sexuality—as well as androgyny, the crossing of genders, sexual ambivalence, and a fascination with the feminine principle in all forms. He mentions the “femality” of God in connection with Laura Riding, above whose bed the inscription said, “God Is A Woman” (*H.D.*: 11.9:45). In addition, H.D. reinforced Duncan’s “deeper suspicion” that “genius is androgynous: unwomanly, unmanly” (11.9:55), a suspicion so memorably formulated by Virginia Woolf: “a great mind is androgynous” (97) and thus elaborated towards the end of *A Room of One’s Own*:

It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly . . . Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must

lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. (102–03)

Duncan is also subversive in rejecting the necessity of celibacy traditionally demanded of both the Dickinsonian woman genius and the questing Narcissus (male and female) in American literature. He refuses both the compulsory asexuality of Thoreau or Ahab, which Nina Baym identified in American literature, and the solitary pursuit, equally mandatory, of a woman of strength and intelligence such as Hester Prynne. Duncan's "heroes" are sexual beings, in autonomous sexual relationships. He celebrates the sexually awakened woman both in H.D. and the various intertexts he proposes where Psyche and Eros act "in conjunction." He describes H.D.'s time as one when "women began to claim an equal share in the right to consciousness, including sexual consciousness" (*H.D.*: 11.8:85), and evokes "the very sacred and taboo divinity of Woman as ruler of sexual mysteries" (11.8:86). He pictures the early years of Modernism as the first time when women could be socially and intellectually emancipated *and* full sexual beings, without being numbed by heterosexual norms.

Duncan's celebration of a female (or transgendered) and homo-/bisexual canon was especially important in the context of his own ties to the Black Mountain and San Francisco artistic communities, where, as Michael Davidson has shown, "compulsory homosociality" was the norm. With his heretic textual genealogy, Duncan offered an alternative to Olson's same-sex bonding based on the heterosexual norm as well as High Modernism's "phallic ideals of power, energy, and virtuosity" (Davidson, "Compulsory" 198). Duncan's alternative tradition is authored by women, exiles, and forgotten hermetic writers. Here lay the hidden and invisible text, the "rejectamenta," of both High Modernism and the early postmodernism of Black Mountain and San Francisco.

Textuality and sexuality appear as competing sources of physical pleasure. This is what Miss Keough taught the boy Robert Duncan early on (several decades before Roland Barthes): that reading such writers as H.D., for example, is a sensual experience comparable to the sexual act. Duncan's response, of pleasure, to a text is very similar to the way Charles Bernstein describes his reading of radical Modernism, especially Gertrude Stein:

of intense pleasure in the music of language: of hearing a palpable, intense, I'm tempted to say absolute, sense-making; you can almost taste it . . . Reading a Stein poem I feel an enormous satisfaction . . . I find the work satisfying, self-sufficient. (143)

For the high school student Duncan, Eros, “a primal authority, a cosmic need” (*H.D.*: 1.3:69) seems to easily transgress the borderline between Eros and Form, as textual pleasure “leaps up”: “Something in me—a like earnest regard—ready and with the joy of self-discovery, had leaped up towards a life, a larger play of vitalities” (1.1:29).

The traditional metaphors of weaving and ploughing—commonly applied to both text and (gendered) sex—appear throughout the book. However, they either appear as inseparable or are each applied to both the male and the female sexual act. In the cultural context, weaving and tapestry are metaphors commonly used for forms of cultural behavior associated with women’s creativity: as endless interweaving of lives, a pregnancy-like state of life within a life, showing through the tapestry of the text, its infinite web of textuality. Much of Part 3, Chapter II is devoted to the recurrent images of weaving in H.D.’s writing, as “Threads weave over and under” in the “tradition of the tapestry-maker’s art,” with the insignia woven into the design of the palace-tapestry” (*H.D.*: 11.3:140). Duncan quotes poem XXXVIII from H.D.’s *The Walls Do Not Fall*, where, he insists, “the poet and her reader, the animal and plant worlds, the stars and events are revealed in a fabric the poem weaves” (11.3:118).

my mind (yours),
your way of thought (mine),

each has its peculiar intricate map,
threads weave over and under

the jungle-growth
of biological aptitudes,

inherited tendencies

But Duncan takes the idea of pregnancy-like creativity further: he too can appropriate the mothering experience because for him it is neither species- nor gender-specific:

There were often times in childhood when, lying in the tall grass, the perspective of the world shifted . . . So that I would forget myself in the ants' purposes or in the worm's intent. That was one instance where one's consciousness was transported to another world that was still this world. . . . as a poet I know that language has many such realms for the wave of life itself strives to speak in us, and from some parent cell drifting in the first seas . . . a germ of animal sympathy has survived to find its life in me as a man. (*H.D.*: II.3:124)

Duncan uses the figure of ploughing, too, and often as a metaphor of the creative acts of both love making and poetry writing. He insists on dissociating it from the heterosexual context: its active male element, he suggests, is counterbalanced by the root *verso*, the other side of the fabric, "the underside of weaving," thus also sexual underworld, "anal and oral fantasy" (II.8:76–77).

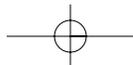
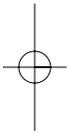
Throughout *The H.D. Book* Duncan treats bisexuality and lesbianism in the sense that suggests a kinship with later feminist thinking: Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous (in valorizing the individual bisexual psyche and bisexuality as the manifestation of feminine components in both men and women) and Monique Wittig and Judith Butler (in giving primacy to the lesbian as an expansion of sexuality). Duncan is primarily interested in those "unintelligible" genders who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural coding and who transgress the cultural matrix based on stable gender identities toward some transgendered self. Indeed, what Duncan advocates can be related to Kristeva's "third attitude," where "the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*" (209). Duncan would probably sympathize with Cixous's fantasy of bisexuality for the "complete being" and her insistence on recognizing plurality: "accepting the other sex as a component" (84), or with Butler's and Wittig's insistence on the "third gender," "beyond the categories of sex" (Butler 19). Overwhelmingly, for both Duncan and these feminist writers, the precondition for the completeness underlying the creative process lies with bisexuality or sexual pluralism embodied by the creative androgyny that H.D. postulated.

Duncan attempts to override the idea of discrete genders and sexualities as he discusses H.D.'s *Palimpsest*. Unfolding the palimpsestic



levels of history, Duncan uncovers sexual personae and their transformations. In Athens, he writes, “the cult of Aphrodite gave way to the cult of the male Eros” (*H.D.*: 1.3:71), and artistic representations of love crossed gender boundaries: “Love that had been a woman in another phase is impersonated by youth” (1.3:71). Soon, however, “the virtue of boy-love in men’s eyes had come to be suspect,” with homosexuality deemed as “contrary to nature,” and “Platonic and Sapphic lovers [. . .] driven outside the law” (1.3:74). Duncan’s radicalism lies in connecting normative heterosexuality with logocentrism, rooted in the *logos* of the Greeks faulted most notably by Duncan’s Black Mountain friends for the separation of man from experience, man from the universe, discourse from participation. To these separations Duncan added the sexual one, normative heterosexuality between genders construed in a strict binary.

In his effort to uncover a more pluralistic primal situation lost to logocentrism and heterosexuality, Duncan brings together various levels of historically suppressed sexualities. In reconstructing the manifestations of liminal sexualities, especially those of “the winged Homoeros” or “homoEros,” Duncan performatively reveals “earlier erased lives” (*H.D.*: 1.3:85) of muted literary traditions as well as meanings erased or repressed in language. In Chapter 5 of Part I, for example, he is inspired by the name of his Aunt Fay; but instead of plain etymologism, Duncan here follows floating, “the winding associations of *fay*, *fey*, *fairy* in the O.E.D.” (1.5:4), to realize that they are all related, in one conglomerate with *fate*, *faith*, *feign*, and *fair*, with the additional meaning of *queer*, *perverted*, *effeminate*, thus suggesting sexual duplicity or multiplicity. Reentering in his mind the inner chamber of the hermetic gatherings, “realm of astral fantasy” for the adults of the family, he evokes the figure of Hermes, the winged “Hermetic Christos,” “systole and diastole of the heart beat” (1.5:5), and the Egyptian god Thoth, in whose name his grandmother recognized *Truth*, “the truth of what life is that we know in death” (1.5:5). In this metonymic space created by the names *Fay*, *Hermes*, and *Thoth*, Duncan textualizes “a reality that was duplicit” (1.5:6): the “truth” of “hermetic” (“winged”) bi- and homosexuality hidden or muted at the time. “Male and female were mixed too,” writes Duncan referring to the magic wand of Hermes, around which two snakes twist; “for we who were men had women in other lives and understood



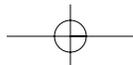


what to be a woman meant out of the depths of human experience, the source of sexual sympathies and powers” (1.5:6). Eros and Hermes also appear in allegories of both bisexual and homosexual love. Their essential affinity shows in being winged gods (the usual mark of bisexuality) with phallic emblems (the “herm”; 1.3:70), they are often portrayed, Carl Kerényi points out, as nymph-like, hermaphroditic youths, “still in a completely undifferentiated state” (55).

Duncan transgresses the binary regulation of sexuality by historicizing and naturalizing the hermaphrodite. Hermaphroditos emerges as the third gender that transcends binaries. This emphasis on the bisexual nature of homosexual desire—homosexuality as spiritual androgyny—is important in a direct political sense too: it gives witness to Duncan’s integrative approach to gender, an issue where he was more radical than most of his contemporaries. For, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, until the late 1970s, the most readily available framework for the study of gay/lesbian relationship was the separatist-feminist one, according to which “there were essentially no valid grounds of commonality between gay male and lesbian experience and identity; to the contrary, women-loving women and men-loving men . . . [were] at precisely opposite ends of the gender spectrum” (36). Duncan breaks from this separatist framework, suggesting that gay male traditions have overlapping interests with the lesbian experience, canon, mythology, or psychology. The winged and bisexual youth, Hermes, and Her, the hermaphroditic quester in H.D.’s *HERmione*, are not opposites, but rather of common sexual identities, variations of the same being. The lesbian canon of the openly homosexual Duncan (who, by the way, even earned his living at one point as a professional typist, in a profession “dominated by [underpaid] women and homosexual males”; see Davidson, *Ghostlier* 179) seems to suggest a marked continuum of male or female homosocial desire and assumes an alliance between lesbian and gay traditions.

* * *

One of the most provocative texts of early postmodernism, *The H.D. Book* is engaged in testing and crossing boundaries, both literary and political. In pursuit of new forms, Duncan allows those textual layers



to emerge which exist in simultaneity within the *palimpsestos* of the creative experience. Attracted “by the brilliance of the company” (*H.D.*: II.3:129), Duncan invites his predecessors to enter his text on their own account—without being mastered or dominated. This gesture might be best understood in terms of that “unmastering of language” which Charles Bernstein describes as the defining characteristic of the radical Modernism of H.D. and Gertrude Stein: “To be immersed in language without obsession to dominate it, conquer, take personal (even ‘subjective’) possession of it, as if it were property” (147).

In terms of the (political) message conveyed, Duncan asserts his radical position on the canon of woman writers—predominantly lesbians and experimentalists—formerly invisible as a tradition; on the fundamental kinship between textual and sexual pleasure (without, however, differentiating between pleasure and desire in terms of female and male sexuality); on the survival of the primordial ideal of hermaphroditism and bisexuality; and on the possibility of gay and lesbian alliance. Duncan’s alignment with (later) feminist thinking as well as queer theory might earn him a place in the canon of representation and allow for *The H.D. Book* to act as a Trojan horse and bring in other “political experimentalists.”

For ultimately, his message concerns the cohabitation of politics with the avant-garde: he not only selects those women writers whose radical political agenda is expressed through means of radical experimentation, but articulates his own political and cultural critique through a form that is the product of his experimentation: palimpsestic overwriting and the blurring of textual boundaries, that is, the “magic of swarming and drifting identifications” (*H.D.*: II.3:125). A full engagement with the world is coupled with an attention to the medium of writing.—All this might earn its place in a *Heath* anthology, one would think.

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