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Politics and Kitsch

In an important recent reading of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Daniel Tiffany affirms that Pound's famous "poem including history" turns out to be anything but: Pound's epic aspiration cohabits uneasily with "kitsch,"¹ which transforms the "modern, redemptive totality" the *Cantos* had meant to promise into a vision of "archaic totalitarianism": "On its own terms, as a poetic vision of utopia, the *Cantos* is a failure: It is not, as Pound claimed, 'a poem containing history' but a poem containing, and consumed by, *myth*: by delusional, bourgeois myths—which Pound converts into neo-pagan 'mysteries'—of class and racial hatred."² Kitsch's archaizing diction and structural nostalgia in this instance create a futurity in the image of a past which never existed. According to Tiffany, this devastating legacy meant that the next generation of American poets mostly read the *Cantos* through a fragmentary "hyper-formalist" lens, isolating the achievements of Pound as "better craftsman," as it were, while bracketing the pretensions to epic synthesis of a cultural and political totality. For Tiffany, the result was that "the appeal and function of kitsch in the *Cantos* could not even begin to be acknowledged, debated or tested."³

If in many respects Tiffany's account holds true, there is an important exception that this essay will discuss: Robert Duncan, who, as we shall see, employs an overwhelmingly Poundian poetics as the basis of his work on the student and anti-Vietnam war protests of the 60s in the San Francisco Bay Area, in no way shying away from Pound's kitschier aspects—archaic diction, sentimentality, ostentatious literariness and stylistic inauthenticity. Given not only Pound's own anti-Semitism and support for Mussolini but also the well known association of kitsch with fascism, the deployment of kitsch as the foundation of a liberatory, communalist, and queer leftwing poetics in the fifties and sixties was counter-intuitive, to put it mildly. However, my contention here will be that it was also surprisingly prescient, and holds a potential which if far from fully realized also remains unexhausted. The promise of Duncan's embrace of kitsch lies in the elaboration of an explicitly anti-capitalist leftwing poetics and politics that would avoid some of the pitfalls of rationalist critique, or the impasses of a political problematic based on "false consciousness." Rather, Duncan's writing can be seen as a fascinating attempt to inscribe into poetics and concrete action what Samo Tomšič has called the unconscious as the subject of politics.⁴ That Duncan's project was not

entirely successful, as we shall see when we examine his interventions during the sixties, vitiates neither its historical significance nor its interest with regard to today's struggles. The latter sections of this essay will examine in detail Duncan's work in the sixties in the context not only of political contestation in the U.S. but also of the issues and debates that surrounded May 1968 in France. To start with, however, I would like to sketch the development of Duncan's kitsch poetics in his theoretical writings, notably the recently published *H. D. Book*.

In this work, begun as a homage to the modernist poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)—one of the most important contemporary poets for Duncan from his adolescence onwards—a crucial underpinning of the entire project is nothing but a probing and extension of the “kitsch” aspects of Pound's *Cantos*, in the interest of an anti-capitalist poetics that puts the political and redemptive aspirations of Pound's work (despite Pound's tragic inadequacy) at the very center of any consideration of his importance.⁵ In Duncan's rendering, H. D. as woman, queer, and Freudian analysand becomes the emblem and embodiment of the true emancipatory potential of all that Pound had to abject. Duncan refers in several instances to Pound's own phrase stating that the *Cantos* possessed “the defects inherent in a record of struggle,” but Duncan finds these defects also to be the poem's true virtues. Where Pound had hoped for eternal truths, on the contrary Duncan considers the *Cantos* to be more like a hysterical body locked entirely into its own history, and incorporating “the troubled spirit of our times as no other work in poetry does.”⁶ Thus, *contra* Tiffany, Duncan would suggest that the *Cantos* do contain history, by virtue of their own exuberant symptomatology.

But Duncan turns this in his own particular way, intriguingly suggesting: “It is his [Pound's] impersonating genius that, even where he presents flashes of eternal mind—*veritas, claritas, hilaritas*—they do not appear as a sublimation of the poem but remain involved, by defect, in the agony of the contemporary” (*HD*, 55). Duncan's stress on “impersonating”—likely an allusion to Pound as translator and author of *Personae*, reliant on a poetics founded on speaking the voices of others⁷—valorizes those very aspects that had brought Pound criticism from so many other quarters, not least Wyndham Lewis, as Duncan implies that Pound's very subjective porosity rather than originality or mastery are the core of his value for poetry as a form of political and communal practice.⁸ Pound inadvertently becomes the model of the poetic subject for Duncan, and as we shall see, he will argue that it is in his unconscious that Pound possesses a meaningful intelligence, as opposed to the stupidities of his articulated positions. But for now, let us note that this “impersonating genius” so dear to Duncan bears a striking resemblance to one of the key elements of Tiffany's matrix of kitsch—“imposture”—and that Duncan in his explicit theorizing or poetic

practice either argues for or makes use of *all* of the elements of what Tiffany calls the “kitsch platform” that confronted early modernism: “archaism,” “sentimentality,” “stereotypical diction,” “melodrama.”⁹ Regarding Pound, and Anglo-American modernism as a whole, Duncan’s strategy is not to purify them and therefore make them palatable to a post-war counter-cultural left (a project which would ironically duplicate Modernism’s own) but rather to examine modernism’s desire for purity itself. This is hardly unique. But Duncan’s proximity to or even immersion in “kitsch” makes evident that his project is undertaken in something other than a spirit of demystification, while it in no way abjures the tools of critique. If the proximity of kitsch to fascism is well known and frequently discussed, Duncan locates Pound’s problems elsewhere;¹⁰ in many ways, Duncan’s emancipatory poetics propose as their model the ideal of an even kitschier *Cantos*. By refusing both Pound’s own modernist critique of himself (as insufficiently “modernized”), and a bourgeois-liberal recuperation of Pound as technician (which on the contrary might see Pound’s political aspirations as *overly* “modernist”), Duncan finds in Pound the foundations of a revolutionary poetics. What are conventionally considered Pound’s “mistakes”—his insistence on political engagement (for example, his refusal to accept a reified poetic object that would propose to sustain itself independently from the question of its circulation within social exchange),¹¹ or his failure to expunge the tonal marks of the unconscious in the form of heightened, unidiomatic diction (Duncan is merciless on Pound’s condemnation of “rhetoric”)—are what Duncan does *not* want to correct. Neither the defensive pleasures of camp nor the masochistically defenseless ones of abjection for Duncan, whose poetics work against the policing of the relationship to both self and object both those stances imply.

Hysteria, Self-Possession, and the Lyric Subject

On the contrary, what Duncan implicitly proposes throughout is a different relationship to symptomatology in terms of how, where, and on what authority texts speak. In this context, the emphasis on “impersonation” along with the related kitsch hallmarks of sentimentality and melodrama lead to another discourse that figures explicitly in Duncan’s *H. D. Book*—that of hysteria, as for Duncan it is precisely Pound’s poetic corpus that speaks what his conscious voice cannot know. Hysteria, by way of its etymology and historical association with women, allows Duncan to understand his own intense relationship to female writers and teachers: “I had found my life in poetry through the agency of certain women and. . . I had then perhaps a special estimation not only of the masters of that art but of its

mistresses” (*HD*, 69). Yet, as he goes on to write, “Poetry is the Mother of those who have created their own mothers” (*HD*, 70). At the same time, for Duncan psychoanalysis is the self-cancelling master discourse that allows modernism, and by extension politics and poetry, to be something other than a discourse of mastery, whether a master or a mistress is asked to occupy that position. If Duncan finds Pound’s value to arise very much from how his work manages to be “within” its own moment, the problem then is how the poet can release herself to these forces of history and the social rather than master them, and by extension release herself as productive worker in language to the community. Hysteria is one name that Duncan gives to this attempt, in opposition to the “respectability” of the “eminently sane” T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. Of Pound and D. H. Lawrence, Duncan writes: “There is hysteria. . . just where the man strives to bring his individual awareness and the communal awareness into one” (*HD*, 360). What is excessive or “discordant” (*HD*, 361), such as the “rant, the bravado, the sarcasm” of Pound, Lawrence, and W. C. Williams arises from this imperative in a manner whose violence can be positive: “The discord of their modes to the social norm is a therapeutic art” (*HD*, 361). And ultimately, the success of Pound’s art lies above all in its success as a symptom. Pound’s poetic practice, with its rebus-like ideograms, the privilege given to translation, the theoretical emphasis on condensation, makes Pound for Duncan the great Freudian poet, as unlikely as this might seem, not least to Pound himself: “Pound is a great Dreamer, and it was a condition of his Dream that he vehemently and even violently reject the Freudian breakthrough [sic] that began the translation of the language of dreams into our daily consciousness” (*HD*, 369). But Duncan doesn’t reify symptomatology itself as an unruly and liberatory rebuke to repression, of a necessarily “therapeutic” kind. In fact, it is precisely the trope of hysteria which allows him to hypothesize a different return of the repressed, this time on the scale of a planetary event rather than a work of “art.” Indeed, in a striking passage hysteria becomes Duncan’s trope for the most apocalyptic historical scenario, an hysterical return of the repressed on the macrocosmic scale of the planet and the microcosmic scale of the chromosome:

In areas of science that most avoided such thought, even the psychoanalytic subconscious of Freud much less the subliminal self of Myers—men, as if they did not know what they were doing, insured the great hysterical possibility of our time—the increase of pressures and explosion in the atom bomb, the radioactive aftermath that would riot in the chromosomic structure of man, that most would increase to a new power the meaning of the hysteric thing, this suffering in the womb. (*HD*, 606)

Duncan's task is to elaborate a different hysterical possibility, and bringing the hysterical project to a more positive end entails a new conception of subjectivity not entirely unrelated to Pound's "personation." Duncan begins by identifying poetic work with the community and indeed the commons:

The poet, too, is a worker, for the language, even as the field and the factory, belongs to the productive orders and means in which the communal good lies. All that is unjust, all that has been taken over for private exploitation from the commune, leaves us restless with time, divorced from the eternal. If I had come under the orders of poetry, I saw too that those orders would come into their full volition only when poetry was no longer taken to be a profession and when the poet would be seen to share in the daily labor toward the common need. (*HD*, 67)

However, for Duncan this relationship to the common good can only be achieved through a crucial form of dispossession—one which for Duncan is intimately related to the psychoanalytic project—which informs the poet's relation both to her own experiences and to her experience of the production of poetry. It entails a rejection of what current corporate (and therefore, academic) jargon calls "ownership" in the broadest possible terms. As Duncan succinctly puts it in the *H. D. Book*: ". . . self-expression and likewise self-possession in verse would set up an 'I' that is the private property of the writer in the place of the 'I' in which all men may participate" (*HD*, 559).¹² The double-meaning of "self-possession" indicates that two alienations go hand in here: that of the misrecognition integral to locating mastery in the authority of the conscious ego, and that of the auto-reification which comes from thinking of the self in terms of ownership and property, and commodifiable labor power. A truly communal writing can only come from beyond them both, as the "I" belongs to the unconscious on one side and the community on the other. But note also the specificity of Duncan's language: as opposed to the self as "private property" Duncan proposes not the I as enlightenment universal, but rather the I as *common* property, as offered to the communal project—the hysterical gift of the dispossessed self, one in which the poetic body of the text might be shared by all, in a new version of the totem feast. For Duncan, then, "self-possession" in the psychological sense—the reification of the coherent ego, the firm policing of its boundaries—is inherently allied to the conception of one's self *as* a possession, to be bartered in alienated form for personal gain on the literary market-place, and whose value might actually be increased by a little bit of self-expressive neurotic spice. Or as Duncan writes in an essay with the pointedly punning title "Properties and Our REAL Estate" and in a phrase which is also an excellent example of Duncan's repurposing of kitsch diction for

cultural critique: : “. . . where communism makes manifest that nothing is owned by the right of any one but all is by the grace of God, we will shed our self-possession.”¹³

What is required, then, is a process of dispossession of conscious mastery undertaken in the project of the dereification of the isolate individual, rather than in order to increase its autonomy, adaptability, or functionality within a capitalist system based on affirming one’s self as a privately owned source of labor power to be sold. As Duncan developed these ideas largely from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, his thinking dovetailed in important ways with the differing critiques of ego-psychology formulated by Adorno and Lacan at roughly the same period, and also points to a psychoanalytic poetics very different from that emerging among the confessional poets during this time. Rather, Duncan’s position, in which hysteria and labor come together in a communal, liberatory project, parallels the logic recently described by David Pavón-Cuéllar as he critiques the reified and atomized bourgeois subject which underpins most modern theoretical psychology: “To dissipate the psychological ghost, it suffices that hysterics express themselves on the couch or workers on barricades.”¹⁴

Prohibition and Permission

In terms of how Duncan derives such radical stances from the very same modernist poetics that lay behind so many of the confessionals, H. D.’s *Tribute to Freud*—an account of the poet’s sessions with Freud—proves crucial as it provides a Freudian psychoanalysis of *praxis* as much as of interpretation that opens the way for Duncan to new imaginings of collectivity and its forms, including poetry and myth. But in the first instance, this means that Freud becomes the name of what gives H. D. the “permission”—one that her own work will be crucial in transmitting to Duncan¹⁵—to move beyond an Imagist poetics largely founded on Mosaic and patriarchal repression, exclusion, and prohibition, as the title of Pound’s famous “A Few Don’ts for Imagists” makes crystal clear:

It was Freud’s role in H.D.’s second initiation to bring her from the formative prohibitions that had given rise to the modern style, from the stage which Pound’s “A Few Don’ts” represents, into a work which involved exactly those prohibited areas—repetition, *remplissage*, or sentiment. Associations must here not be cut away, dismissed, paraphrased or omitted, but dealt with, searched out until they yielded under new orders their meanings. Where the modern artist had sought a clean, vital, energetic, ascetic form—repression and compression—Freud sought the profound,

delving in unclean thoughts, depressions, neuroses, voluptuous dreams. The Freudian permission or command saw form as a swarming ground. (*HD*, 384)

If much in the above statement clearly rhymes with both the decadent modernism of, say, a Djuna Barnes,¹⁶ and the “first word, best word” liberatory poetics of Allen Ginsberg, Duncan’s position contains important differences with both, notably in terms of his understanding of liberation itself, in relation to spontaneity, revision, and, as we shall see, law.¹⁷ In Duncan’s psychoanalytically inspired poetics, the “first word” might be the “best word” in some sense, but it cannot be the *last* word. A poetics that valorizes “repetition” and the processes of working-through intrinsic to analysis must also be open to revision. Indeed, revision without erasure is central to the dilatory form of the entire *H. D. Book*, which Duncan posits as explicitly palimpsestic: “I seek now in working upon the later draft of the book not to correct the original but to live again in its form and content, leaving in successive layers record of reformations and digressions as they come to me” (*HD*, 427).¹⁸ In Duncan’s view, this is in stark contrast to the collaborative mutilation that Eliot and Pound inflicted on *The Waste Land*, no matter how radical or unruly that poem had seemed in 1922:

The poem suffered in its very success. It had been cut and reorganized to succeed, and had lost in its conscious form whatever unconscious form had made for the confusion of sequence, the “miscellaneous pieces” that did not seem to fit. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” Out of whatever real ruin that threatened, Pound and Eliot had agreed finally upon the monumental artifice of a ruin, a ruin with an outline. “Complimenti, you bitch,” Pound writes Eliot... (*HD*, 225)

Thus, even *The Wasteland*, for Duncan, becomes an exercise in repression and containment; an artificial ruin that is ultimately too well made and too carefully policed. In the larger economy of the *H. D. Book’s* rhetoric, the text of *The Waste Land* itself becomes a hysterical, feminized body which Pound and Eliot must sanitize as they might, (with Pound displacing onto Eliot the castration he finds the latter’s triumph to have inflicted on him, as his salutation demonstrates).¹⁹ As against this modernist cutting, however, Duncan everywhere proposes a writing of flow and spillage, of inclusion and inclusiveness that is not utopian but rather a heterological vision of necessary mess, disorder, inconsistency, or, to use another word that Duncan harps on, “imperfection.” Indeed, Duncan will reproach H. D.’s early imagist poetry for its intolerance of “imperfection,” the openness to which he likens to “our admission in consciousness of what must be included in our humanity, in our poetic art, in our history” (*HD*, 393)—the Freudian “permission” again.

Impersonality, Fantasy, Myth

Duncan's procedure of revision without "correction" is not only crucial to the entire Freudian poetics he maps throughout *The H.D. Book*; it also implies a view of temporality of clear importance with regard to the early modernist aesthetic ideology with which Duncan is grappling. Freud's model of "working through," or of the irreconcilable coexistence of differing temporal moments within the unconscious, and Duncan's literary appropriation of it, violate one of the central precepts of Imagism: the primacy of the "instant of time," and by extension, the very concept of what an "intellectual or emotional complex" might be.²⁰ This is central not only to Duncan's own poetics, but to how he reads H.D. in the alternative modernism he constructs in *The H. D. Book*. For the "time" that Duncan is at pains to elaborate throughout the text is very largely analytic time—here, less the *Nachträglichkeit* of trauma, than the temporality of deferral, repetition, and delay of the analytic sessions, the structural repetitions of the working-through. In a striking formulation, discussing the early meetings of Helen and Achilles in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Duncan writes:

. . . where the man and the woman huddle over a fire in the night on the beach, a gathering begins. This is not the magic of symbols, but the magic that goes on in the practices of psychoanalysis—the magic of associations until a host of incidents, impersonations, tendencies precipitate what is called the "content" and in the precipitation the crisis. Not those streams of consciousness that in Proust's magic opened out from one impression vistas of the past recaptured; but as if this magic were reversed and all the glowing and modulated fabric were to be called in from its dispersion to increase the pressures of a single moment. (*HD*, 602-3).

This remarkable passage reverses not only the parable of Proust's madeleine but an entire paradigmatic modernist economy found in Joyce's "epiphanies" and not least, in Pound's theory of the "luminous detail." Rather than locate the single element that "governs knowledge as the switchboard governs an electric circuit" and is "swift and easy of transmission,"²¹ as in Pound's synecdochic theory, for Duncan it is the cumbersome process of accretion itself and the slippage between "details" in the network of associations that produce not "knowledge" but rather the "crisis": that is, literally, the moment of decision. In such a conception, no one detail can ever be "luminous"; it is accretion or "gathering" that is productive.²² Such a passage speaks volumes about Duncan's own dilatory, associative, repetitive writing practices (notably but not only in *The H. D. Book*), but it is also fundamental to how Duncan returns to the question of myth, the relation of myth to the political, and the implications of psychoanalysis for both. Rather than psychoanalyzing

myth, as both Freud and Jung do—as well as Duncan in other places—here psychoanalysis becomes the *form* of myth, or a model of mythical association. This is because Duncan’s account arises in the context of his discussion of H.D.’s own feminist appropriation of myth in *Helen in Egypt*. There, H.D. takes her departure from Stesichorus’ *Pallinode*, according to which “Helen was never in Troy. She had been transposed or translated from Greece into Egypt. Helen of Troy was a phantom, substituted for the real Helen, by jealous deities. The Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion.”²³ H. D. instead tells the story of the “real” Helen in Egypt, where she encounters Achilles. It is they who are “huddled over the fire”²⁴ at the beginning of H. D.’s telling of the story, where they will talk of Isis, Thetis—Achilles’ mother—and above all, hieroglyphs and reading.

The air of familiarity in both H.D.’s staging and Duncan’s recasting derives from the participation of this scene in the myth of myth-telling itself. As Jean-Luc Nancy has made plain, the very definition of myths as such occurs within a greater framing myth of “a group of people gathered together, with someone telling them a story”²⁵ which is the “story of their origins, of where they come from or how they come from the Origin itself.”²⁶ This scene of myth is itself mythical, Nancy reminds us: “The humanity represented in the scene of the myth, humanity being born to itself in producing the myth. . . forms a scene no less fantastic than any primal scene. All myths are primal scenes, all primal scenes are myths (it is Freud once again who plays the role of inventor).”²⁷ Nancy is not using “myth” here in the loose sense of something which is not empirically true; rather, he is stressing the fact that myths and primal scenes both are tasked with *explaining an origin* as part of their structure. Behind Nancy is quite possibly the work of Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis on fantasy. In their classic *Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origines du fantasme* they stress that psychoanalysis must interest itself not only in the “origins” of fantasy, but in the circumstance that the function of fantasy is to *provide* origin-stories. They write, “In their very content, in their *theme* (primal scene, castration, seduction) originary fantasies also point to this retroactive postulate: they go back to the origin. Like myths, they claim to offer a representation of and a solution to what for the child remain major enigmas. . . . Fantasy of origins: in the primal scene, the origin of the individual is represented; in seduction fantasies, it is the origin and bursting forth of sexuality; in castration fantasies, the origin of sexual difference”²⁸ The scene Nancy describes, then, is in some ways the primal myth: the myth of the origins of the mythic mode, which itself explains origins. It is in this context that the full significance of Duncan’s reversal of the primal mythic scene can truly be measured, as well as how Duncan’s myth relates to those Tiffany denounces in Pound. Duncan mines a similar

demystifying vein when, in reference to Hitler as well as Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War, he writes “Where history becomes myth, men are moved not toward the ends they desire but toward their fates, the ends they deserve” (*CE*, 153). And against this, the mythic community for Duncan is not one united in its adherence to an auto-theorizing tale, as in Nancy’s evocation of the classic scene, but one that dissipates all tales centrifugally through conversation, exchange, and forms of working-through and acting-out, as indicated by terms like “impersonations” and “incidents.” This helps indicate how Duncan can conceive of the communal or communist poem as something other than “self-expression.” As Laplanche and Pontalis point out in the same article, whereas in day-dreams, dominated by the ego, the “scenario is essentially written in the first-person, and the place of the subject clearly marked and unchanging,” on the other hand in primal or “originary” fantasy there is an “absence of subjectivation which goes hand in hand with the presence of the subject *within* the scene,”²⁹ divided between unstable, partial, and variable identifications, as indicated in Freud’s famous “A Child is Being Beaten.” Originary fantasy, then, is a scene or staging, in which the subject is implicated without having a stable part: if the subject is always “present in the fantasy,” she can be so “in a desubjective form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question” and this because the prime function of fantasy is not the representation of the desired object but the staging of desire.³⁰

Following from Laplanche and Pontalis, we might say that Duncan’s poetics strive to present the fantasy rather than the day-dream, to distance themselves from the “ego” which Laplanche and Pontalis point to as the ballast of the diurnal reverie. Duncan writes:

The “our,” “my,” “us,” “we,” “I,” “me” of the poet’s work, and the other “you,” “your,” “they,” “them” are pronouns of a play, members or persons of a world drama in division. They are no more at liberty, no more seek liberty than they pursue happiness, for the sense of poetic justice or form that is history reveals them all as actors or chorus of a work that now we see is a self-creative drama at play. (*HD*, 559-60).

The reflections on liberty link with a statement made shortly before, where Duncan writes “‘Liberty’ too is a demand of the anti-poetic. The poet cannot take liberties in the poem. For just there, where the arbitrary, self-expressive or self-saving, where the self-conscious voice comes, the *idiotes*, private howl or moan or the urbane sophisticated tone breaks or takes over from the communal voice” (*HD*, 559). The reference to the “private howl” along with the reticence regarding “liberty” might be taken as a distancing from Ginsberg. Here, Duncan seems closer to the poetics of dictation of his friend Jack Spicer, and the Eliotic impersonality that lies behind it. As with Spicer, at root is a consideration of the relationship between

“freedom” and what lies beyond consciousness and the Ego, in a reflection which breaks with some of the naive utopian strains of Surrealist or Beat valorization of the unconscious and the overcoming of repression. Duncan writes:

Free association, it was once called; but Freudian analyses have shown that associations are not free but binding. In the process of personation the events about us are transformed into knots, possibility is tied to possibility until a net is woven writhing with the psychic energies that before had been oceanic. (*HD*, 608).

Echoing Eliot on free verse, one might say that for Duncan no association is free for the analyst who wants to do a good job. But the emphasis on binding networks of association and the hysterical “personations” which they both produce and are produced by offers a path for Duncan to skirt the alternative between writing like the “dead man” that Eliot and Spicer both require, or writing from the “self-possession” of the commodified bourgeois ego which Duncan everywhere denounces. Jean-Michel Rabaté has recently stressed how apposite Pound’s nickname of “Possum” was for Eliot, as the implications of the latter’s writing strategy with regard to “tradition” was to “play possum” or pretend to be dead.³¹ For Spicer, this pose became earnest, as his theories of dictation call for a subjective death in many ways more severe than Eliot’s. Appealing to Orpheus but structurally homologous with much of Beckett, the poet’s proper position is often defined as that of speaking from beyond the grave, or from Hell. “Going into Hell so many times tears it / Which explains poetry”³² Spicer writes, and in *After Lorca*, a book of “personations” if ever there was one, he equates the failure of poetry with the instant the poet “ceases to be a dead man.”³³ For Duncan, one of the major questions is how to move beyond the thanatocratic poetics of Eliot and Spicer without falling into an equally problematic facile affirmationism of a “life” which would amount to the mirrors of misrecognition under which the “idiotic” pursues its regime. As we shall see, what both of these models preclude is the relationship to “volition” necessary for political action, all the more important as for Duncan it is precisely the post-capitalist un-self-possessed communal poet who can occupy the structural place of the ossified dead man to which Eliot and Spicer resort. To enable this transition, a kitsch version of myth under the aegis of psychoanalysis becomes crucial.

Fairy Tales

Duncan sketches this in his decisive essay, “The Truth and Life of Myth,” composed during the transparently epochal years of 1967 and 1968. There, Duncan argues that “Jung

thinks theosophically, where Freud thinks mythologically” (*CE*, 182), though by the former term Duncan highlights elements that other poets might happily champion as “mythopoetic.” For Duncan, however, it is precisely Jung’s insistence on “myth” in an exalted sense that impedes any true mythic thinking. Duncan evokes the Jungian privileging of the archetype and “deep image” and its attendant scorn for the “little dreams” of Freud, whose meanings reside in the “interests of lower organs and orders” (*CE*, 182), rather than their sublimation into grander meanings.³⁴ For Duncan, the Freudian paradigm of the dream asserts “all parts belong, no member is to be dismissed as trivial or mistaken. Mistakes themselves mark the insistence of meanings in other meanings” (*CE*, 183). In the larger economy of the essay, however, this distinction between the Jungian and Freudian approach to dreams crucially echoes an earlier distinction between traditional acceptations of “myth” as opposed to “fairytales.” Whereas myth for Duncan offers protagonists who are “movers of the universe and initiators of the first mysteries” and implies poets, makers and tellers who are “sages or mages more famous than kings” (*CE*, 163), on the other hand “folk and fairytales have their home in the gossip of old wives and little children, [in] stories about the cooking-hearth and the nursery bedside” (*CE*, 163): “Back of fairytales is the despised life of the peasant” (*CE*, 163). Moreover, the “lowly folktale” which Coleridge was eager to distinguish from myth and demote to “Fancy” (*CE*, 163) is on the side of that “other Christ” whom Duncan is not ready to discount: “...the Jesus of folktale and legend, the very fairytales hero in the New Testament who is a lowly carpenter, an unrecognized king, whose kingdom, like fairyland, is not of this world, and whose disciples are despised men and women” (*CE*, 164). Duncan quotes Emperor Julian’s disdain for Christianity as the religion of “contemptible men” such as “innkeepers, publicans, dancers, and others of the like” (*CE*, 176) and repeats that phrase verbatim when presenting the Jungian disdain for the “lower organs and orders” of the Freudian dream. We end up with Freud and Christ as against Jung and classical Myth.

Now, the recusal of transcendent mythic grandeur as the proper domain for psychoanalysis and its replacement with the domestic space of the nursery, primary care, women, children, and the poor is consonant with Duncan’s political reading of psychoanalysis in this essay as the discourse that gives voice to the “language of madmen, children, dreams, and of myths, that had been thought unintelligible” (*CE*, 183).³⁵ But by moving from a mythopoetics to what one might call a fairypoetics, it also outlines a poetics and psychoanalysis embedded in kitsch. Daniel Tiffany considers the “fairy way of writing” to be a major kitsch component, and outlines its links to anxieties about class distinction as well as its mobilization by queer poetic coteries in a manner that systematizes many of the

insights Duncan was developing in the 60s, both in “The Truth of Life and Myth” and in *The H. D. Book*. The latter work, which contains a significant excursus on the “fairy,” prepares the terrain by way of a remarkable queering of some of Pound’s core poetics as formulated in *The Spirit of Romance*, notably its chapter “Psychology and the Troubadours.”³⁶ Crucial to Pound’s mythos is the postulate that Troubadour lyric arises from the sexual mysteries that the Albigensian Crusades had been appointed to destroy. While not entirely disputing that, in a remarkable sequence Duncan patiently and gradually specifies in what these forbidden acts consisted. The decisive moment in Duncan’s argument is the unveiling of an etymology that is still accepted today, and which cuts to the heart of Pound’s foundational belief in the “light from Eleusis,” or erotic mysteries, as the secret core of modern European poetic culture. Duncan writes “An echo of the Church’s accusations against the Cathars or Bogomils—they were, originally, *Bulgars*—is left in our word today for one of these forbidden sexual acts that is still outside the law of the established State: *buggery*” (*HD*, 92). This becomes the central scene, act, and desire in the Provençal poetry of love, which Pound places at the root of modern lyric.

Additionally, Duncan’s queering of Pound’s medievalist erotic mysteries is followed by a like queering of Eliot’s use of medieval material (though in contradistinction to Pound, Eliot is not named in this discussion). This is accomplished through a discussion of the words “fay” and “fairy,” the first historically related to “illusions or enchantments” and therefore linked by Duncan to Pound’s theories of the poetic image. “The casting of the image is high fairy, *phanopoeia*” (*HD*, 125), Duncan writes, borrowing Pound’s famous term, and thereby the “hardness” of imagistic or objectivist facticity is rethought as witchcraft or fairy dust. But Duncan’s references to Jessie Weston and the “Celtic genius” in the context of fairy lore (*HD*, 125) also allow this dust to cover the Arthurian Romance so crucial to the early Eliot.³⁷ Much turns on the etymology of “fay,” which Duncan accurately traces back to the Latin word “fata”—that is, the Fates of classical antiquity—allowing him to bring the myths of Fairyland into still closer contact to motifs of the underworld, ghosts, and the dead. Following from this, Duncan is able by way of allusion to the slang associations of fay and fairy to suggest a Queer Deep Structure inhabiting fairy lore and therefore the grounding myths deployed by *The Waste Land*. These arguments for a subterranean queerness at the heart of the Medievalism so central to Eliot and Pound are made over the course of thirty pages in which Pound’s *Cantos* feature as a crucial intertext throughout. It is not coincidental that it is with a reference to the beginning of the *Cantos* and the “phantoms of Odysseus and

his descent to the dead” that Duncan inaugurates a startling synthesis that is a crux of his entire project, and must be quoted at length:

In the fairy-world, the otherness or alien nearness of the dead and of hidden elements, of illusion and delusion in our daily life, the witchcraft of phantasy [note the Greek root this word shares with Pound’s “phanopeia”] and the bewitched obsessions of madness, all the psychological dangers, combined as if they were the heart’s wish. The specter that haunts Europe [that is, communism] Marx had called the hidden wish of the human spirit in history. The traumatic image Freud had called the repressed wish of the psyche, the primal scene. The underground uprises into the place of what is above-board. Justice demands it. The verso appears, so vivid that we see the surface of things had faded in the sunlight, and what we most feared we must now become. The living seem dead and the dead most alive. The words *fey*, *fay*, and *fairy* had a meaning I was to learn among schoolmates that in the common usage superseded all other meaning: “queer,” “perverted,” “effeminate.” Old concepts of sodomy and of shamanism—the cult that Orpheus was said to have brought from the forest world of the North to corrupt Greece, a cult of mediumship, poetry, and homosexuality—carry over into our vulgar sense of the word *fairy*, where men’s fear and mistrust of a sexual duplicity are most active. (*HD*, 127-128).

Here we see the Marxist programme of liberation, the Freudian combat against repression, Pound’s modernist project, and queer sexualities all embedded in the fairy story of Medieval romance, now ripped from the hetero-normative and regulatory roles both Pound and Eliot sought to ascribe to it in the foundational moments of modernism. In this way, a queer and kitsch Medievalism—a fairy story and fairy tale—becomes the motor of Marxist-Freudian liberation, often through the medium of hysteria. The specter haunting Europe’s regimes of exploitation takes the form of the hysteric and the fairy.³⁸ And these minor forms associated with minor figures—women, children, peasants—crucially offer a form of historical transmission and reproduction thought outside the traditional models of what might be called semination, whether Whitman’s dissemination or Pound’s broadcasting (which literally means the sowing of seed). The scandalous, unstable and unbounded speaking body of hysteria counters phallogentric metaphors of insemination as the projection of form—the reproductive stamp or brand on feminine matter.³⁹ Here, it is the matter that speaks. But Duncan soon was called to speak himself, as the social and public space available to progressive political discourse changed radically during the early sixties. Living in San Francisco and with a close connection to the University of California at Berkeley, where he had been a student in the forties, Duncan found himself at one of the crucibles where the possibility of turning poetic interventions into political ones seemed most viable. Duncan did not fail to respond to this demand, albeit it in ways which were not always successful.

Bending the Bow: Protest, Law, Volition

The promises and pitfalls of the poetics Duncan was working out in the sixties become strikingly visible in his 1968 collection, *Bending the Bow*. Although the latest poems in the book date from 1966 and thus stop short of the “summer of love” of 1967 as well as 1968, the book is clearly located by Duncan himself within that context of radicalism. For example, his introduction, dated October-November 1967, contains a first section titled “The War” and presents as a pivot a scene of police and military violence inflicted on antiwar protestors, one which would not be unfamiliar to the UC Berkeley community today. Just as importantly, poems throughout the book address the anti-Vietnam War movement from its inceptions, and what at the time was an even more unlikely source of political upheaval: the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, initiator of the sea-change in the US political scene constituted by the emergence of university students as such as major political actors. Indeed, in thinking the periodicity of the 60s in the US, there are very few more important factors than this largely unprecedented eruption of student activism as a dominant political and social question.⁴⁰ But whereas Thomas Pynchon, for example, in *The Crying of Lot 49* registers this decisive moment for our contemporaneity in a work now considered as a major template of the so-called “post-modern,” Duncan can seem surprisingly retrograde. The poetic mode he elaborates to address these developments consists to a striking degree of a pastiche of Pound, and thus, is doubly kitsch: first because of the kitsch core of much of Pound’s poetics, and second, because the “personating” phoniness of pastiche generally is in and of itself a foundational element of kitsch. In fact, to a considerable degree Duncan’s political writing in the book consists of two dominant styles, sometimes used separately, at others in uneasy cohabitation: a Poundian mode clearly modelled on his “Hell” Cantos, and a minor archaicizing “fairy story” mode, often featuring the Christic elements we saw above in “The Truth and Life of Myth.” Underlying both is the problem of collective action and individual agency in relationship to it, all the more pressing as at the heart of Duncan’s poetics is the suspicion of bourgeois affirmationist subjectivity we have seen above. Thus, “Earth’s Winter Song” combines Poundian Dantesque pastiche in lines like these:

Wearing the unctuous mask of Johnson,
from his ass-hole emerging the hed of Humphrey,

he [the old dragon] bellows and begins over Asia and America
the slaughter of the innocents and the reign of wrath. [“hed” is Duncan’s spelling, and
his idiosyncratic usages will be retained in all citations]⁴¹

with Christian kitsch as seen here:⁴²

- the few
frightened shepherds – the three
magi or magicians seeing in the Child
the child of their lore – Joseph
whose faith is father, and the girl
whose virginity engenders –and the new
lord of the true life, of Love • (CLP, 377)

If such lines can be saved at all, and it is doubtful, it is only by placing them in the context of Duncan’s argument in “The Truth and Life of Myth” that positions Christianity on the side of domestic, collective social practice and also crucially social parapraxis, given the links between fairytale and Freudian dream-reading he establishes therein. In other words, here the Christ story needs to function as the anti-Mythic rather than the arch-mythic or archetypal in order for Duncan’s political parable to work, for the poem is not in praise of mythic individual heroism but rather collective acts of resistance and the courage of the weak (for which the rhetoric is high kitsch): “The beautiful young men and women! / Standing against the war their courage / has made a green place in my heart” (CLP, 376). These in their collectivity stand not only against the powers of the war, but also against the properly Mythic voice of judgement which speaks with a Dantean/Poundian rhetoric of grandeur and disdain in the same poem. The poem, then, is symptomatically torn between these two modes, which echo another division much of the book is at pains to reconcile: that between an essentially *communal* vision of labor and exchange implying a collectively derived subject both more primary and beyond the ego and its “self-possession,” and a vision of political agency and activism which is necessarily voluntarist to some extent. In “Earth’s Winter Song,” the Christic language will also be called upon to smooth over this disjunction: “O the green spring-tide / of individual volition for the communal good, / the Christ-promise of brotherhood....” (CLP, 377). Elsewhere, however the “communal good” will be seen less as an agglomeration of the individuals who comprise it and more as a way of thinking beyond the category of the individual, and the notion of “volition” will not be so quickly reduced to that of conscious will and mastery.⁴³

In fact, the word “volition” appears as early as the volume’s introduction (but also as late, as the introduction was an *a posteriori* synthesizing production), and there in the

contradictory guise it wears in much of Duncan's work, as Duncan writes about the protestors facing the police who close in to disperse them: ". . . we, under own orders, moved each to sit or lie upon the ground. . . the individual volition of a non-violent action" (*CLP*, 294). Note that "orders," another key term for Duncan, tends to go *with* rather than against "volition," casting the latter as an acquiescence which is nevertheless not a subservience. Again echoing discussions of "liberty" in "The Truth and Life of Myth," in the Introduction Duncan writes "our liberties are obediences of another order that moved us" (*CLP*, 294). However, one of the Introduction's concluding strains complicates this by stressing "interferences" (*CLP*, 300) and claiming that the ultimate obediences paradoxically derive from what is "out of order" as Duncan punningly puts it— that is, a work's discordant elements: "Were all in harmony to our ears, we would dwell in the dreadful smugness in which our mere human rationality relegates what it cannot cope with to the 'irrational,' as if the totality of creation were without ratios. Praise then the interruption of our composure, the image that comes to fit we cannot account for, the juncture in the music that appears discordant" (*CLP*, 300).⁴⁴ Here, once again, Duncan praises the "uprising" (to use the title of one of the book's most famous political poems, and a term Duncan also explicitly associates with emanations from the unconscious and sexuality) that disturbs the ego's sense of self-possession and mastery, yet he distances these disturbances from postulations of contingency or liberty. "That Freedom and the Law are identical" Duncan writes elsewhere in *Bending the Bow* (*CLP*, 360),⁴⁵ while in no way suggesting a totalitarian submission of the will as the ultimate freedom from the drives, as in so much fascist rhetoric. Rather, for Duncan, the unconscious would seem to consist of its own form of law, or "binding" as we saw in the passage from the *H.D. Book* discussed above, but not one which authorizes irresponsibility. Many of these problems come to a head in Duncan's poem about the Free Speech Movement and the administration of the University of California, "Passages 21: The Multiversity."

The Multiversity

This poem, in part an excoriating assault on University of California Chancellor Clark Kerr, also refers by way of the word "multiversity" to Kerr's most famous concept, elaborated in his extremely influential work of 1963, *The Uses of the University*. Duncan's isolation of this concept was prescient: by the end of the decade, when student protests had become routine throughout the globe, Kerr's book was increasingly located as a prime ideological exponent of the shifts in the structure and function of the university to which

students were responding—at least in part—in wealthier countries, not least France in 1968. For example, Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* of 1967—exactly concurrent with *Bending the Bow*—points to Kerr in theorizing how “culture turned fully into merchandise”—entailing the commodification of university work— must of necessity go on to become the leading consumer good of the society of the spectacle.⁴⁶ Calling Kerr “one of the most advanced ideologues” behind this tendency, Debord explicitly mentions *The Uses of the University*. If he doesn’t cite it directly, the statistics he refers to and the content which he summarizes make clear what passage he had in mind. There, Kerr writes that the university’s new (by which he means post-war) imbrication with the industrial sector makes it “. . . a prime instrument of national purpose. This is new. This is the essence of the transformation now engulfing our universities. . . . Basic to this transformation is the growth of the ‘knowledge industry,’ which is coming to permeate government and business. . . .”⁴⁷ And here follow, in Kerr’s original, the main elements of the passage which Debord translates and summarizes, showing the acuity of them both: “The production, distribution, and consumption of ‘knowledge’ in all its forms is said to account for 29 percent of gross national product. . . . What the railroads did for the second half of the last century and the automobile for the first half of this century may be done for the second half of this century by the knowledge industry.”⁴⁸

A few years after Debord’s analysis, Kerr’s vision was again a leading target of a Marxist critique of the modern university, though one coming from a very different intellectual tradition. This is one levelled by a group of students and lecturers working under the guidance of Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, then Reader in Labour History at the University of Warwick which, in 1970, became the site of an important student protest and occupation, triggered by the students’ thwarted desire for a Student Union building that would be fully under their control. Noting that the “new university” of Warwick was from its inception founded in collaboration with the local barons of industry (in this case, automotive) the Warwick group commented as follows in the still classic *Warwick University Ltd*⁴⁹:

One prime social function of a university is to inquire freely and to criticize freely. And the more managed, the more planned, the more ‘efficient’ the rest of society grows, the more important this function becomes. . . .

One of the pervasive myths of the mid-twentieth century is that with the replacement of the old-style entrepreneur and tycoon by the propertyless manager, there has come about a qualitative change to “managerial” capitalism. The new manager is seen as running the system ‘in the national interest’ rather than in the interests of the propertied class. . . .

Where does the University fit into this picture? Professor Clark Kerr, who ran the Berkeley campus of the University of California⁵⁰ where many have located the origins of the student movement, answered this question in his book *The Uses of the University*. The University provides skilled manpower and facilities for basic research. And it produces the culture and ideology of the pluralist system. . . .

But the world of industry is emphatically *not* a world of a neutral technocracy working for the benefit of all.”⁵¹

The institution derided by Debord along with the Warwick collective is one that Kerr, in an attempt at wit, had dubbed the “multiversity” in the book to which they both refer. By “multiversity” Kerr meant to stress that this new structure was now clearly torn in several different directions by various forces whose interests could no longer be seen to be aligned. No longer an “organism” as in older views, Kerr claimed it must be seen as a “mechanism—a series of processes producing a series of results—a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money.”⁵² Kerr, who considered himself a progressive liberal, retains a responsibly critical position towards the multiversity throughout his discussion of it, but in an ideological maneuver that both Debord and Thompson would have easily unmasked, he presents it quite simply as an inevitability: “. . . it . . . has its reality rooted in the logic of history. It is an imperative rather than a reasoned choice among elegant alternatives.” In light of this, Kerr ruefully suggests, “ ‘The Idea of a Multiversity’ has no bard to sing its praises.”⁵³ Naturally, Kerr had not foreseen the extravagantly bardic Robert Duncan, who was certainly ready if not to praise at least to sing.

Like Debord and Thompson, Duncan seems at least to have had a glance at *The Uses of the University*. Therein Kerr writes in the forced jauntiness which dominates much of the book, “It is sometimes said that the American multiversity president is a two-faced character. This is not so. If he were, he could not survive. He is a many-faced character, in the sense that he must face in many directions at once while contriving to turn his back on no important group.”⁵⁴ It’s hard not to think Duncan had that passage in mind in his opening lines:

not men but heads of the hydra

his false faces in which
authority lies

hired minds of private interests

over us

here: Kerr (behind him, heads of the Bank of America
the Tribune,

heads of usury, heads of war)
 the worm's mouthpiece spreads
 what it wishes its own
 false news : . . . (CLP, 356-7)

The surprisingly contemporary phrase “false news” will go on to describe how the FSM has been erroneously presented by the Oakland Tribune, mentioned above, as well as other unnamed sources, and the poem also lists forms of hypocrisy and bad faith operative among the administrators and faculty, for example, “The aging Professor, translator of fashionable surrealist revolutionaries, muttering — / *They shld not be permitted to be students; they shld be in the army*” (CLP, 357-8; Italics and abbreviations Duncan's). Throughout, however, one of Duncan's major concerns is the question of community and collective action, specifically the “hidden community”—both within and without the university—that he chastises the UC administrators for denying when they claim that the FSM is restricted to only a tiny number of students.⁵⁵ This is fundamental, as the poem specifies “Where there is no commune, / the individual volition has no ground” yet also “Where there is no individual freedom, the commune / is falsified” (CLP, 358). However, the ending of the poem indicates that Duncan is after something more elusive than a classic liberal balance between the needs of the individual and those of the community.⁵⁶ The poem concludes like this:

Each day the last day; each day the
 beginning the first word
 door of the day or law awakening we create,
 vowels sung in a field in mid-morning
 awakening the heart from its oppressions.

Evil “referred to the root of *up, over*”
 simulacra of law that wld over-rule
 the Law man's inner nature seeks,
 coils about them, not men but

heads and armors of the worm office is

There being no common good, no commune,
no communion, outside the freedom of

individual volition. (*CLP*, 359)

These rather mysterious lines receive some elucidation from the *H.D. Book*, where Duncan refers to the same etymology of “evil,” and writes that evil may be defined as any “. . . power over us of outer or inner compulsion. As the power and presumption of authority by the state has increased in every nation, we are ill with it, for it surrounds us and, where it does not openly conscript, seeks by advertising, by education, by dogma, or by terror, to seduce, enthrall, mould, command, or coerce our inner will or conscience or inspiration to its own uses” (*HD*, 335). “Evil,” therefore, is the false law, the simulacrum that we submit to. The problem, however, is that for Duncan there is also a true law to which we must submit, and neither the true nor the false can be located safely on one side or the other of the division between inner and outer. If even our “conscience” and “inspiration” can serve evil, then clearly evil can assert itself in the very form of “volition,” and all the more as the true volition which Duncan would valorize itself implies an acquiescence or acceptance of an “inner law” which nevertheless seems transcendent of the individual, who must imagine her volition as a product of neither “self-possession” nor inner compulsion. And this is all the more fraught as the “orders” which we give to and accept from ourselves to achieve this true volition are interlocked with what is “out of order”—with the “interference” or the “dissatisfaction in all orders from which the restless ordering of our poetry comes” (*CLP*, 300). In other words, for Duncan the “communal” less designates a group of individuals than it names a transcendent structure from which the “laws” and orders to which volition says “yes” derive. Because the “inner compulsion” can be as fraudulent or as evil as the outer, “volition” only functions as a concept in the context of the radical beyond of self-possession represented by the community. While unequivocally writing protest poetry, then, Duncan constantly retreats from a traditional affirmation of the subject of protest. Tiffany, referring to kitsch’s reliance on the “conventional” and “formulaic” associates its mode with the social and claims “what kitsch expresses lies beyond personal experience,”⁵⁷ and Duncan also, in his kitsch writing of “volition,” attempts to parallel a bracketing of the lyric exceptionalism based on self-possession and self-expression with a rethinking of the subject of political resistance along similar lines. This position is precarious, and can easily be accused of

quietism given its reticence regarding affirmation. Indeed, within the history of the protracted and violent rupture with Denise Levertov over their respective protest poems, Levertov made just this sort of accusation against Duncan. Stephen Fredman summarizes her position as implying that as a Freudian “Duncan’s obsession with the unconscious and the shadowy causes him to devalue individual volition and commitment.”⁵⁸ But especially noteworthy is that the fundamental point of contention in this Californian spat—the relative weighting of conscious, volitionist political activity as opposed to the productive powers of unconscious structures—would be at the heart at one of the central discussions around the meaning of May 1968 in France.

May 1968: Structures in the Streets

I refer here to the famous debates surrounding the legendary graffito and slogan, “Structures don’t take to the streets,” allegedly written on a blackboard in the occupied Sorbonne during the events themselves. Its very existence there is somewhat ironic in and of itself, for as Élisabeth Roudinesco, Frédérique Matonti and others have pointed out, in the run-up to 1968 structuralism was largely associated with left-wing and anti-establishment thought, —as exemplified above all by Althusser, Barthes, and Foucault—and was most certainly unwelcome in the French university establishment, at whose center this derogatory graffito was written. This irony finds its explanation, however, in the fact that other important elements of the radical left contested structuralism, denouncing it as an ideology which necessarily downplayed the role of conscious choice and decision-making as source of action. Sherry Turkle asserts that “ ‘Down with structuralism’ became a student slogan” in ‘68, and discusses how more generally, structuralist premises were seen as “antithetical in spirit to the voluntarist flavor of the May uprising which asserted the primacy of desires and ideas.”⁵⁹ Indeed, among the leading participants of ‘68, the Situationists were very decided opponents of structuralism, which Guy Debord had attacked in *La société du spectacle*, associating it as an academic discipline with many of the same tendencies he found in the university as imagined by Clark Kerr. He somewhat predictably dismisses structuralism as a form of ahistorical reification: “Le point de vue où se place la pensée anti-historique du structuralisme est celui de l’éternelle présence d’un système qui n’a jamais été créé et qui ne finira jamais” (“Structuralism’s anti-historical thinking is based on the perspective of the eternal presence of a system which was never created and will never come to an end”; my translation).⁶⁰ But moreover and more suggestively, Debord argues that the emphasis that

structuralism places on “codes” is only an outgrowth and symptom of the forms of mediation inherent to the society of the spectacle, rather than a transhistorical, universal tool for analyzing them: “Le structuralisme est la *pensée garantie par l’Etat*. . . . Sa façon d’étudier le code des messages en lui-même n’est que le produit, et la reconnaissance, d’une société où la communication existe sous forme d’une cascade de signaux hiérarchiques” (“Structuralism is *thought with a government warranty*. . . . Its manner of studying the code of the messages in and of itself is only the product and the awareness of a society in which communication exists in the form of a cascade of hierarchically ordered signals”; my translation).⁶¹ Opposed to the allegedly subjectless version of history offered by structuralism, Debord, echoing Freud’s “Where it was there I must go” asserts: “Là où était le *ça* économique doit venir le *je*” (“There where the economic id was, the Ego/I must come”; my translation).⁶²

But as is well known, the phrase “les structures ne descendent pas dans la rue” also had an interesting after-life that extended beyond the events themselves. On February 22, 1969, in the discussion that followed Michel Foucault’s epochal talk, “What is an Author?” Lucien Goldman produced that very Sorbonne slogan as evidence when arguing *contra* Foucault that people, not structures, made history.⁶³ Also in attendance, however, was Jacques Lacan, who responded as follows: “Je ne considère pas qu’il soit d’aucune façon légitime d’avoir écrit que les structures ne descendent pas dans la rue, parce que, s’il y a quelque chose que démontrent les événements de mai, c’est précisément la descente dans la rue des structures. Le fait qu’on l’écrive à la place même où s’est opérée cette descente dans la rue ne prouve rien d’autre que, simplement, ce qui est très souvent, et même le plus souvent, interne à ce qu’on appelle l’acte, c’est qu’il se méconnaît lui-même” (“I do not believe it is in any way legitimate to write that structures don’t take to the streets, because if there’s one thing that the events of May have shown, it is precisely the taking to the streets of structures. And the fact that this phrase was written at the very site where such a thing took place proves nothing, except what is so often, and even most often, integral to what one calls the “act”—that this act misrecognizes itself”; my translation).⁶⁴ At stake here is the very relationship between the unconscious and political action, as well as the relationship of language, *as both structure and act*, to both. And for Lacan, the slogan that is used to discredit structuralism along with his own form of psychoanalysis is nothing other than a striking example of the mystifications of the ego and by extension, of the ego-psychology that psychoanalysis must always resist: this might be the reign of the misrecognizing “je” that Debord seems to call for, in fact, in the passage above. It would be easy to dismiss Lacan’s jibe as a patronizing dismissal of the students’ revolt as adolescent acting-out if we didn’t

know that this was emphatically not his position, just as Duncan's rejection of Levertov's Vietnam poems can't be simply aligned with ivory tower aestheticism. Rather, all the actors above are trying to sort out what a political subject-position can or should be.⁶⁵ The complication for Duncan and Lacan comes from their insistence on the unconscious as something *beyond* the site of errors to be rectified or repressions to be unveiled. One of the most spectacular sites of Duncan's reflections on this subject appears in an astonishing letter of June 1968 to Levertov and her husband Mitch Goodman, himself a prominent antiwar activist. Here, Duncan explicitly opposes conscience in the form of "The Super Ego, that does not caution but sweeps aside all reservations"⁶⁶ to "the other inner voice of conscience, our inner knowing what we have to do (*not* what we must do, not a moral imperative; but our sense of the given, when we "have" to do...)" (*DL*, 611). Torturously and incompletely, Duncan seeks to understand the "conscience" of the super ego itself as a potentially libidinal and amoral agency, in a manner not wholly unlike Freud's speculations in "Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego." Duncan admits to Levertov and Goodman that he is "troubled" by "the very courage of your convictions" which he associates with the "tyranny of the will" (*DL*, 611). His far from satisfactory but still compelling conclusion is that he prefers to "evade the inner command, even as I would evade the draft [that is, forced military conscription] of the social command": "As in my work I would undo the commands even in obedience. This is not a lawlessness, but a working with ideas of law. No, I do not mean to *evade* conscience but to confront it, to know it out, appalled by it; neither to go with it nor oppose it but to be concerned with its nature" (*DL*, 611). In a properly Nietzschean transvaluation of values, Duncan ceases to be able to fully distinguish conscience from its other.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, returning to May 1968, Samo Tomsic, in his recent book *The Capitalist Unconscious*, revisits Lacan's debate with Goldmann, arguing that the error of the protagonists of May '68 was that they "opposed structure and the event, or structure and politics, and herein lay one of their key failures. Instead of thinking the events as an outburst of the structural real, they were guided by the fantasy of a pure real outside structure" (*CU*, 21). To avoid similar ideas errors today, Tomsic argues that we must accept that "the subject of cognition. . . cannot be the subject of politics" (*CU*, 6)—a position which rhymes with Duncan's. Rather, what is required is "the formal inclusion of the subject of the unconscious in the field of politics" (*CU*, 22), a formulation explicitly opposed to the trivial reduction of politics to "unconscious complexes" (*CU*, 22), such as that which Lacan denounced in the wake of 1968. This would be possible within a Lacanian framework because, Tomsic argues,

for the later Lacan structure “is less about stable and necessary relations than about contingency and contradiction” (*CU*, 206); that is, to use terms which Tomsic doesn’t, an economy or dynamics of conflicting forces, more in line with Bataille or Derrida. While Tomsic cannot fully explain how this “formal inclusion of the subject of unconscious” into politics might actually function, he nevertheless convincingly and crucially reminds us that an emphasis on the unconscious must not be seen as a retreat from the social into a “sphere of strictly private life” (*CU*, 79), as the Freudian unconscious abolishes the traditional public/private distinction, simply because “the existence and the formal mechanisms of the unconscious depend on the same structures, which determine the functioning of social links” (*CU*, 79). This leads him to the following pithy formulation: “The motto shared between Marx and Freud would therefore be: the impersonal is the political—namely the impersonal core of the personal” (*CU*, 80). Duncan’s recusal of “self-possession” within the context of an explicitly engaged political poetics must be seen as in line with these concerns, as well as a harbinger of the task of so many subsequent leftwing poets who have searched for what might be called an impersonalized lyric and simultaneously a historicized, non-transcendental impersonality—as if they had found Eliot’s tradition standing on its head, and were attempting to stand it on its feet again. It is Duncan’s refusal of both the Eliotic/Spicerian raging clamor for the reign of death on the one hand and affirmationist voluntarism on the other that accounts for both his achievements and his limitations, as well as his mobilization of kitsch. In the end, for Duncan, the inclusion of the subject of the unconscious in the field of politics depends on the forms of writing of that knowledge which doesn’t know itself. Kitsch, hysteria, and dream are some of the names this writing takes. But more surprisingly, perhaps, for Duncan the solution to the quandary is neither desublimation nor unrepression, but rather obedience to “laws” and “orders” conceived along entirely new lines. The vitality of Duncan’s project comes from its refusal to distinguish that “order” from what is beyond or “out” of it; from its simultaneous need to separate “volition” from “compulsion” and its acknowledgement that that need speaks of “compulsion” itself. If kitsch could be said to represent Duncan’s refusal of modernist ideals of aesthetic autonomy, his harping on “law” could be seen as a symmetrical refusal to fantasize a political subjective autonomy in its place. Duncan’s challenge then becomes to think the “law”—including that of conscience—beyond the parameters of a pseudo-Freudian mature acceptance of “frustration,” a fascist social erotics of submission and domination, or a naive valorization of transgressive freedom and enjoyment. These are also the challenges that have remained open since 1968.

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¹ Which is by no means solely a negative term for Tiffany, its implications in Pound's case notwithstanding.

² Tiffany, *My Silver*, 155.

³ Tiffany, *My Silver*, 169. If William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson of course did follow Pound's totalising and epic precedent in *Paterson* and the *Maximus Poems* respectively, note that they both have at the base of their poetics the eschewal of Pound's most kitschy elements: high style, archaic diction, assertion of sacred harmonies and unities, etc.

⁴ Tomsic, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 22. Hereafter *CU*.

⁵ *The H. D. Book* was in its inception commissioned by Norman Holmes Pearson as a homage meant to honor H. D. on her seventy-fourth birthday in 1960. The book soon took on a life of its own, combining autobiography, poetics, political theorising, and a global account of modernist poetics generally, to mention only a few of the varied interests which

led the book to balloon to its ultimate size of over 600 pages. Written between 1959 and 1964 and partially published in little magazines between 1966 and 1984—though widely disseminated in manuscript to Duncan’s interlocutors throughout its writing—the book was never published as a “whole” (a dubious term in relation to this work) until 2011. See the editors’ Introduction to this edition, from which the information above was gleaned, for more details.

⁶ Duncan, *The H. D. Book*, 55. Hereafter *HD*.

⁷ Could Duncan here be using “impersonate” as a negation of William James’ term “personate,” which he discusses later? Possibly, but oddly, like Freud’s *Heimlich* and *Unheimliche*, “personate” and “impersonate” mean the same thing, and perhaps testify to a like ambivalence.

⁸ See *Time and Western Man*, where Lewis calls Pound “that curious thing, a person without a trace of originality of any sort” (67). As a receptive “consumer” rather than “producer,” Pound is also feminised in Lewis’ discourse, while his asserted preference for the “dead” over the “living” locks him still further into a decadent or kitsch discourse.

⁹ Tiffany, *My Silver*, 134.

¹⁰ For example, in his classic article on Kitsch Clement Greenberg already links it heavily to fascism and Stalinism: precisely because of its inauthenticity as a “synthetic” form which “predigests” experience, rather than creating it, for Greenberg kitsch is the ideal cultural form for propaganda and enforced cultural docility (15).

¹¹ Already in *ABC of Influence*, a book to which this essay is indebted, Christopher Beach notes that for Duncan a crucial aspect of Pound’s modernism was the “vital connection” between “literary form and political engagement” (163). And by taking the tale of Gassire’s Lute—one central to Pound—as his starting point, in his magisterial study of Duncan’s anti-war poetry Nathaniel Mackey inevitably focuses on the Poundian legacy.

¹² Stephen Collis quotes this phrase and refers to other related ones which I also discuss in his illuminating piece on the “poetic commons” in Duncan, there suggesting that Duncan’s “main late theme” might be resistance to “the enclosure of the poetic commons” (47). Collis quite rightly remarks that Duncan as Freudian sees his task as “to resist the privatizing ego” (51). I seek to delve further into that insight in this article. In his Introduction to *Reading Duncan Reading* Collis returns to some of these issues, framing them in the crucial context of intertextuality, central to Duncan’s practice as a self-described “derivative” poet. Building on the work of critics like Nathaniel Mackey, who has stressed how Duncan responds to accusations of a sequestered “bookishness” by figuring such a poetry as a “communal form” (89), Collis writes “Essentially, what I’m arguing for is the social significance of intertextuality” and “the model of sociality” that Duncan’s derivative poetics propose (xvii). George Fragopolous extends these enquiries on intertextuality, the derivative, and the communal in his interesting essay in the same volume, also noting the pertinence of Duncan’s Freudian position.

¹³ Duncan, *Collected Essays*, 59 (hereafter *CE*). The critique of “self-possession” in this piece is intertwined with the broader critique of property which leads Duncan to cite the adage “Property is theft” (59). It’s clear that for Duncan, self-possession is a subset of this form of property. Duncan attacks the idea of the lyric I as the poet’s private property in many places in his writing, such as in “Man’s Fulfilment in Order and Strife,” where discussing Browning’s dramatic monologues he ventures: “. . . Browning’s art of speaking in many imagined persons created an order of poetry, of made-up things, in what was most feared as a mental disorder, a splitting into a multitude of projected personalities—none of them Browning’s own. Against the private property of self, he created a community of selves....” (*Collected Essays*, 203-4).

¹⁴ Pavón-Cuéllar, *Marxism*, 177.

¹⁵ “Permission” is a crucial word for Duncan, and is stressed heavily in many sections of *The H. D. Book*, as well as grounding one of Duncan’s most important poems, “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow.”

¹⁶ See Sherry, pp. 280-7, for a reading of Barnes as decadent modernist.

¹⁷ See Robert Kaufman for interesting comments on Duncan’s relationship to Ginsberg by way of a comparison of their varied relationships to Romanticism. While Kaufman’s arguments are often compelling, I find that as counter-balance to modernist dogma decadence and kitsch operate more powerfully for Duncan than high Romanticism does.

¹⁸ Duncan explicitly likens his conception of this textual structure to Freud’s (ultimately rejected) deployment of the history of Rome as a model for the Unconscious in *Civilization and its Discontents*. That is to say, stylistically Duncan hopes the “final” version of *The H. D. Book* will display the traces of all the previous versions that it never finishes revising: not the original *or* its revision, but the dialogue of both.

¹⁹ Though I don’t have the space to discuss this here, Duncan’s work in this vein anticipates that of Susan Howe in *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark*. His own reading of Hawthorne’s tale “The Birthmark” looks forward to and possibly informs Howe’s further explorations in important ways. Like Howe, Duncan finds Hawthorne’s tale of a husband’s rage to excise a physical “imperfection” from the body of his wife to be an effective allegory of a rage for “purity” in art, and his critique is feminist in several ways: the woman’s body literally incarnates the fault to be cut into shape, as Poundian imagism stresses the cutting of unruly texts in a manner that Duncan thought was internalised by the young H. D. in her own self-policing. Duncan also reads the “birthmark” to be removed quite literally: as the mark of the maternal that must be repressed. Howe’s reading greatly develops and extends the feminist implications of Duncan’s reading.

²⁰ I refer to Pound’s crucial early definition of Imagism: “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (*Literary Essays*, 4).

²¹ Pound, *Selected Prose*, 22-3.

²² There is a somewhat similar formulation in “The Truth and Life of Myth,” in which Duncan argues that the experience of release felt in waking up from the bounds of dreaming to the “work-a-day” and comfortable daytime world is “experienced in reverse by the convert to psychoanalysis, who begins to find in dreams, or, rather, in his interpretations of dreams, the real tenor of daily life” (148).

²³ H. D., *Helen*, 1.

²⁴ H. D., *Helen*, 13.

²⁵ Nancy, *La Communauté*, 109, for original French. My translation.

²⁶ Nancy, *La Communauté*, 100, for original French. My translation.

²⁷ Nancy, *La Communauté*, 144-15 for original French. My translation.

²⁸ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Fantasme*, 67-8 for original French. My translation.

²⁹ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Fantasme*, 81 for original French. My translation.

³⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Fantasme*, 96-7 for original French. My translation.

³¹ Rabaté, *Pathos*, 109.

³² Spicer, *My Vocabulary*, 383.

³³ Spicer, *My Vocabulary*, 150.

³⁴ It should be noted that the essay gestures at differentiating a more nuanced “Jung” from the “Jungians” it targets, but this line of inquiry is not fully pursued. Note that the reference to “organs” in the passage above is also a dig at the desexualising tendencies of Jungian analysis, as the broader context makes very clear.

³⁵ Duncan comes back to this idea in many places in *The H. D. Book*, including by way of a long passage from William James on how in recent psychology “The menagerie and the madhouse, the nursery, the prison, and the hospital, have been made to deliver up their

material. The world of mind is shown as something infinitely more complex than was suspected; and whatever beauties it may still possess it has lost at any rate the beauty of academic neatness” (605). It is from this basis that Duncan will go on to discuss hysteria as something other than a simple symptom or illness.

³⁶ Duncan hints that he’s working from the original publication of “Psychology and the Troubadours” in *The Quest*.

³⁷ Moreover, Lucy Allen Paton, whose work Jack Spicer quotes without attribution in *The Holy Grail*, argues that Arthurian Romance derives from the Celtic “fairy story,” and Duncan might be drawing on her work here.

³⁸ And note that Duncan’s queerness has a clear “effeminate,” domestic, and parapractical cast, far from the heroic manliness of some other modes of queer political affirmation, like much of Whitman’s, for example.

³⁹ Pound’s preface to Rémy de Gourmont’s *Natural Philosophy of Love* is a classic modernist statement of this position.

⁴⁰ Of course, that there *were* precedents of powerful student activism outside the US is part of what made the events so distressing to the establishment at the time. Anxieties about Berkeley becoming like a “Latin American” campus were frequently expressed. See Draper, p. 59 for a discussion of this.

⁴¹ Duncan, *Collected Later Poems*, 376; hereafter *CLP*.

⁴² In the course of their increasingly mutually hurtful exchange over their anti-war poems, Denise Levertov noted this disjunction of modes herself, though uses different terms to discuss it (Duncan and Levertov, pp. 519-20).

⁴³ The more powerful strains of Duncan’s thinking can be seen to align with some of the questions Jean-Luc Nancy opens in his work on community, as both Stephen Collis and George Fragopolous have suggested. Also pertinent for these questions is a Freudian perspective succinctly summarised by Pavón-Cuellar: “Consonant with Marx. . . Freud conceives the individual as a point of arrival, not departure” (46).

⁴⁴ Spicer’s legendary Vancouver lecture on dictation, delivered in June, 1965, speaks in very similar terms, precisely in reference to the example of a conscious desire to write a political poem. Evoking “the real thing, the thing you didn’t *want* to say in terms of your own ego,” Spicer, condemning as puerile the conscious desire to write a poem to say “I think that the Vietnam crisis is terrible” hails the hypothetical situation in which “. . . you’re trying to write a poem on Vietnam and you write a poem about skating in Vermont” (*House*, 6-7). Spicer’s view was not that the poet should be “above” politics; rather, he mistrusted the conscious will as a source of the poetic.

⁴⁵ Norman Finkelstein also cites this phrase in his extremely helpful article “Robert Duncan, Poet of the Law,” which touches on many of the paradoxes that interest me here. However, I think Finkelstein might underestimate how difficult it is in Duncan’s formulation for the poet to come to consciousness of the true necessity behind her relationship to the law, which Finkelstein posits as Duncan’s goal.

⁴⁶ Debord, *La Société*, 187 for original French; translation mine.

⁴⁷ Kerr, *The Uses*, 87-8.

⁴⁸ Kerr, *The Uses*, 88.

⁴⁹ This book, a collective production, was hastily written and published in the midst of the conflict pitting students and faculty against the administration.

⁵⁰ In point of fact, Kerr was Chancellor of the entire UC system while Edward Strong was Chancellor of the Berkeley campus, but Kerr stepped in early to take charge during the FSM crisis.

⁵¹ Thompson et al, *Warwick University*, 39-40.

⁵² Kerr, *The Uses*, 20.

⁵³ Kerr, *The Uses*, 6.

⁵⁴ Kerr, *The Uses*, 29.

⁵⁵ For echoes of some of the specific falsities Duncan denounces here, see accounts of erroneous reporting in Draper, pp. 59-60 and 112-114.

⁵⁶ See Eric Keenaghan, who also discusses Duncan's opposition to "the private property of self" (116) in an account of how such positions lead Duncan to a rejection of classic liberalism.

⁵⁷ Tiffany, *My Silver*, 32.

⁵⁸ Fredman, *Before Caesar's Gate*, 67. Denise Levertov, a former poetry editor for *The Nation*, was probably a better-known and more influential poet than Duncan in the 60s, certainly among the more mainstream cultural and literary communities. She and Duncan had been close friends and interlocutors since the early fifties, and their collected correspondence stretches to 700 large-format pages. During the Vietnam War Levertov was among the most visible and radical of the cultural figures in opposition, and this visibility itself emerges as an issue for Duncan during these years. Their rupture has been very widely discussed. See for example the *Introduction* to their correspondence, along with Fredman, Fragopolous, Mlinko, and Davidson, as well as Bertholf and Gelpi's collection of essays. As the violence of their disagreement increased the terms of it also evolved and changed. By the crucial years of 1970-71, Duncan's censure of Levertov increasingly took the form of the accusation that her political stances were largely the product of a displaced female *ressentiment*. This troublingly misogynistic turn requires a study in itself. Meanwhile, for a brilliant reading of the structural contradictions governing Duncan's anti-war poetry, see Mackey's study "Gassire's Lute" in his book, *The Paracritical Hinge*. Mackey shows two constant problems Duncan wrestled with, both of which resonate with this essay. First is Duncan's anxiety that poetry might "feed" off the war as subject matter, turning to poetic profit the outrages of the war's violence in a vampiric and unethical manner. Second is his concern that the power of poetry, to the extent that it has any, might not be opposed to war's violence but rather a form of it—that poetry and war cannot be entirely dissociated. Mackey powerfully shows how this problem is indissolubly linked to the deepest foundations of Duncan's poetics: "To see that the word is not a containment but a contention of meanings is to see also that war isn't something existing only outside the poem, a fact to be . . . dealt with as topic. War is also an internal characteristic of the poem" (103).

⁵⁹ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 71-2.

⁶⁰ Debord, *La Société*, 193-4.

⁶¹ Debord, *La Société*, 194.

⁶² Debord, *La Société*, 46.

⁶³ Roudinesco, *Histoire*, 1911.

⁶⁴ Foucault, *Dits*, 813.

⁶⁵ Jean-Michel Rabaté's "Lacan's année érotique" offers a fascinating account of Lacan's relationship to May 68, including the debate with Goldmann, and also cites Lacan's scathing review of a book which offered a puerile Oedipal reading of the revolt (21).

⁶⁶ Duncan and Levertov, *Letters*, 610, hereafter *DL*.

⁶⁷ Duncan's refusal here to separate the "good conscience" of Levertov and Goodman from the operations of a destructive Superego not only permitting but actually commanding the most inconceivable forms of violence echoes Duncan's parallel refusal to dissociate the violence and destructiveness of poetry from that of war, as Mackey demonstrates throughout "Gassire's Lute." See especially pp. 113-141.