CHAPTER 6

The Language of Vision
Denise Levertov
Robert Duncan

I

For almost twenty years Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan shared poems with each other and wrote poems to and for each other. Poems flow into and out of the letters; letters occasionally are themselves poems or turn into poems. Their correspondence constitutes the most remarkable exchange between two major poets in American literary history. What sustained the correspondence was a dialogue about the function of the imagination and about the function of language in the imaginative act. Moreover, the issues that sustained the dialogue dramatize and clarify the interplay between Neoromanticism and Postmodernism that defined postwar American poetics. The back-and-forth of letters, so intense and regular that it reads like an epistolary novel, carried Duncan and Levertov through a friendship so close in the 1950s and 1960s that they called each other brother and sister, animus and anima; yet it ended in a painful breakup in the early 1970s over the very "aesthetic ethics" they had thought they shared. The phrase is Levertov's; she used it to describe what she had learned from Rilke, her first mentor, and to designate the underlying issue of her exchange with Duncan.[1]

In literary accounts of the postwar period Duncan and Levertov are linked, along with Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, as the major poets of the Black Mountain school, named after the experimental Black Mountain College, tucked away in the hills of North Carolina, where Olson was rector in the 1950s. The four of them were scattered across the map – Olson in Gloucester as well as Black Mountain, Creeley in Mallorca and New Mexico, Duncan in San Francisco, Levertov in New York – but they were connected by a crisscrossing web of friendships and correspondences. Through Olson, Duncan and Creeley had residences at Black Mountain; Levertov never went to the college and met Olson only later at a conference, but Creeley and Duncan are her link to Black Mountain

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poetics. In the poetry wars of the postwar decades the Beats and the Black Mountain poets represented experimental open form against the closed forms of Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, and J. V. Cunningham. But where the Beats drew their inspiration from Whitman's free verse and from jazz and blues, the Black Mountain poets coalesced around Olson's 1950 essay "Projective Verse," which in turn took as its point of departure not the Romantic Whitman but the Modernist experimentation of Pound and Williams in the first half of the century and of their Objectivist successors Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen.

"Projective Verse" headlined its theory of open form, in Olson's emphatic caps, as "COMPOSITION BY FIELD." The linguistic field of the poem followed and enacted the poet's engagement with the multidimensional field of experience. The lines of the poem were shorn of the initial caps that set them off as scanable metrical units and orchestrated themselves across the space of the page through linebreaks and indented left-hand margins, so that the spatial arrangement, like a musical score, registered the temporal measure of the lines through the field of the poem. The defining axiom of Black Mountain poetics is Creeley's formulation, again posted in Olson's caps, that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT."[2] In other words, form is not precedent to or extraneous to content and meaning but, on the contrary, the evolving dynamics of form constitutes the poem's emergent content and meaning.

The Black Mountain poets gave their individual inflections to form as extension of content and content as realization of form. In broad terms, Olson and Duncan were closer to the Pound's epic intentions, with its investigation of history and myth and philosophy, whereas Creeley and Levertov were closer to Williams's attention to the particulars of immediate experience in finely calibrated lyrics. And, perhaps because of the attraction between their different sensibilities, Olson and Creeley were drawn into extended and voluminous correspondence, as were Duncan and Levertov.

Before Black Mountain poets were identified as a school, however, Levertov and Duncan found each other on their own, and, as the letters make clear, what drew them together at the outset was not "Projective Verse" but the Romantic conception of the imagination as a faculty of vision and inspiration. Before Levertov came to New York as the wife of American writer Mitchell Goodman, she had been publishing poems as one of the New Romantic poets in England. In an early notebook Duncan declared that he was seeking "a style and temperament in which the

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Romantic spirit is revived" and that "there is a route back to the Romantic in Stevens."[3] "How many correspondences there are," Duncan exclaimed to Levertov, "between your *Double Image* (1946) [her collection of New Romantic poems] and my *Medieval Scenes*, written in 1947."[4] Levertov first encountered Duncan's "rich romanticism" in Muriel Rukeyser's review of his *Heavenly City, Earthly City* (1947) in *Poetry* magazine, and she liked the excerpts quoted in the review so much that she bought the book soon after arriving in New York.[5]

Duncan said that when he wrote the title poem of that collection, poetry was for him "a magic of excited, exalted or witch-like (exciting) speech, in which the poet had access to a world of sight and feeling, a reality, deeper, stranger, and larger than the world of man's conventional concerns."[6] The dichotomy in the title catches the essential Romantic dilemma: the tension between the aspiration to transcend human limits and the human limits that constrain and perhaps doom that aspiration, between the spirit's effort to inspirit matter and matter's failure to incarnate spirit. Duncan's opulent diction and imagery, before he encountered Olson and "Projective Verse," acknowledge Stevens, and the meditation in the third and concluding section of the poem, as the poet ponders that dilemma beside the "[t]urbulent Pacific," is Duncan's response to Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West." As with Stevens, the dualism is not resolved in Duncan's poem: "in the avenues of his earthly city / unearthly presences wink, / unfathomable eyes of an inward vision."[7] And that unresolved dualism is, as we shall see, the source and expression of a persistent gnosticism that over the ensuing years will more and more sharply set Duncan's "inward vision" against Levertov's increasingly incarnational vision. At this first encounter, however, what Levertov responded to in *Heavenly City, Earthly City* was a connection with "the tradition of magic and prophecy and song."[8]

By the time Duncan discovered Levertov's poems in the pages of Cid Corman's magazine *Origin* in the spring of 1953, the "Romantic spirit" of both poets had accommodated itself to and assimilated late Modernist notions of form and technique. Through Olson, Duncan had been exposed to Black Mountain poetics as extensions of the formal experiments of Pound and Williams, Gertrude Stein and Zukofsky. Upon coming to New York, Levertov had been swept up by the rhythms and diction of American speech and by a poetic culture radically different from the British, and the traditional formalism of the New Romantics rapidly gave way to American experimentalism. In particular, Levertov had become friends with Creeley, her husband's Harvard classmate, and through

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Creeley had met Williams, who became the most important influence in her transformation into an American poet. For his part, Williams came to think of Creeley and Levertov as the poets of the younger generation who most creatively carried forward his sense of poetic line and structure. The Levertov poems that Duncan found in *Origin* clearly showed Williams's influence, and the poem he was most struck by was "The Shifting" – so struck, in fact, that he was impelled to address to her the poem-letter that initiated their voluminous correspondence.

When Levertov's poem appeared in *Overland to the Islands* (1958), published by Jonathan Williams, who had studied at Black Mountain, it was called "Turning":[9]

> The shifting, the shaded
>   change of pleasure
> Soft warm ashes in place of fire
>   out, irremediably
>
> and a door blown open:
>
> planes tilt, interact, objects
>   fuse, disperse,
>   this chair further from that table . . . hold it!
>   Focus on that: this table
>   closer to that shadow. It's what appalls the
>   heart's red rust. Turn, turn!
>   Loyalty betrays.
>
>   It's the fall of it, the drift,
>   pleasure
>   source and sequence
>   lift
>   of golden cold sea.

Composition by field: the poem as process and the poem as graph; the poem following the temporal realization of experience in the spatial arrangement of words and lines on the page. "Turning" is sustained by the tension and correlation between the two exclamatory commands: "Turn, turn!" but "hold it!" followed by "Focus." It is pleasure in the shift/drift/lift that keeps the heart from rusting in place, and the strong verbs suggest a Cubist painting: "planes tilt, interact, objects / fuse, disperse." However, lest the shifting blur into indistinction, lest the particulars get lost in the "golden cold sea," the admonitions at the heart of the poem insist, moment by moment, on clarity of focus, on the distinct particularity of "this" and "that": "this chair further from that table," "this table / closer to that shadow."

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Over the years it is precisely Levertov's focus on the particularity of the moment, her sensuous and tactile experience of the physical world that attracted Duncan as a counter to his tendency to intellectual abstraction and his delight in shifting perspectives and configurations. "The Rights," the poem she wrote for him after their first exchange, begins:[10]

I want to give you
something I've made

some words on a page – as if
to say 'Here are some blue beads'

or 'Here's a bright red leaf I found on
the sidewalk'

In a 1965 letter Duncan tells Levertov that where she sees experience as "a constellation raying out from and into a central focus," as in "a mandala or wheel," he sees experience as the spinning equilibrations of "a mobile."[11] And indeed Duncan's poems do characteristically spin out an open-ended and ongoing process of circulation, and Levertov's characteristically draw in the dynamic convergences of an immediate moment.

The letter from June 1953, in which Duncan meant to express his "more than admiration" for "The Shifting," took the form of a poem – but a poem so perplexingly different from the poems of his that Levertov had read that she wrote back to ask if the "R.D." of the signature could possibly be the Robert Duncan of *Heavenly City, Earthly City.* The "puns, lists, juxtapositions" of "Letters for Denise Levertov: An A Muse Meant" seemed to her to be mocking rather than praising her poem.[12] What had intervened were Duncan's immersion in the writings of Gertrude Stein in the early 1950s and his composition of several sequences imitating Stein's verbal and syntactical experiments.[13] Stein's anti-Romantic foregrounding of the materiality of language and the mechanics of signification made her a precursor of Postmodernism and a formative influence on later poets, from Zukofsky and Oppen through Ashbery and Creeley to the Language poets of the 1970s.

So Duncan's "Letters for Denise Levertov" was written in his Steinian mode. Levertov, however, had no interest in or sympathy for Stein's strain of Modernism. Not surprisingly, then, she felt only baffled consternation when she read the opening lines from R. D.:[14]

in
    spired / the aspirate
    the aspirant almost

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without breath
it is a breath out
breathed spiraling – An aspiration
pictured as the familiar spirit
hoverer
above
each loved each
a word giving up its ghost
memorized as the flavor
from the vowels/the bowels/
of meaning

Or these lines later in the letter:

Why knot ab stract
a tract of mere sound
is more a round
of dis ab con
traction
a deconstruction
for the reading of words.

Levertov's perplexed response to R. D. precipitated a back-and-forth exchange through the month of June in which Duncan, appalled that "[m]y praise is your abuse," explained his intentions, and she apologized for her "stupidity."[15]

So quickly was everything patched up in great embarrassment on both sides that by the time they met for the first time in New York in 1955, she was able to tell him in a follow-up letter that "the effect on me of your visit" made her want to write back "a real crazy letter – something like a loveletter, tho' not that." The circumstances of their lives on opposite coasts – Duncan with his life's partner, the painter Jess Collins; she with her husband and their son Nikolai – kept them apart except for occasional and brief visits. But their correspondence over the next two decades and more were in fact love letters of a special and rare kind, based, in Duncan's words, on "the special view we have … of why and what the poem is."[16]

Nevertheless, they sensed from the start real differences. She described their initial exchange as "such a spectacle of cross-purposes," and he saw right off that "my own aesthetic is I see *not yours*." Yet they willfully passed over the underlying cross-purposes to celebrate "the happy conjunction of the two of us," wherein the symbiotic interplay of "sympathies and differences shld [sic] give rise to a dialectic."[17] Their symbiotic relationship represented, they said, the play between animus and anima, distinct but interdependent aspects of the imagination. Levertov

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ascribed the "big difference," the "thread of another texture among those that we held in common," to Duncan's daunting intellectual "sophistication," his "almost encyclopedic range of knowledge," including history, philosophy, and mythology. He agreed that he was "drawn by the conceptual imagination rather than the perceptual imagination," but, paradoxically, for that very reason, he was drawn to the immediacies of the perceptual imagination in her poems. She called her first American collection *Here and Now* and told Duncan that "when this *kind* of imagination – the presence of felt-through absolutely convincing details – is manifested it excites and delights me – shakes and moves me to tears," so that "even thinking of it … is almost a sensuous, no, sensual experience, sharp and exquisite."[18]

Consequently, in the encounter between mind and world from which the poem arises, Duncan's imagination tended to turn in, to draw sensual experience into the play of consciousness, whereas Levertov's imagination tended to turn outward and seek realization in the particulars of experience. In a notebook entry Duncan attributed "the radical disagreement that Olson has with me" to the fact that Olson is "so keen upon the *virtu* of reality that he rejects my 'wisdom' … because my wisdom is not true wisdom. He suspects, and rightly, that I indulge myself in pretentious fictions … It is the intensity of the conception that moves me." Levertov's own dialogue with Duncan convinced her that the challenge to her was "to develop a greater degree of conscious intelligence to balance my instincts and intuitions" and the challenge to Duncan was "to keep his consciousness, his diamond needle intellect, from becoming overweening, violating the delicate feelings-out of the Imagination."[19]

Yet through the poems and essays and letters of the 1950s and 1960s, their profound trust in and empathy for each other sustained their shared commitment to the mystique and metaphysics of the imagination, to the visionary nature of the creative process. Their Neoromanticism adapted the Romantic imagination to Modernist practice; they assimilated their reading of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Emerson and Whitman with their reading of Pound and Williams and Stevens. In Duncan's words, "I read Modernism as Romanticism, and I finally begin to feel myself pretty much a 19th century mind … [M]y ties to Pound, Stein, Surrealism and so forth all seem to me entirely consequent to their unbroken continuity from the Romantic period."[20] What transfixed them both was the ineluctable mystery shadowed yet somehow manifest in lived experience. The notion of the creative process they shared was essentially (but, as we shall see, differently) religious, as they sought to invest the formal experimentation they

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learned from the Modernists with the metaphysical aura and mystique of the Romantic imagination.

The juxtaposition of Duncan's *The Opening of the Field* (1960) and *Roots and Branches* (1964) with Levertov's *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961) and *O Taste and See* (1964) illustrates the dialectic, within their Neoromanticism, between the conceptual imagination and the perceptual imagination. Here, for example, is the text of the first poem of *The Opening of the Field,* with the title serving as the first line:[21]

OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO A MEADOW

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved
whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under The Hill
whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words
that is a field folded.

It is only a dream of the grass blowing
east against the source of the sun
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game
of ring a round of roses told.

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is.

The language shows none of the verbal quirks and ruptures of Duncan's Stein imitations of the early 1950s. Instead, its smoothly seductive rhythms and hypnotic revolving of the words and images on their vowels and consonants work their magic, cast a spell of "words within words," so that what is concealed is revealed and what is revealed is concealed: the scene

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seen and unseen. And the scene is a composite or composed imagined landscape.

In August 1958, Duncan sent Levertov a version of the poem, begun in 1956 and revised through many previous drafts. In the same letter his gloss on the sources of the poem indicate the whirl of associations in the imagery:[22]

> In *The Opening of the Field* there was, and I've stuck to it, a basic fiction: the field that is: The poem as composed by field. (Feel?) See Olson's "Projective Verse"; the Field that Abraham bought for the cave of Machpelah "That I may bury my dead out of sight." It's third, a field in the earliest dream I remember, a hilltop meadow with the grass in no wind bowing towards the east, and a circle of children dancing a ring around me as It, to be crowned initiating the fullness of fear and the destruction of the world by flood.
>
> Now what do I *know* here? It's the pulse I go by –

Duncan points to the poem as an instance of composition by field, and his imagery is a characteristic fusion of literary, historical/religious/mythological, and personal sources. In Genesis Abraham purchased the field and cave of Machpelah, known as the Cave of the Patriarchs, as a burial place for himself, Isaac, Jacob and their wives, and in Judaism Machpelah became hallowed ground. The "destruction of the world by flood" alludes not only to the Genesis account of Noah but also to the legend of the sinking of the island of Atlantis. Duncan's adopted parents, ardent theosophists, had convinced him as a child that he had been reborn from a previous incarnation on Atlantis. The nursery rhyme of "ring a round of roses" derives from the medieval plague ("all fall down"), and Duncan's recurrent dream fuses childhood and death with him as "It" at the center of the ritualized game. The image recurs in a number of his poems as well as in Jess's apocalyptic painting "If All the World Were Paper And All the Water Sink" (1962) (with a silhouette of Duncan watching the game) as well as in Jess's illustration for the title page of *The Opening of the Field.*

The field evoked in the poem is, then, an imagined or "dream" site, "folded in all thought," enclosing the whole lifespan from childhood to death. It is at once "mine," "so near to the heart," yet it is also "not mine" but "eternal" and archetypal: the "everlasting omen of what is." Thus it is the "place of first permission": the platonic light source that projects all the shadowy forms of life and of all that "I am" in particular; yet the field is also the burial ground or "hall" of Machpelah into which all living forms fall. The children's game is a dance of death; sunrise and sunset coexist; the Queen Under The Hill is at once the Great Mother and Proserpina of the

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underworld "hall." The insistent rhyming of all/hall/fall sounds the existential round, and all the circlings of images and intimations are gathered and contained in a "made place": the "property" of the central "mind" of the speaker who is both subject and object ("me as It") of the game. The poem itself – the reverberant field of "words within words" – is the conscious mind's defensive "hold against" life's death dance. The repetition of the title line at the end folds the poem hermetically on its repeated "as if" and closes the circle.

Where Duncan's "Meadow" is a work of the conceptual imagination, "The Ripple" is an instance of Levertov's perceptual imagination.[23]

On white linen the silk
of gray shadows
threefold, over-
lapping, a
tau cross.
Glass jug and
tumblers rise from
that which they
cast.

And luminous
in each
overcast of
cylindrical shade,
image
of water, a brightness
not gold, not silver,
rippling
as if with laughter.

The perceptual imagination made for Levertov's "passion … for the vertebrate and cohesive in all art." From Williams she had learned the strategic use of line breaks to measure the process of perception, focus on individual details, and highlight the syntactical play of elements within a simple declarative sentence. Line breaks, she said, provide "a form of punctuation *additional* to the punctuation that forms part of the logic of completed thoughts. Linebreaks – together with the intelligent use of indentation and other devices of scoring – represent a peculiarly *poetic*, alogical, parallel (not competitive) punctuation."[24] The delicate lineation in "The Ripple" prompts the reader to see what might go unnoticed: the silken gray shadows on the white linen; the solid jug and glasses rising from their cast shadows; the luminous shimmering of jug-water in the shadows; the configuration

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of the shadows into a triform cross. The careful line breaks mark the mind's active participation in and response to the objects of the moment's perception: "rippling / as if with laughter." The tau cross is a sacred symbol in Egyptian mysteries as well as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and as the only metaphor in the visual description it renders the mind's perception of the sacramental aura investing this simplest of everyday perceptions.

Years later Levertov would remark: "This acknowledgement, and celebration, of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry from its very beginnings."[25] Again and again her poems of the 1950s and 1960s are epiphanies of wonder at the *Here and Now*, the title she gave her first American collection. In "The Depths," the word "sacred" expresses no easy sentimentality but a revelation of essence:[26]

> When the white fog burns off,
> the abyss of everlasting light
> is revealed. The last cobwebs
> of fog in the
> black firtrees are flakes
> of white ash in the world's hearth.
>
> Cold of the sea is counterpart
> to this great fire. Plunging
> out of the burning cold of ocean
> we enter an ocean of intense
> noon. Sacred salt
> sparkles on our bodies.
>
> After mist has wrapped us again
> in fine wool, may the taste of salt
> recall to us the great depths about us.

As in "The Ripple," light is the agent of sight and insight, as the meeting of land and sea reconciles the opposition between fire and water.

The last lines of "Claritas" (Latin *clarus* means "light") enact the declension from the supersensory to the sensory:[27]

> Sun
> light.
>   Light
> light light light.

Capital S "Sun" becomes "light"; capital L "Light" proliferates into the multitudinous world of "light light light." The thrush in the poem, known in New England as "the All-Day Bird" because of its daylong singing, becomes a type of the artist, and the speaker "prays" to make her

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poem of praise as precise as the bird's song in the exact rendering of its subtly nuanced modulations. When Levertov sent "Claritas" to Duncan, his reply expressing admiration for the poem breaks, in mid-letter, into his own poem, published with slight revisions as "Answering" in *Roots and Branches.* While writing the letter, he heard a bird chirruping outside his window, unperturbed by the pneumatic drill from workmen repairing the street. Joining its song and hers, he "sings out" his response, italicized in the insistence of the concluding lines: *"The song's a work of the natural will. / The song's a work of the natural will."*[28]

Nevertheless, a comparison of the title poems of *Roots and Branches* and *O Taste and See*, both published in 1964, confirms, within their sense of shared enterprise, their different inflections of seeing into song. The opening lines of "Roots and Branches" transform the swarms of orange monarch butterflies that migrate each winter to the California coast into a profusion of metaphors, "tracing out of air unseen roots and branches of sense I share in thought." In the rest of the poem the butterflies become almost completely subsumed into figments of his imagination, stimuli in his consciousness that function to perfect his "inner view of things":[29]

There are

echoes of what I am in what you perform
this morning, How you perfect my spirit!
almost restore
an imaginary tree of living in all its doctrines
by fluttering about,
intent and easy as you are, the profusion of you!
awakening transports of an inner view of things.

Duncan's instinctive turn to inner vision had a physiological basis; his eyesight was impaired in a childhood accident, which left him cross-eyed and seeing a double image, one slightly higher and to the left of the other. This literal blurring of the physical world made Duncan all the more responsive to Levertov's acute sensory observation, but these Stevensian lines do indeed suggest Stevens's notion of the imaginative *mundo* as an alternate world. "Roots and Branches" moves quickly from the sight of the butterflies to the branching of his "inner view" into the words of the poem.

In contrast, for Levertov insight must be grounded in the perceived world. The opening lines of "O Taste and See" invert Wordsworth's famous declaration (in the sonnet "On Westminster Bridge") to insist instead: "The world is / not with us enough," with the hang at the line

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break emphasizing the inversion. The poem then glosses a subway poster with the famous verse from Psalm 34, "O taste and see the Lord is sweet," to mean "if anything all that lives / to the imagination's tongue." The Lord will be tasted only in all that nourishes body and spirit:[30]

> grief, mercy, language,
> tangerine, weather, to
> breathe them, bite,
> savor, chew, swallow, transform
>
> into our flesh our
> deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
> living in the orchard and being
>
> hungry, and plucking
> the fruit.

In a mortal Eden the fruit is to be eaten. Even abstractions like grief and mercy, life and death are not disembodied concepts but lived experiences as palpable to the imagination's tongue as plum and quince.

As Levertov and Duncan were swapping poems and commenting on each other's poems, they were clarifying their poetics, piecemeal in the letters and more systematically in essays. She reported to him in August 1962 that she had begun putting together her thoughts on organic form for a lecture. Before she completed the long gestation of that essay and sent it to him in October 1965, he wrote her in January 1964 that he was himself at work on a lecture, commissioned by the Voice of America, about his "concept of the poem." The results were Levertov's "Some Notes on Organic Form," first published in *Poetry* magazine for September 1965, and Duncan's "Towards an Open Universe," first published by Voice of America in *Contemporary American Poetry* in 1964. The two essays present succinct statements of the conceptual and perceptual strains of the Neoromantic imagination.

Levertov's essay posits a correspondence between the "organic form" of the poem and the forms of things in the world outside the observer's mind and extrinsic to language. The "conception of 'content' or 'reality' is functionally more important" than, and prior to, the poem because "first there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him their equivalence in words: he is *brought to speech.*" Levertov is clear about the metaphysical assumptions of her position: "For me, back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal." The shaping work of

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the imagination commences when it is "*brought to speech*" and activated to find the most precise and resonant "equivalence in words." The organic poet is therefore not inclined to fall back on established and "prescribed forms," which often imply that "content, reality, experience, is essentially fluid and must be given form"; instead, the organic poet seeks out the "inherent, though not immediately apparent, form" of the experience.[31]

Levertov cites the Romantic antecedents to her conception of composition by field: Coleridge, Emerson ("Ask the fact for the form"), and, most importantly, Hopkins: "Gerard Manley Hopkins invented the word 'inscape' to denote intrinsic form, the pattern of essential characteristics both in single objects and (what is more interesting) in objects in a state of relation to each other, and the word 'instress' to denote the experiencing of the perception of inscape, the apperception of inscape." She finds her "religious devotion to the truth, to the splendor of the authentic" in the etymological roots of words:[32]

> To contemplate comes from "*templum*, temple, a place, a space for observation, marked out by the augur." It means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god. And to meditate is "to keep the mind in a state of contemplation"; its synonym is "to muse," and to muse comes from a word meaning "to stand with open mouth" – not so comical if we think of "inspiration" – to breathe in.
>
> So – as the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem: the words which are to be his way in to the poem, if there is to be a poem.

Since the culminating "moment of vision, of crystallization … occurs as words," "the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception," and the rest of the essay proceeds with a nuts-and-bolts discussion of how the elements of composition – rhythm, rhyme, repetitions and variations, harmonies and dissonances, line breaks, spaces and indentations – realize the poetic organism. The essay "Line breaks, Stanza-Spaces, and the Inner Voice" is an illustrative exercise in explicating the evolution of her poem "The Tulips."[33]

When Levertov sent "Some Notes on Organic Form" to Duncan, his initial response was to note that his experience of form was more fluid and multiphasic than hers: "not a mandala or wheel but a mobile." Twice he extracts with approval her phrase "a method of recognizing what we perceive" but detaches it from the large metaphysical claim behind the phrase as it appears in the essay. She wrote: "A partial definition … of organic poetry might be that it is a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing

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what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such poetry is exploratory." Duncan responds by redefining organic form not as natural allegory but as aesthetic self-determination: organic form should not be construed to mean that it "seeks to imitate the growth forms of shell, tree, or human body," but rather must mean that "the poem itself is an organism growing (living) into its own life as a form."[34] Levertov did not at the time take note of Duncan's elision from language as referential to language as self-referential: a crucial shift that would lead the Language poets of the 1970s to regard Duncan as a forebear.

The Romantic in Duncan, however, could see the danger of entrapment in such self-referentiality, and in "Towards an Open Universe" he described the poem of "inward vision" as "a happening in language, that leads back into or on towards the beauty of the universe itself." The configuration of "our own personal consciousness" in words adumbrates "also the inner structure of the universe," so that the immanence of the poet in the poem is analogous to "the immanence of the Creator in Creation." However, the differences with Levertov are significant. Where she concenters the forms of reality and reality of forms in an apperception of the "form beyond forms," Duncan sees a radically open universe with the shifting circulations of "self-consciousness" tracing "the transcendent consciousness of the dance." Because of the fluidity of reality, "the poet and the poem are one in a moving process"; poems are "part of the evolving and continuing work of a poetry I could never complete."[35]

By 1968, when the crisis of the Vietnam War was making clearer the differences between him and Levertov, Duncan cites Heraclitus at the beginning of the essay "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," and goes on to argue that order is indistinguishable from disorder as the poles of a dynamic interchange: "Nature is unnatural, Order is disordering." Amidst the indeterminate and violent fluidity of nature and history, the poem's "truth does not lie outside the art" but, on the contrary, in its own making. Duncan could confess to Levertov: "I *am* apprehensive of my idolatry of the poem …" Nevertheless, more and more firmly was he convinced that only through "a supreme effort of consciousness" might the poet recover the "gnosis of the ancients" beyond the unremitting "War of Contending Powers" and conjure the hidden truth or "Secret Doctrine" in poems that might constitute "the Gnosis of the modern world." In fact, for him the poem is "an occult document" precisely because language – through the nuances of "syntax, morphology, etymology, psychology" – can strive to

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apprehend "the exchange of opposites, the indwelling of the one in the other" as "phases of a dynamic unity." "Towards an Open Universe," he told Levertov, proposes "the concept of a poem as a lasting event contributing to the human reality we call language": not the poem as perceived reality but the poem as hermetic reality.[36]

The "wisdom" that Olson dismissed as "pretentious fictions" Duncan saw as *Fictive Certainties*, the title he gave his collection of essays, including "Towards an Open Universe" and "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife." For her part, Levertov called her first book of essays, including "Some Notes on Organic Form," *The Poet in the World*.

II

During the late 1960s the seemingly minor dissonances in the loving concord between Duncan and Levertov became an increasingly disruptive discord that finally ended their long friendship. The issue that forced them to face their differences came with their shared opposition to the Vietnam War and turned on the question of how poetry can and should address violence, how the imagination can and should engage politics. After initially trying to minimize their widening differences, they were too true to themselves to dissemble or evade. All the accumulated weight of their long trust in each other makes all the more painful and poignant the barrage of letters in late 1971, when they stood, toe to toe, and battled it out.

The sources of their disagreement were not so much political or even aesthetic as theological: the different religious orientations from family and childhood that informed their adult sensibilities. Born in Oakland in 1919, Duncan was adopted as an infant by theosophical parents, in fact was chosen for adoption astrologically, based on the date and time of his birth. He grew up (first in Oakland and then in Bakersfield) in a household and extended family steeped in a mix of occult traditions: alchemy and astrology, Rosicrucianism and the Kabbala, Mme. Blavatsky and Hermes Trismegistus. Though as an adult he took all symbolic systems not as matters of doctrine but rather as metaphors of the activity of consciousness, his consciousness was thoroughly imbued with the gnosticism at the heart of the various occult symbologies. Jess shared Duncan's hermetic and theosophical interests and painted Duncan's portrait as the "Enamourd Mage," seated at a desk fronted by hefty hermetic volumes with their titles fully legible. Thus Duncan wrote in a continuity and tradition of mages; as we heard him say, "the Secret Doctrine" that offers "the Gnosis of the modern world" makes the activity of imagination a kind of "magic" and

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the poem "an occult document."[37] The open-ended sequence that was the major labor of the last twenty-five years of his life is called "Passages": verbal passages mapping the maze of his heterodox imagination.

Levertov was born in Ilford, on the eastern periphery of London, in 1923, and she too traced her mystical inclinations, more orthodoxly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, to her parents and her education at home (she and her older sister Olga never went to school). Her father was a Hasidic Jew from Russia who converted to Christianity, married a Welsh woman, and emigrated to England, where he was ordained an Anglican priest and, in addition to ministering to a parish, became a widely published voice in Jewish-Christian dialogue between the two world wars. Levertov's Welsh ancestors numbered a two visionaries well known in their day. She was not a practicing Christian and described herself as a religious agnostic at the time she began her friendship with Duncan. However, the incarnational and sacramental character of the faith in which she was raised made her poems, certainly by the time of *Here and Now,* epiphanies of the everyday sacredness of the perceived world.

From the beginning, then, the poetic explorations of Duncan and Levertov proceeded in directions more divergent than they could for a long time fully recognize: the poem as hermetic gnosis, the poem as natural allegory. Historically, gnosticism is hermetic and platonist; radically dualistic in its conception of physical, moral, and spiritual life, it posits an irreconcilable opposition between spirit and matter, good and evil: "the War of Contending Powers," Duncan called it. In the various formulations of different hermetic cults, gnosis – a spiritual insight open only to a gifted elite of initiated individuals – reveals spirit as fallen into material bodies, trapped in mortal flesh and threatened constantly by physical and moral corruption, so that spirit must strive to hold itself untainted by physical existence until death releases it back into immortality. Duncan adapted the theosophy he learned at home to his own humanist purposes, eliding the agon of spirit into the agon of consciousness: "Consciousness is God, the occult tradition says. 'Consciousness is self,' Olson puts it." For Duncan, God, insofar as we can know him, is consciousness, and consciousness, insofar as we realize it, is godlike. As he put it to Levertov, "ποιειν [*poiein*] the process of Making is Creation itself, our individual awakening to creation we are involved in." The godlike consciousness realizes its own apotheosis by making the contentions of the material, temporal existence into "the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness." Already in 1953 Duncan had cited Plato and St. Augustine (who was himself steeped in Manicheism before

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his conversion to Christianity) to declare: "Soul is the body's dream of its continuity in eternity – a wraith of mind. Poetry is the very life of the soul: the body's discovery that it can dream. And perish into its own imagination."[38]

In contrast to gnosticism, the Judeo-Christian tradition proclaims not just a personal God but Emmanuel, God-with-us, engaged in material and social existence, immersed in human history, for Christians incarnate in the flesh and bone of Jesus. There has been and is a persistent strain of asceticism and gnosticism in Judaism and Christianity, absorbed from the neoplatonist philosophies and gnostic sects of the centuries just before and after the birth of Christ, but that inclination runs counter to the radical vision of God-with-us. Salvation is not redemption *from* the body but redemption *of* the body. God-with-us reconciled the dualism of matter and spirit, once for all but to be realized, generation by generation and person by person. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, therefore, redemption is not a privilege reserved for the initiated individual or elite but is the personal and public responsibility of the whole people in communion. During the stresses of the 1960s, Levertov did not belong to a religious community, Jewish or Christian. However, in rallying the poetic community to oppose the war and in joining the larger community of resisters, she found herself justifying her ethic of collective action by recourse to theological and moral assumptions rooted in her religious upbringing at home.

The letters and poems of the 1960s record the gradual and then sudden divergence between Duncan and Levertov. A letter of January 12, 1964 reflects how close the symbiosis between anima and animus still was. After chatting about a number of things, including poems they have written, Duncan breaks unexpectedly into a poem that names Levertov muse to the musings of his consciousness:[39]

I'd
been in the course of a letter, I am
in the course of a letter to a friend
who comes close in to my thought so that
the day is hers, my hand writing
in thought shakes in the currents, of air?
of an inner anticipation of? ghostly
exhilarations in the thought of her

....

You stand behind the where-I-am.
The deep tones and shadows I will call a woman.

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The quick high notes … you are a girl there too,
and I would play Orpheus for you again

The letter concludes with "I'm a little shaky with this having happened here" and signs off "with love still shaking a bit." By return mail Levertov recognized how special that moment was: "That's a beautiful poem. Thanks, for it & for the letter"; and in 1968 she wrote a longish poem called "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," that can be read on one level as a response to Duncan's playing Orpheus. Duncan's spontaneous poem became the title poem of *Bending the Bow* (1968) and it led, in the weeks immediately after the letter, to the first poems in the long series of "Passages" that would be the central undertaking of his poetry for the rest of his life. *Bending the Bow* contains the first thirty "Passages," written between 1964 and 1968.

"Passages" is a challenging series (rather than sequence) of poems, dense with literary, mythological, historical, and personal allusions, lines spaced out across the page to indicate the pauses and transitions and associative leaps in the poet's consciousness. The text requires and rewards the kind of sleuthing explication that readers have given Pound's *Cantos*, and indeed "Passages" and Olson's *Maximus Poems*, well under way when Duncan began "Passages," follow *The Cantos* in the evolution of the Modernist epic of consciousness from Romantic prototypes like *The Prelude* and *Leaves of Grass*.

The opening "Passages" establish the terms and tones of Duncan's undertaking. The epigraph for the whole series comes from Julian the Apostate's gnostic *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*, and the first poem, "Tribal Memories," transforms the archetypal woman/muse of "Bending the Bow" into Mnemosyne, mother of the muses, and the "World-Egg" into the matrix of the poet-offspring's consciousness: "enclosed, in a shell of murmurings, // rimed round, / sound-chamberd child." "At the Loom: Passages 2," dated "Feb. 4–11 1964" and citing *The Cantos*, invokes the image of Kirke at the loom, weaving her song into words. In her witch-woman's weaving the warp stands metaphorically for the "set strings of the music": the conventions of syntax and metrics, the historically accumulated denotations and connotations of words. If the "cords [chords] that bind" become too tight, they become "a warp of the will," constricting the free movement of the imagination. However, "my mind" as "shuttle" in Kirke's hands moves through the warp; its "weft of dream" in "the word-flow / the rivering web" gathers "the wool into its full cloth" so that the design in the poem's fabric reveals "[t]he secret! the secret! It's hid / in its showing forth."[40]

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By "Where It Appears: Passages 4," Duncan seeks complete release from "the warp of the will," into the boundless freedom of the open universe:

> I'd cut the warp
> to weave that web
>   in the air
>   and here
> let image perish in image,
>   leave writer and reader
>   up in the air
>   to draw
>   momentous
>   inconclusions ...

"Passages" becomes a venture into an undetermined and indeterminate "area of self-creation." The Enamourd Mage, seated in Jess's portrait behind his occult texts, floats his airy inconclusions to counter the "magi of the probable," who think that the art work is a reflecting "mirror" that "I hold in the palm of my hand," a circle that can define and "surround / what is boundless."[41] Duncan wants instead to be a mage of the improbable gnosis, whose inconclusive images, though "up in the air" and of the moment, are nonetheless "momentous" intimations of the numinous secret shadowed forth in the perishing images of material existence.

By July 1964, Levertov had received the first fifteen "Passages," and in a long letter, beginning "Chèr Robèrt," she voiced, amidst the admiring praise, several questions and two revealing criticisms. The last lines of "At the Loom" about the battle she found "tacked on" to "the loom poem," not growing out "of what precedes it but ... irrelevant to it"; and "Where It Appears," she had to admit, is just "obscure to me." What is at issue for her is clarity of focus in the organic integration of the poem. Duncan pushed back on these two objections. Her suggestion that the "tacked on" section be either cut or made into a separate poem would have merit, he tells her, "if the poem is thought of as an organic form ... But what I have in mind ... is to be free of that 'forge, loom, lyre' and work in the air." Indeed, "Where It Appears" is "obscure to you" precisely because it "states as a purpose what you wouldn't accept – that the poem, woven in air, is to be cut loose from its warp ... and that I propose 'momentous inconclusions' ..." His proposed purpose is not, like hers, to connect but, on the contrary, "to *disconnect.*"[42]

Levertov's objections, however, had more than a literary basis. During the mid-1960s, while the Mage, inspired by his anima, was seeking in "Passages" the "widest range for the play of the poem,"[43] the Poet in

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the World was finding her own poems moving oppositely into political engagement. Through her childhood and girlhood Levertov's parents had been staunch advocates for social justice and against anti-Semitism, and her sister Olga had remained a left-wing activist in England. By the mid-1960s the accelerating violence in Vietnam was drawing Levertov and her husband into nonviolent protest against the imperialist war driven by the same capitalist structures that made for racism, classism, and ecological devastation at home. "During the Eichmann Trial," Levertov's first political poem, stands out from the poems of celebratory wonder that surround it in *The Jacob's Ladder*, but *The Sorrow Dance* (1967), despite celebratory poems like "Psalm Concerning the Castle" and "A Vision," marks a distinctly darkening tone and deepening political awareness.

"A Lamentation" is an elegy for Olga Levertoff, who died in 1964 after a stormy life, often estranged from parents and younger sister – "Grief, have I denied thee? / Grief, I have denied thee" – and the "Olga Poems" that followed "A Lamentation" mourn her tragic life while acknowledging her unflagging fight for radical social change. In "A Note to Olga (1966)" Levertov associates her own turn to political action with her reconnection to Olga, as she imagines Olga behind her in a Stop-the-War march in Times Square, singing "We Shall Overcome" with her and the other protesters as they are arrested.[44] Duncan commended the Olga poems, but the concluding poems of *The Sorrow Dance*, a section titled "Life at War," contains the poems that would become an increasingly contested issue with Duncan through the last years of the decade.

In a letter of January 25, 1966, Levertov submitted the poem "Life at War" to Duncan with some anxiety as her first "absolutely direct anti-war poem (finished this very day, though 'brewed' & begun with false starts back in, oh, October I guess)." Here are the lines from the poem that would provoke the dispute:[45]

> We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,
> our lungs are pocked with it,
> the mucous membrane of our dreams
> coated with it, the imagination
> filmed over with the gray filth of it:
>
> the knowledge that humankind,
>
> delicate Man, whose flesh
> responds to a caress, whose eyes
> are flowers that perceive the stars,

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> whose music excels the music of birds,
> whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,
> whose understanding manifests designs
> fairer than the spider's most intricate web,
>
> still turns without surprise, with mere regret
> to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
> runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
> transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
> implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.
>
> We are the humans, men who can make;
> whose language imagines *mercy*,
> *lovingkindness*; we have believed one another
> mirrored forms of a God we felt as good –
>
> who do these acts, who convince ourselves
> it is necessary; these acts are done
> to our own flesh; burned humanflesh
> is smelling in Vietnam as I write.

Along with "Life at War," Levertov's letter included "A Vision," "a completely *dis*engaged poem about angels," and she nervously voiced uncertainty about the new turn in her poetry, perhaps in anticipation of his response: "I'm very unsure if the 'political' one is a good poem but it is even so a tremendous relief to have at least opened my mouth."

Duncan had recently sent "Earth's Winter Song," a "Xmas poem" that used the Annunciation and Nativity as ironic frame for his own outrage at the Vietnam War. In the next paragraph of her letter Levertov proceeds to state her "considerable reservations" about "Earth's Winter Song" on the very grounds that Duncan will later use to indict "Life At War": the inadequacy of diction and imagery for the emotional weight they are intended to carry, and the judgmental self-righteousness in personal denunciations like the following: "Wearing the unctuous mask of Johnson, / from his ass-hole emerging the hed [sic] of Humphrey, / he bellows and begins over Asia and America / the slaughter of the innocents and the reign of wrath." She could see that "exactly what I am saying about 'Earth's Winter Song' may be true of 'Life at War,' " and her uneasiness in making the critique, she tells him, is intensified by her sense of a widening rift between them.[46]

Her trepidation over challenging "[m]y Master, my Orpheus" only increased when he did not reply for weeks and then months, and in April she anxiously sent a letter that is a poem, acknowledging that their opposition to the war has created a crisis between them. The poem-letter ends:

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I send you therefore
as if on a seagull's wing
one word –

what word shall it be? –
'Love'? – I love you but
I love
          another, as you do.
Love I send, but I send it
in another word.
                              Longing?
                                             Poetry.

The irony was, as Levertov must have known, that it was precisely poetry that was the pressing issue between them. She was relieved when Duncan at last wrote to thank her for the "lovely" letter-poem and to call "A Vision" "one of your miraculously beautiful and realized poems." However, he made no immediate comment about either "Earth's Winter Song" or "Life at War" and instead discussed "Soldiers," one of a spate of antiwar "Passages," published as *Of the War: Passages 22–27* (1966). Only in 1970, after he had distanced himself from the war in his poetry and was condemning "Life at War" and others of Levertov's war poems, did he admit "how right you were about my 'Earth's Winter Song.' "[47]

Their roles, however, were soon reversed. With her rapidly deepening commitment to the protest movement, Levertov praised the Vietnam "Passages" and published "Up Rising" in the *Nation*, where she was at the time poetry editor. But for his part Duncan recoiled from her Christmas poem "Advent 1966" with "an agonizing sense of how the monstrosity of this nation's War is taking over your life." The Orpheus-master instructed her sternly that despite the war they must both "continue as constantly in our work … now more than ever" and not betray their vocations as visionary poets. Even as *Of the War* was being published, he attributed the vehemence of his outrage in part to his high blood pressure and warned her against being consumed and transformed by the violence she was protesting. Aware that his war poems are at least as violent and graphic in language and imagery as hers are, he set about sublimating the violence into a "larger context." *Of the War*, he told her, had to be read within the encompassing vision of "Passages," wherein a poem like "Up Rising" underwent a "sea change or alchemical phase towards rendering up its purely poetic identity, where the figures do not *refer* to contemporary history only but are happenings in the poem itself." He distinguished "Up Rising" from Levertov's "kind of witness" because "ultimately it belongs to the reality of that poem ["Passages"] and a vision of Man. And

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I do not answer for myself in my work but for Poetry."[48] He would keep the man and the poet in separate activities, faithfully wearing a black armband against the war but striving (not entirely successfully) to keep the war from overtaking the larger poetic vision.

Duncan went on to deconstruct Levertov's witness by questioning the genuineness of her engagement with the war. In August 1966, even before the admonition to Levertov cited above, he quoted to her the lines from "Life at War" about the "breaking open of breasts" and the "implosion of skinned penises" and, apparently without a sense of condescension, expressed concern that the strong emotion here arose not from her compassionate concern for the victims of war but from an unacknowledged neurotic tangle of repressed anger and resentment: 'The words in their lines are the clotted mass of some operation … having what root in you I wonder?" Her long response by return mail countered, with underlinings, that the poem came from "the extreme *strangeness* of men actually *planning* violence to each other" and argued that "my participation in the Peace Movement" helped her "to grasp with the imagination what does happen in war – so that even if one hasn't been there, in the flesh, one doesn't let the horror of war just be an *empty* word – all our words have to be filled up with, be backed by imaginative experience." She did allow herself to wonder whether "the horror *at* violence" might have some connection with "my own violent temper" or "my anxieties, my 'imagination of disaster,' " but added: "I'm not sure where such questions lead."[49]

Despite their efforts to avoid a showdown, lines of differentiation and opposition were being drawn. Duncan to Levertov: "the question of poetry is *not* whether one feels outrage at the war or feels whatever – other than the imperative of the poem. It's the force of word-work … that I miss." Levertov to Duncan:

> I stand fast by what has caused me to *feel*. And the range of response in you & me overlaps – & that is a large area – but beyond the area of overlap extends in quite different directions. Years ago that shamed & embarrassed me – but not now. You are more the Master, a Master poet in my world, not less, just because I feel that the only emulation of such a master is to be *more oneself.*

The declension from "the Master" to "a Master" to herself as "master" did not go unnoticed: "It does seem clear, Denny, that you are more an expressive poet than a formalist: the poem so often bears the burden of conveying the feel of something or the emotion aroused by something or a thought – giving rise to the poem instead of the poem giving rise to its

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own objects."[50] There was the breaking point, out in the clear: experience giving rise to the poem, the poem giving rise to itself.

Levertov's increasing involvement in speeches, marches, demonstrations, and in her husband's much-publicized trial with five others for conspiring against the military draft law slowed and tempered but did not stop their correspondence, and the dialogue between their differences carried over into the poems themselves. Just as reading "Claritas" with and against his "Answering" encapsulates where Levertov and Duncan stood in 1962, reading Duncan's "Santa Cruz Propositions" and "A Seventeenth Century Suite" with and against Levertov's book length notebook poem "Staying Alive" encapsulates where they stood by the late 1960s. "Staying Alive," written in pieces between 1968 and 1971 out of the same cultural and personal crisis as Lowell's *Notebook* and Rich's *Leaflets*, is unlike any other Levertov poem in its length and diffuseness. A mélange of fragments and short poems interspersed with prose, quotations, headlines, and newspaper excerpts, "Staying Alive," while following her involvement in protest and resistance, also bravely raises the very question that Duncan pressed home: whether her political activism was not sapping her creative energies and visionary wonder.

Duncan derided the refrain "Revolution or death" in Part I of "Staying Alive" as hollow propaganda and pointed out that the word "revolution" meant not change but turning in place ("an endless rolling of the wheel"). Responding in Part II, Levertov admitted the imprecision of the word but clarified her meaning: "A new life / isn't the old life in reverse, negative of the same photo. / But it's the only / word we have . . ." For her, a line from a Rilke notebook caught the moral and existential imperative behind her anxiety: *"Life that / wants to live. / / (Unlived life / of which one can die.)"*[51] The contention with Duncan impelled Levertov to return to Rilke, her first mentor before "I first came to America and began to read Williams, Pound, and Stevens." From the Modernists she had engaged formal issues of style and technique, but from Rilke she had learned at the outset the essentially moral "concept of the artist's task – a serious, indeed a lofty concept": "my first lesson from Rilke – *experience* what you live: to the artist, whatever is *felt through* is not without value, for it becomes part of the ground from which one grows." Rilke's "passion for 'inseeing'" proposed a "sense of aesthetic ethics" that ran counter to Duncan's hermetic aestheticism. By making "no distinction between meeting art and meeting life," Rilke "shows the poet a way to bridge the gap between the conduct of living and the conduct of art," and in that effort "the underlying necessity was to ask not others but *oneself* for confirmation."[52]

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In October 1968, Duncan saw with dismay a televised film clip of Levertov in a red dress speaking at a protest demonstration with what seemed to him unrestrained fury, and he associated her image with the passage from "Staying Alive" in which Levertov quotes folksinger Judy Collins's plea at an antiwar rally ("We must *not* be angry, we must L-O-O-O-V-E") and then questions it: "Judy understand: / there comes a time when only anger / is love." Duncan responded with Part III of "Santa Cruz Propositions" whose opening line "It is Denise I am thinking of – " unleashes a furious invocation of her as Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and destruction:[53]

> *SHE* appears, Kālī dancing, whirling her necklace of skulls,
> trampling the despoiling armies and the exploiters of natural resources
> under her feet. Revolution or Death!
> Wine! The wine of men's blood in the vat
> of the Woman's anger, whirling,
>
> ....
>
> Madame Outrage of the Central Committee
> forms a storm cloud around her where she is brooding.
>
> ....
>
> She has put on her dress of murderous red.
> She has put on her mini-skirt and the trampling begins.
> She has put on her make-up of the Mother of Hell,
>
> ....
>
> from the center of terror
> that is the still eye of the storm in her:
>
> *"There comes a time when only Anger is Love."*

The fury in these lines raises the question of just who was running out of control, but Duncan sent Levertov "Santa Cruz Propositions" in October 1970, merely with the bland notation that she comes into the text as Kali dancing. Her hurt and baffled response comes in Part IV of "Staying Alive": "And meanwhile Robert / sees me as Kali! No, / I am not Kali, I can't sustain for a day / that anger." Later she would explain to him that what he took as rage was really her anxious nervousness when she was told, as she was rushed on stage, that her longer prepared remarks had to be cut to "exactly 3 minutes." Yes, she had blurted out her message, but, she told him, if he had listened to what she actually said, he would have heard a message of nonviolent resistance to the carnage of war.[54]

These later remarks came in the extraordinary exchange of very long letters in October–November 1971, in which the old friends stood their

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ground and had it out at last. On the psychology of the poems, Duncan to Levertov: "I think the poems like 'Life at War,' 'What They Were Like,' 'Tenebrae,' and 'Enquiry' are not to be read properly in relation to Viet Nam … but in relation to the deep underlying consciousness of the woman as a victim in war with the Man." Levertov to Duncan: "You say my poems which talk about Viet Nam aren't at bottom about Viet Nam at all but about the sex war. That is unmitigated bullshit, Robert." On the didacticism of the poems as her evasion of their neurotic source in her psyche, Duncan to Levertov: "it is moralizing that sets in"; "it is the *poem* itself that is not listening, that has turned to the vanity that all moralizing is in order to evade the imminent content of the announced theme." Levertov to Duncan: "People in general *have* shared this belief, basically, in many times and places. A faith in man's potential, his capacity for goodness. Certainly in Christian times at least. The concept of the Incarnation is the concept of Man's redeemability, however fallen into corruption, for man was made in God's image. Even sceptics and atheists cannot help being culturally affected by that concept."[55]

The single sentence that epitomizes their differences is Duncan's flat declaration: "The poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it …" In the 1968 essay "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife" Duncan had made a similar assertion: "Hitler cannot be defeated; he must be acknowledged and understood." Behind these assertions lies the gnostic dualism that sees good and evil as the irreconcilable but constituent poles of temporal existence, so that "the War of Contending Powers" is the inescapable human condition. In Duncan's insistent caps to Levertov, "THERE HAS BEEN NO TIME IN HUMAN HISTORY THAT WAS NOT A TIME OF WAR." Since "the very nature of man" is thus at war with itself, the only transcendence possible is acknowledging the stain of evil, as he had done, in a hermetic poem visionary enough to imagine a cosmic harmony beyond or behind the irreconcilable clash of opposites. "[M]y sense in *Up Rising*," he would insist in the heat of argument, "was not that the war was or was not important to me, but how come it was of import to the poem. Nor was I concerned to attack the war in the poem, but to follow thru the vision of the war …"[56] Duncan inscribed my copy of *Of the War* with the gnostic injunction: "in the slaughter of men's hopes distil the divine potion that stirs sight of the hidden"; he inscribed my copy of *Bending the Bow* with the neoplatonist line: "In the War now I make a Celestial Cave."

His notion of conscience and moral responsibility was the anarchist injunction "to stand by the individual life." "[T]he righteous

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Conscience – what Freudians call The Super Ego" urges opposing evil and doing good, but "I draw back from commanding conscience as I wld avoid whatever tyranny of the will ..." Even Christ's "writing in the place of 'Thou shalt not kill' his 'Thou shalt love'" bound the "free immediate individual experience of choice" into a coercive morality which said that "no man is free until *all* be free; no man has life until *all* have life." For Duncan the only ethics were individualist, and the only politics anarchist: "I would evade the inner command, even as I would evade the social command." Such a position could hardly be more different from Levertov's conviction that "the concept of the Incarnation" means that "'We are members one of another.' I've always believed that even if it was St Paul, whom I dislike on many counts, who said it." Realizing that with these sharp exchanges they were only hurting each other, Levertov declared a "truce, in all courtesy and good faith," in which for a year and a half they would not discuss poetry.[57]

Despite the truce, Duncan could not let go of their wrangle. In March 1972, he sent Levertov "A Seventeenth Century Suite," pointing Levertov to two middle sections of the suite to signal their differences: "Sections 4 and 5 are drawn from your 'Advent 1966' poem – tho not from your poem ... but from your reference points: (a) Southwell's poem and (b) photographs of napalm victims." Levertov's "Advent 1966" recalled Robert Southwell's Christmas poem "The Burning Babe" to contrast Southwell's Christian vision of the birth and death of Jesus as redemptive with the unredeemable and senseless slaughter and incineration of Vietnamese children. Six years after the blow-up, Duncan responded to Levertov's poem by rewriting its message in his own version of "The Burning Babe." Duncan's Christ-child is "no more than an image in Poetry," transformed by "Imagination's alchemy" into "Art's epiphany of Art new born, / a Christ of Poetry, the burning spirit's show ..."[58]

What Levertov called their "love and co-respondence" as visionary poets had reached an unbridgeable "rupture."[59] Where Duncan was metaphysically platonist and gnostic, religiously polytheist, morally manichaean and individualist, politically anarchist, and linguistically self-reflexive, Levertov was metaphysically incarnationalist, religiously monotheist and Christian, morally communitarian, politically socialist, and linguistically referential. Their divergent conceptions of the imagination and of poetry were at base the divergence between a gnostic theology and an incarnational theology. From this point on, as Duncan's conceptual poetry revealed ever more unmistakably its hermetic character, Levertov's perceptual poetry revealed ever more unmistakably its sacramental character.

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In "Passages 36," part of "A Seventeenth Century Suite" dated December 16, 1971, Duncan wrote of "the end of an old friendship, / the admission of neglect rancoring, / mine of her, hers of what I am." Their friendship might still have survived on some different basis had Duncan not allowed James Mersmann to publish, in his book on poets and the Vietnam War, Duncan's vicious description of Levertov's war poems as her own sexual fantasies. In 1973, Duncan admitted to Levertov that "my adverse readings" of her war poems arose from "an inner disturbance with what the Jungians call the *Anima*," but that he hoped to "rearrive at what I feel to be a just reading" of her work. However, in the interview quoted in Mersmann's book the year before this conciliatory letter to Levertov, Duncan had said that the depiction of violence in a poem like "Life at War" with its "charged, bloody, sexual" imagery revealed "her own sadism, and masochism" so that the war acts only as "a magnet" for her own violence and "the poem is not a protest though she thinks she's protesting." Levertov told him flatly that she expected him to "apologize and perhaps print a retraction some place," but in the next letter he did not address her demand, merely reporting that "a little suite of poems has begun that are dedicated to you." Only in November 1978 did he send the completed poem "The Torn Cloth," which begins: "We reaving / –'re-weaving' I had meant / to write." The Freudian slip substituting "reaving" for "re-weaving" indicates his ambivalence in the effort to "weave the reaving / into the heart of my / wedding clothes," "into the fabric of intentions." She wrote back sadly that though she felt no "negative emotion," even anger "so long after," he'd "waited too long" to respond, "and so although I would have *liked* to feel … the relief and joy and deep satisfaction that I might once have felt, the fact is that I *did* not, and do not." She felt only "our friendship twice broken, deeply betrayed."[60]

Levertov would come to feel that "I was too stubborn … unChristianly stiffnecked" about his failure to apologize or retract, but "at the time I was unable to think that way." At a reading in 1984 Duncan prefaced "The Torn Cloth" with the admission that he was driven by some inner "daemon" to push their friendship to the breaking point.[61] Her response to "The Torn Cloth" would come in "To R. D., March 4, 1988," which records "an extraordinarily vivid dream" that she had the month after his death. Echoing his last poem to her, she tells him that although she had "put you away like a folded cloth," in the dream she is sitting in the Lady Chapel of a church when he takes the seat beside her:

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I put a welcoming hand
over yours, and your hand was warm.
I had no need
for a mentor, nor you to be one;
but I was once more
your chosen sister, and you
my chosen brother.
We heard strong harmonies rise and begin to fill
the arching stone,
sounds that had risen here through centuries.

She immediately sent the poem to Jess, and he "assured me that Robert's affection for me had remained intact."[62]

III

In 1984, the Poetry Society of America recognized the long and fruitful association between Duncan and Levertov by conferring on them jointly the Shelley Memorial Award. In her last letter to Duncan, Levertov wrote solicitously about the kidney failure that would take his life four years later, and added: "felicitations on the 1/2 a Shelley prize – I expect they told you I am getting the other 1/2!"[63] But the fatal break in the fall of 1971 marks the increasingly divergent directions of their later poems.

In Duncan's work, war as the condition of existence runs from the 1950 poem "An Essay at War" through *Of the War* to "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife." Language enacts the contention of order in disorder, of disorder toward order, and "God" is the capacity in the human consciousness to imagine order in disorder, to write the poem toward Poetry. "The word 'God' becomes necessary where there is an intense feeling of presence and oneness in opposites, an awe that cannot let go of contradictory elements, of an otherness in which I am more truly 'I.' " Reading Emerson's Transcendentalist "Self-Reliance" in the "Hermetic and Rosicrucian tradition," Duncan marvels at "how Emersonian my spirit is," but at the same time his "Calvinist predisposition" makes him "read my Emerson dark." Duncan rejects the metaphysics of the ancient Gnostics in which the material word is a "grand trap" from which the human spirit must be sublimated into Spirit and instead grounds his gnosticism in the material world with God as "the largest consciousness we have of our 'I' in our belonging to the process of the Cosmos." In effect, God is "the labor of Spirit in every being and thing towards Its Self-realization."[64]

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Poems, then, are the "ground work" in the divinization of the visionary consciousness, and the paradoxical culmination of the work is the sublimation of consciousness into the language of the poem: "not myself, or *the* Self, but yet another dimension, the work Itself, the poem Itself, where Poetry Itself appeard." The poet expires into the poem, into Poetry itself: "The poem, not the poet, seeks to be immortal."[65] In 1968, the year not only of "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife" but also of the publication of *Bending the Bow*, Duncan declared his intention to free his poetry from the encumbering expectations of readers, critics, and publishers so that it might evolve into its largest consciousness of the process of the Cosmos, and in that pursuit he would publish no collection of poems for at least fifteen years. *Ground Work*: *Before the War* was published in 1984, fifteen years after *Bending the Bow*, and *Ground Work: In the Dark* in 1988, the year of his death. *Before the War* suggests the poems' aspiration toward a state of consciousness antecedent to and beyond the contentions of mortal existence, and *In the Dark* acknowledges that the progression toward the light is, paradoxically, a progression toward death.

So the enamoured Mage withdrew to his desk and books, and the poems draw on and proceed from favorite sources: neoplatonist philosophers and theosophists, Dante and the seventeenth-century metaphysicals, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Pound and H.D. and Stevens. There continue to be marvelous short, individual poems like "Achilles' Song" and "Bring It Up from the Dark," "Styx" and "The Sentinels." But Duncan's psychological and imaginative withdrawal in the 1970s and 1980s increasingly made for long sequences ("Dante Etudes" is forty pages long), at the same time that the ongoing series of "Passages" and "The Structure of Rime" continued through *Ground Work*.

Citing Emerson's "Self-Reliance," Duncan described "Passages" as "a work in which I seek to lose myself in the hearing of the voice of the work itself, a work not of personality or oneself but of structures and passages."[66] What Duncan called "structures" were not fixed boundaries but labyrinths of branching and intersecting openings. As a result, the "Passages" become more Poundian as they unfold across the page, with the elusive and allusive openness of the later *Cantos.* Duncan even stopped numbering the "Passages" after 36, in order to avoid any implication of sequentiality and teleological order. He was distressed that Olson, like Pound in *The Cantos*, thought of his *Maximus Poems* as moving to a conclusion that would define its direction and design. Stevens too shared that Modernist aspiration and thought of calling his collected poems "The Whole of Harmonium." But Duncan's notion of a "Grand Collage"

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was more indeterminate and shifting, less like a collage and (as he told Levertov early on) more like a mobile, the poems circulating in the gyre of "Poetry Itself."

"Passages 31: The Concert" turns on the separateness and connectedness of all things in the cosmos, and the suspended phrases and irregular lines drift and sift down the page, turning on each other. Here is the opening:[67]

> Out of the sun and the dispersing stars
>   go forth the elemental sparks,
>   outpouring vitalities,
> stir in the *Salitter* of the earth
>   a *living* Spirit,
> and the stars, mothers of light, remain,
>   having each
> its own "organic decorum, the complete
> loyalty of a work of art to a shaping
>   principle
>   within itself" –
>
>   that lonely spirit
>
> having in its derivation likewise
> the quality of the stars and yet
> a severd *distinct* thing . . .

"Out" and "in," the sun and stars disperse their light; the "*living* Spirit" illuminates the "lonely spirit" of each "severd *distinct* thing." And at the end of "The Concert" the rhythm of expansion completes itself as the "I" of the poem – "the isolated satyr each man is, / severd distinct thing" – explodes into the farthest reaches of the open universe:

>   I saw
>
> willingly the strain of my heart break
>   and pour its blood thundering at the life-locks
>
> to release   full   my man's share of the stars'
>
>   majesty   thwarted.

In Michael Palmer's introduction to the reissuing of both segments of *Ground Work* in a single volume, he writes of Duncan's quest for "an 'open form' sufficiently responsive to what is, essentially, an ungovernable vision." As a result, Palmer goes on to say, "[p]oetic form is stretched almost to the point of dissolution. The poem-as-object yields to the exigencies of process."[68] But, for Duncan, the dissolution of form into formlessness was

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indistinguishable from the coalescence of formlessness toward form. That reciprocity is what "The Concert" is celebrating. It is no accident that the poem that first drew Duncan to Levertov was "The Shifting," and, as time went on, he insisted more and more that the gaps between and juxtapositions of words, the orchestrated placement of phrases and images within the rhythmic play of the line, the fine and accurate timing in the length and turning of the lines adumbrate the unique form to which the disparate elements aspire and move, as the poem aspires and moves to "Poetry Itself." As Duncan read poems to audiences, he marked and measured the timing and rhythm with his hand, like the conductor of a private orchestra playing in public, like a mage spelling out his vatic lines.

Here, for example, are lines from one of the final unnumbered Passages called "Et," that begins in French and ends:[69]

> the Cave the Birds the Sources the Trees
> ancestral leavings seek first of all
> the Springs in these passages back of Pound's cantos
> my keys.
> The Moon is full
> whose sheath of reflections flows out over the shining strand below us
> *ici* franchissons ces parages
> the silken light the silver fountain therein
> the dark metal
> *mobiles, obscurs, capricieux, changeants . . .*

The French "Et" – "And" – and the French phrases suggest a movement beyond the known and familiar words into a dimension of speech that is other but expressible. Once again, the words cast a spell, spell out the runic invocation. The wide-open lines do not quite vanish; the white spaces suspend the images and phrases in the irregular but steady flow that moves through the sinuous passages of time and measure. Here, from the cave above the shining strand, through the circulations of the obscure, capricious, changing mobile of the poem, let "us" leap over these watery passages to the sources of the flow. Let us pass through the silken light of the silver fountain to the dark metal keys that unlock the gnostic riddle; here – "*ici*" – we are at last: before the war and in the light of the dark.

As Duncan's poems became more gnostic, Levertov's became more incarnational. Her poetic development is often seen as falling into three phases: the earlier lyrics of visionary wonder, the political poems of the 1960s and 1970s, and the religious poems of her last decades, but she saw in these phases no discontinuity but a continuity. She often spoke of her life as a pilgrimage guided by the "acknowledgement, and celebration,

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of mystery," and the convulsions of postwar politics impelled her to see that the pilgrimage moved through the social world, that pilgrims were "members one of another." "Being the child of a socially conscious family," she said, "conscience and circumstances virtually forced me into the politics of the anti-war movement of the 1960s and on into the broader anti-nuclear, environmental, and social justice concerns which evolved from it …" Moreover, her association in the cause of peace and justice with Catholics like Daniel Berrigan, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day served to confirm her realization that her sense of the sacramental mystery of daily experience and her commitment to a community of peace and love were both rooted in Judeo-Christian values, and specifically in the incarnational theology that she had absorbed from her childhood. To her mind, then, the poems traced a pilgrimage at once more expansive yet more centered and grounded: a "mandala or wheel," as Duncan said, in contrast to his "mobile," a "form that maintains a disequilibrium."[70]

"A Poet's View," written in 1984, traces the course of Levertov's religious sensibility. From the beginning she had felt that "[t]he concept of 'inspiration' presupposes a power that enters the individual and is not a personal attribute," but more recently that power "began to be defined for me as God, and further, as God revealed in the Incarnation." Thus "[i]n the matter of religion … I have moved in the last few years from a regretful skepticism which sought relief in some measure of pantheism (while it acknowledged both the ethical and emotional influence of my Jewish-Christian roots and early education) to a position of Christian belief." When she had undertaken to write "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus," first published as a chapbook in 1981, she thought of the sequence as adopting the traditional parts of the liturgy for "an agnostic Mass" for doubting Thomas. However, "a few months later, when I arrived at the Agnus Dei, I discovered myself to be in a different relation to the material and to the liturgical form from that in which I had begun. The experience of writing the poem – that long swim through waters of unknown depth – had been also a conversion process, if you will."[71]

Levertov's copious notebooks and diaries, in addition to the poems and essays, examine the long pilgrimage that would bring her in the fall of 1990 to becoming a Roman Catholic. The inner journey was matched by a move from the East Coast – with residences in New York, Boston, and Cambridge, summers in Maine, and teaching positions at various colleges and universities – to the West Coast, teaching at Stanford part of the year and living in Seattle, where she died of lymphoma in December 1997. In "A Poet's View," however, she sees herself as never finally settled, always

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searching out: "[t]hough I own a house and have steady work, I am by nature, heritage, and as an artist, forever a stranger and a pilgrim."[72]

"Agnostic" can cover a range of skeptical positions, but the invocations in the early sections of "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" move from "O deep, remote unknown" to "Thou / unknown I know" and "the known / Unknown unknowable." The turning point comes at the end of the "Benedictus": "The word / chose to become / flesh. In the blur of flesh / we bow, baffled." And the concluding "Agnus Dei" completes the "conversion process" by pondering the double paradox of God incarnate in our mortal bodies and our bloody history: omnipotence vulnerable to the fallible human will, yet thereby the fallible human will empowered to choose to incorporate the divine spirit:[73]

Let's try
if something human still
can shield you,
spark
of remote light.

Levertov's later poetry constellates around that paradox. In *A Door in the Hive* (1989), she wrote another poem for Thomas as the patron saint of self-questioning believers who need to verify vision in the physical world, to see and touch the divine mysteries. So there are poem-meditations on the crucial events in Jesus' life – the annunciation, nativity, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension. Levertov would study the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius with a Jesuit spiritual director in Seattle in the mid-1990s, but she had already found for herself the Ignatian practice of personalizing and vitalizing the Gospel moments by imagining them in graphic physical and sensory detail. And, since for her the Incarnation is not an isolated historical moment but an indwelling presence, sequences like "Of God and of the Gods" and "Lake Mountain Moon" seek God's continuing immanence in the natural and the human world.

"The Many Mansions," the poem that immediately follows the "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" and closes *Candles in Babylon*, is explicit about her vocation:[74]

What I must not forget
is the knowledge that vision gave me

....

This is what, remembering,
I must try, telling myself again,

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to tell you. For that the vision
was given to me: to know and share …

The poems of the 1980s and 1990s contain some of the most quietly beautiful and moving religious poems in modern letters. Levertov had described inspiration in "Some Notes on Organic Form" in its root sense of "breathing in," and in "A Poet's View" as "a power that enters in the individual." But what embodies inspiration in moving and effective poems is craftsmanship: the economy of form, clarity of voice, precision of diction and image, rhythmic control of the line that she learned in the 1940s.

Here, for example, is a trio of poems, written separately in different forms but all imaging air or wind as the spirit animating material life. "Passage" is the last poem in the sequence "Of God and of the Gods." There is no reason to suppose that Levertov had Duncan's "Passages" explicitly in mind, but her poem offers a telling contrast to Duncan's. The four sets of tercets quietly develop the multiple sense of the Latin "spiritus" as "spirit" and "wind" and "breath" and project the Hebrew *ruach* – God's breath blowing over the primordial waters in Genesis – into the landscape "here and now."[75]

The spirit that walked upon the face of the waters
walks the meadow of long grass;
green shines to silver where the spirit passes.

Wind from the compass points, sun at meridian,
these are the forms the spirit enters,
breath, *ruach*, light that is witness and by which we witness.

The grasses numberless, bowing and rising, silently
cry hosanna as the spirit
moves them and moves burnishing

over and over upon mountain pastures
a day of spring, a needle's eye
space and time are passing through like a swathe of silk.

The longish (for Levertov) lines follow the sweep of spirit/breath/wind, and the enjambments keep it moving through the verses. At the same time, the repetition of sound and syllable sustains the continuity of movement while also giving it momentary material instantiation. The alliteration of initial "w"s ("walked," "waters," "walks," "wind") thickens in the middle line to give the "breath, *ruach*, light" palpable heft and presence in its reciprocal agency as both its own "witness" and that "by which we witness." The first syllable of the title-word "Passage" blows through the

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poem – "grass," "passes," "compass," "grasses," "pastures" – to the last line "passing"; and the "s" sounds in every line build to the exquisitely sibilant revelation of "space and time … passing through [the spring day] like a swathe of silk." The poem itself becomes "the needle's eye" through which we see the vision of that spring day passing.

"The Avowal," written in homage to the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet George Herbert, adopts Herbert's device of centering the text on the page, so that the verses seem to spin (very differently from Duncan's) on a stabilizing pivot:[76]

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

The effortless simplicity of the language in its floating circulations gathers to a concluding consonance in the alliteration of the closing lines ("freefall," "float"; "knowing no") closed by the single rhyme ("embrace," "grace").

In *Sands of the Well*, the last volume that Levertov put together before her death, the poem "In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being" takes its title from Paul's sermon on the Acropolis (*The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 17), in which he tells the Athenians that it is God who has given us life and breath. Levertov's poem insists that "breath of God" is no metaphor or figure of speech but fact: "God / the air enveloping the whole / globe of being" so that "[i]t's we who breathe, in, out, in, the sacred," "we inhale, exhale, inhale, / encompassed, encompassed."[77] In, out, in: here, in contrast to Duncan's isolated and severed individual exploding into the open universe, it's the rhythm of inspiration and incarnation.

"On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus," near the end of *Sands of the Well*, identifies Levertov with the "literalists of the imagination." The often-cited phrase comes from Marianne Moore's "Poetry," but the poet whom Levertov has more expressly in mind, both technically and thematically, is Williams, who taught her, perhaps more than anyone, how to find her own voice. The poem is written in the variable foot that Williams developed in his own late work: tercets with lines of varying length (the

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variable feet) spaced by indentation across and down the page. Moreover, her rejection of abstract concepts that are "not / grounded in dust, grit, / heavy / carnal clay" adapts Williams's famous dictum "no ideas but in things" to her Didymus incarnationalism. Resurrection is, for her, no "internal power" of renewal, but "a matter of flesh," a verifiable fact:[78]

miracles (ultimate need, bread
of life) are miracles just because
people so tuned
to the humdrum laws:
gravity, mortality –
can't open
to symbol's power
unless convinced of its ground,
its roots
in bone and blood.
We must feel
the pulse in the wound
to believe
that 'with God
all things
are possible,'
taste
bread at Emmaus
that warm hands
broke and blessed.

As in Williams's triadic poems, the openness of the variable feet allow Levertov a prosy discursiveness that suddenly coalesces in the final dramatic image that melds two Resurrection moments: Thomas knowing the risen Christ by touching his wounds, and the two disciples at Emmaus recognizing him in the breaking of the bread.

Levertov wrote an essay on "The Ideas in the Things" (1983) and another "On Williams' Triadic Line" (1984), and this poem brought her full circle back to Williams, as the later "Passages" brought Duncan back to Pound. Their late work marks the end-points of the divergent courses that Duncan and Levertov took through years of "co-respondence."

IV

In 1959, Levertov wrote: "I think of Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley as the chief poets among my contemporaries."[79] Within the Black Mountain poetics of composition by field they represented for her the distinct but

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intersecting influences of Pound and Williams. Williams thought of Creeley and Levertov as the two poets of the next generation who most successfully carried forward his notions of diction, line, and form, and Creeley was important for Levertov in the late 1940s and early 1950s. But her empathy with Duncan ran deeper because they shared a Romantic conception of the imagination as a visionary faculty; both saw no disjunction between Romanticism and Modernism and sought, in Duncan's words, "a style and temperament in which the Romantic spirit is revived" within a Modernist aesthetic.[80] Nonetheless, as we have seen, their very different theological orientations made finally not only for a different politics but a different poetics – and specifically for different notions of the correlation of language and meaning.

In "A Further Definition" Levertov posited three types of poetry: conventional poems impose "pre-existing, re-usable metric molds" to contain and form experience; free verse accepts and reproduces the "formlessness" of experience; organic poems, with "the utmost *attentiveness*," discover and express the "immanence of form" that is "peculiar to" and "inherent in content." That schema had already been formulated in a lecture that Levertov had given at Wabash College in 1962 with the Emersonian title "Ask the fact for the form." Duncan admired the "clarity" of the lecture but added as a fourth category " 'linguistic' poetry," in which language itself constitutes the experience of the poem and its autotelic content: "the linguistic follows emotions and images that appear in the language itself as a third 'world'; true to what is happening in the syntax as another man might be true to what he sees or feels." At first Duncan distinguished his poetry from hers – " 'linguistic' poetry – and I think of my own as linguistic – is different from organic" – but almost immediately he corrected himself: "I am organic as well as linguistic." Her response was to accept linguistic poetry as a category that "I'd dimly felt I'd left out of that lecture," and acknowledged that much "in your work" – for example, "puns & multiple meanings" – "didn't really fit in the scheme of things I'd posited there." Consequently, when she revised the lecture into "Some Notes on Organic Form," she added to her schema "the poetry of linguistic impulse," though she preferred to see it as "perhaps a variety of organic poetry": "It seems to me that the absorption in language itself, the awareness of the world of multiple meaning revealed in sound, word, syntax, and the entering into this world in the poem, is as much an experience or constellation of perceptions as the instress of non-verbal sensuous and psychic events."[81]

In fact, however, Levertov was always uneasy about language as primary or originary in the creative process. Painstaking about craft though she

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was, she saw language as an instrumental means, secondary to inspiration; the poet "is *brought to speech*" by a generating experience. Consequently, in a single sentence paragraph immediately after admitting "the poetry of linguistic impulse," she adds this specification: "Form is never more than a *revelation* of content." The italics on "*revelation*" call attention to the fact that she is revising the fundamental dictum of Black Mountain poetics, blazoned in capital letters in "Projective Verse": "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." Levertov said that at the Vancouver Poetry Festival of August 1963 (the single occasion in which all four of the principal Black Mountain poets participated), she proposed her revised dictum to Creeley, "the originator of this now famous formula," and "he agreed." She does not elaborate on the terms of Creeley's understanding of the formula, but hers are clear.[82]

If form as an extension of content meant that content informed form and made it organic to the experience, she would agree, for "thought and feeling remain unexpressed until they become Word, become Flesh (i.e., there is no *prior paraphrase*)."[83] However, if the formula were construed to mean that content was only an extension of form, then language makes meaning and constitutes the "third world" of Duncan's linguistic poetry. Her sense of form as revelation of content stuck by Emerson's principle: "Ask the fact for the form." In their epistolary showdown, Duncan wrote of "form as the direct vehicle and medium of content. Which means and still means for me that we do not say something by means of the poem but the poem is itself the immediacy of saying – it has its own meaning." To which Levertov shot back:

> To me it *does* mean that "one says something by means of the poem" – but not in the sense of "using" (exploiting) the poem: rather that the writer only fully experiences his "content" (that which he is impelled to say by means of the poem) through the process of writing it … Which is to say that the poem reveals the content, which is apprehended only dimly (in varying degrees) till that revelation takes place. If it (the poem) "has its own meaning," it is only that the revelation is not only the realization, concretization, clarification, affirmation, of what one knows one knows but also of what one didn't know one knew. I do not believe, as you seem to, in the *contradictory* (& autonomous) "meaning" of the poem, and I think your insistence on that leads you wildly astray often …

Citing again Emerson on the form of the fact as well as his statement that "it is not metres but a metre-making argument that makes a poem," she reiterates, this time with her own caps replacing the italics: "Form is never more than a REVELATION (not extension) of content."[84]

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The fundamental issue here is whether language creates meaning or expresses meaning, whether the poem is a confabulated, autotelic construct or a verbal inscape into objective reality. The debate runs through the history of American poetry, formulated in each age in different terms and emphases: for the Puritans, the issue was the distinction between types and tropes; for the Romantics, the distinction between Imagination and fancy; for the Modernist poets, the distinction between Imagism and Symbolism. In an early notebook Duncan saw in Stevens the accommodation of "the Romantic spirit" to a Modernist sensibility and craftsmanship; he was drawn to Stevens's identification of God with the Imagination in its ability to create in the poem a *mundo* or "third world" alternative to the contradictory, conflicted world we live in. Levertov agreed with Stevens and Duncan that "Imagination is the chief of human faculties," but made this distinction: "Where Wallace Stevens says, 'God and the imagination are one,' I would say that the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion, and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God."[85]

Duncan was correct in judging that he could be organic as well as linguistic, but his linguistic impulse led him to speak, even early on, of "the privacy of my craft," "a happening in language" within the hermetic consciousness so that "the truth does not lie outside the art." In the late essay, "The Self in Postmodern Poetry," he seems to associate himself with the emergent Postmodernist deconstruction of self and language: "the multiphasic proposition of voice in my poetry"; "impersonations, personifications, transpersonations, and depersonations"; "the play of 'I'," the "play of meanings." "Back of the 'Self,' which was but a rime," is the "Elf" lost in "the workings of language." Associating himself with Freud as a "gnostic" in "his profound sense of the nature and operation of language," Duncan notes as one of the "underlying currents" of his work "the weaving of a figure unweaving, an art of unsaying what it says, of saying what it would not say." It is this interest in the fluidity of pronouns, the slippage of signification, the multiplicity of perspectives that in the 1950s drew Duncan to Stein and in the 1970s drew the emerging Language poets, who saw Stein as a forebear of their Postmodernist poetics, to Duncan.[86]

"Most of Gertrude Stein bores me," Levertov told Duncan, and, not surprisingly, her sense of poetic language excluded Language poetry: "the arrogantly self-named 'Language' (or L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E) poets" represent "sterile and elitist manifestations of creative bankruptcy," "rehashed Gertrude Stein veneered with 70's semantics."[87] What's more, in the end, Duncan's own Neoromantic adherences trumped his Postmodernist

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inclinations. In the first paragraph of "The Self in Postmodern Poetry" he explicitly disavows the label: " 'postmodern' is a term used, I understand, to discuss even my work, but it is not a term of my own proposition." Creeley reported that when he asked Duncan what he thought about the Language poets, "he said, 'I can't – I'm moved by this or that person, but I can't finally buy it. I can't accept it, because they have no story.' Well, he didn't actually say all that. He just said, 'They have no story.' And I knew what he meant." Duncan was gnostic but not agnostic: "our belonging to the process of the Cosmos" meant that "[t]his music of man's speech … has its verity in the music of the inner structure of Nature." In a 1983 sermon published as "Crisis of Spirit in the Word," he reaffirmed the power of the word to tell a story against the very poststructuralist semioticians and semanticists whom Levertov deplored:[88]

> I have none of the trouble that semiotics seem to have of how could a word refer to something. No word refers. Every word is the presence of. Tree is the very presence of the tree, and I have no way of being in the presence of the word alone or in my will that I saw a tree, but in this communion, this communication in which the revelation flows through and through.

These sentences could have been written by Levertov.

In their "co-respondence" and their differences, therefore, Levertov and Duncan stand at the center and turning point of postwar American poetics. The dialogue that runs through their poems, essays, and letters rehearses the interplay between the two aspects of the Romantic imagination, turning its visionary powers out toward the world or in toward its own convolutions. Moreover, their accommodation of the Romantic imagination to the Modernist formalism of Pound and Williams comes just at the point when postwar disillusionment and Cold War anxiety were deconstructing the claims of the Romantic imagination to vision and of Modernist formalism to aesthetic coherence. The poetic poles of the next generation were, on the one hand, the modest, tempered, ecological Neoromanticism of poets like Robert Hass in Marin County and Mary Oliver on Cape Cod and, on the other, the combative, highly theorized Postmodernism of the Language poets on both coasts.

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