A Duncan Etude: Dante and Responsibility

This piece is 5,600 words or about 13 printed pages long.

**Etude:**

— A “short piece whose principal aim is the development or exploitation of a particular aspect of performing technique” or “a piece exploring a specific aspect of the composer’s craft” (*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*).

— A “composition intended as a basis for the improvement of the performer’s technique,” often “restricted to the exploitation of one kind of passage” (*Oxford Dictionary of Music*).

I will begin with something completely utopian. For the poet, language is the commons: we all have equal rights to enter there — permission to return to the common source — so long as we maintain our responsibilities — responsibilities which, as Robert Duncan was wont to remind, are the exercise of the ability to respond. This essay is a first sketch of what I want to call the poetics of response. If we are to enter the commons of language — whether as critics or poets — we need to pay attention to response-abilities and thus to the poetics of response. But this essay is also an attempt to get at the politics of Duncan’s poetic form. Obviously, Duncan was a blatantly political poet, but the exact nature of his poetic politics, and the nature of some of his later political moves, has troubled some readers. Apparently anarchist and clearly opposed to the Vietnam war in the late 1960s, Duncan nevertheless turned against Denise Levertov over the very issue of the relationship between poetry and political protest. Then, in the early 1970s, Duncan turned to Dante’s overtly monarchist political writings as a poetic source. Whatever complexities governed these seemingly wilful changes — and they are not, ultimately, my focus here — what did not change was the politics of his poetic form, which continued to see language as an anarchist commons and the poet as the servant of a common project.

1.

Implicit in Duncan's *HD Book* is an argument concerning the kind of criticism he favours, and of which *The HD Book* is itself the embodiment. First and foremost this is decidedly not a form of New Critical disinterested criticism: “I am not a disinterested scholar,” Duncan writes, “...in these terms [of H.D.’s poetry] my deepest responsibilities in work have been conceived” (Preface 3). His book is both “a tribute and a study” (HD Book 1:2, 27), “a book of continuations not conclusions” (2:7, 53). “To undertake this study I must go against the grain of [the] values and rationalities” of academic criticism, seeing his work as having a place amongst like-minded projects such as Jean Cocteau’s *Call to Order*, H.D.’s “The Guest” (from *By Avon River*), and Louis Zukofsky’s *Bottom: on Shakespeare*, “for these are concerned with the inner nature and process of poetry itself” (2:7, 60). As even a cursory glance at some of these texts would soon demonstrate, the kind of criticism Duncan has in mind would, as Zukofsky has suggested, produce a prose with the same “direction” as the poetry it reads, as it arises “from the same source” (Zukofsky 14). It is a criticism of “continuations,” not “conclusions,” of extensions rather than reductions of the work, a poetics of criticism which I will argue finds its clearest definition in Duncan’s key concept of “responsibility” (“my deepest responsibilities in work”).

Duncan offers one definition of responsibility in the poem “The Law I Love is Major Mover”: “Responsibility is to keep / the ability to respond.” If both poetry and critical prose are to have the same “source” and “direction,” for Duncan they must both be based in response: a felt and interested interchange with an initial textual source to whose “call” the later poem “responds.” Furthermore, as a “keeping” of the “ability to respond,” Duncan’s sense of poetic and critical responsibility implies the kind of *honoring* of skills indicated by the term “etude”: one “keeps” the “ability to respond” by practicing it. He does so in *The H.D. Book*, noting “Thought here not expository but experimental, trying the materials” and “allowing for sketches of thought” (HD Book 2: 4, 54), as he does again in his “Dante Etudes” where he also works with the notion of a “sketch book” (Ground 94). In this essay I will explore Duncan’s response-abilities in both his prose and poetry, seeking definitions of responsibility first in the poetic-prose of *The H.D. Book*, and then in the scholarly poetics of his “Dante Etudes.”

2.

In a central passage from *The H.D. Book*, Duncan manages to condense many of his “study’s” concerns into a brief paragraph that highlights just how “interested” his text is:

For I am not a literary scholar nor an historian, not a psychologist, a professor of comparative religions or an occultist. I am a student of, I am searching out, a poetics. There are times when my primary work here — my initiation of self as poet in the ground of the poet H.D. . . . has given way to literary persuasions and arguments, as if I might plead the cause of my life experience before the authorities at Nicæa and have my way, no longer heretical, taken over by those good bishops who control appointments and advancements as established dogma, a place won for H.D. in the orthodox taste and opinion of literary conventions [sic]. (2: 4, 55)

Duncan is here attempting to define his own process in the writing of his *H.D. Book*, and in doing so he again outlines the sort of criticism he sees as appropriate for the poet. Despite the disclaimer, his is a book that involves literary scholarship and history, psychology, religion and the occult, although its author claims no authoritative position in these respective fields. Indeed, he makes much of his lack of credentials, seeing instead a subversive kind of “authority” in being a “heretical” trespasser, a poet whose “discipline” is the un- and cross-disciplined liminality of poetics. The book is, therefore, declaring itself to be, first and foremost, primary rather than secondary, concerned with initiation and self-fashioning — with, more or less, autobiography — rather than the criticism of another poet’s work. Its secondary, “critical” aims are...
Robert Berthoff refers to Duncan’s creation of “a startling literary form in [The H.D. Book] that is a near twin to Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria.” Berthoff does not pursue the comparison, but it is worth elaborating. Concerning autobiography, Duncan, like Coleridge, could claim that “the least of what I have written concerns myself personally” (Coleridge 157). Concerning his text’s other aims, again Duncan could easily join Coleridge in claiming the task of ascertaining “the real poetic character of the poet” whose influence most clearly impacted his current objectives (157). Furthermore, The H.D. Book is open to many of the same criticisms levelled at Coleridge’s text. Catherine Miles Wallace, for instance, notes in The Design of Biographia Literaria that “there is ample evidence that Biographia Literaria is a fragmentated disaster whose difficulties can neither be resolved nor understood,” and cites Carlyle’s famous criticism that just as Coleridge is getting “under way” he is “turned aside by the glance of some radiant new game on this hand or that, into new courses; and ever into new; and before long into all the Universe” (Wallace 1-2). Sheila Kearns also mentions the Biographia’s “numerous ‘errancies’” in Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Romantic Autobiography, commenting on the critical reaction of “embarrassment, apology, or rejection” when it comes to making the claim that this work is an autobiography or even, in some sense of the word, a book” (Kearns 108). For Kearns, Coleridge’s is a “decentered text,” an assemblage of “marginalia” and readings of other texts; nevertheless, Kearns argues for the necessity of this structure as autobiography “is, always, ... a panoptic toward itself: a preliminary to and lesson in, for both the writer and the reader, the art or method of producing itself” (109). An autobiography is an “stude,” an “exploitation of one kind of passage” which inevitably opens out onto many other divergent passages as it progresses. Kearns writes of the Biographia that the desire to prove or disprove the coherence of the work as an autobiography prompts critics to overlook many aspects of the work that are integral components of its status as autobiography. The question of coherence leads us in the wrong direction because it is the disruptions and discontinuities of the narrative that constitute its most prominent autobiographical features. One of the important insights that the apparently haphazard manner of the Biographia’s composition can offer us is an understanding of how the work, as autobiography, is always about the process of its own composition.... By its very nature, autobiography must attempt to give an account of a life that is not yet completed and for which the author cannot, therefore, be fully accountable .... [T]hus the most proper and “complete” story that an autobiography tells is the story of its own composition (109-10).

To the extent that Duncan’s H.D. Book is autobiography, then, it too tells the story of its own composition above all other stories. That story is disruptive and discontinuous because it is constantly twisting back upon itself to view “the subject writing the self in and through a reading of the discourse of the self” (20) — Duncan’s process of “initiation.” Duncan, as Charles Olson writes of Herman Melville, is an author who “read to write” (Olson 39) — and Kearns reveals that this is true of Coleridge as well, so that both Duncan’s and Coleridge’s books are “literary biographies,” stories not of selves but of readings, the gleanings not of authorship but readership — as Kearns notes, “Identity is exegesis. Identity is reading” (20). In this way Duncan’s two main objectives in The H.D. Book — to write a “study” of H.D. and the tell the story of his own poetic “initiation” — come together and explain the text’s often confusing structural anomalies.

3.

After my own lengthy digression I must return to the question of responsibility. As a reader’s as much as a writer’s autobiography, Duncan’s H.D. Book sees self/in intimate relationship with other — that the self is little more than its responsibilities and its response-abilities. Responsibility, as Duncan unwinds its complexities, points in two unresolved directions. On the one hand, responsibility implies a merging of self and other, to the extent that, in The H.D. Book, H.D.’s aims become Duncan’s aims: “to fight for her cause that I saw as my own” (2: 7, 62). On the other hand, responsibility implies a separation of self and other; it is based upon an “exchange” in which something coming from outside triggers a response from inside: “Certain imperatives in what we know give us responsibilities in what we make up....To respond is to recognize imperatives” — “we are creatures of an exchange” (Preface 5).

These contradictory impulses of responsibility are very much the subject matter of Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the concept in The Gift of Death. Elaborating on, and of course deconstructing, an essay by Jan Patocka, Derrida notes that responsibility originates in the gap between two concepts of the mystical: a “daimonic” and “orgiastic” experience of fusion with the other, and a Christian sense of separation from and standing before the other in which the very otherness of the other and the self-consciousness (singularity) of the self is emphasized. Fusion with the other is defined as “irresponsibility” as it elides the separate self-consciousness that could actually feel responsible. However, as the concept has evolved historically and as pagan daimonism has given way to Christian theology, the concept of fusion with the other has not been erased but subsumed and incorporated, for “history never effaces what it buries” (Derrida, Gift 21). Thus the “secret of responsibility would consist of keeping secret, or ‘incorporated,’ the secret of the demonic and thus of preserving within itself a nucleus of irresponsibility” (20). One wonders, here, if Duncan’s “sworn” “keepers” from “Poem Beginning With A Line by Pindar” could not be read in this light — as a keeping of the unitive secrets of “animal life,” “before our histories” (Field 68), that hover behind our responses to the world where one of the poet’s responsibilities is simply “to recognize what is happening” (HD Book 2: 5, 61).

To return, momentarily, to the question of criticism, I would propose that for poet-scholars like Duncan, academic criticism, based upon concepts of “objectivity” and “disinterested” separation of the selfhood of the critic from the otherness of the creative author, is keyed into one version of responsibility — what Charles Bernstein refers to as the “tone lock” of academic criticism (Bernstein 10). Duncan as liminal poet-scholar unearths the secreted other of academic disinterest — creative author, are keyed into one version of responsibility — what Charles Bernstein refers to as the “tone lock” of academic criticism (Bernstein 10). Duncan as liminal poet-scholar unearths the secreted other of academic disinterest — of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Romantic Autobiography. Identity is exegesis. Identity is reading” (20). In this way Duncan’s two main objectives in The H.D. Book — to write a “study” of H.D. and the tell the story of his own poetic “initiation” — come together and explain the text’s often confusing structural anomalies.

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Which leads us to the gift and love of the other — concepts Derrida also associates with responsibility. Gift implies an other who gives, an outside from which the gift originates, but the response which answers the call of the gift may itself be a movement in love, an erotic attempt to merge with the other whose gift has so moved the responsibility of its recipient. Again speaking of his teacher’s gift, Duncan comments that “what I was grew in what she was” (1: 1, 11). Here, at the very beginning of The H.D. Book, Duncan’s first master is held up as the exemplary scholar/ instructor. When she asks him what he “will make” of the texts that are her gift to him, he notes that “I was not to sum them up, not to know something about them so that I could do well on an examination, but to grow through them and towards them in some way” (11). What
Derrida wants to highlight the contradictoriness of terms such as “gift” and “responsibility,” to unveil their impossible demands for unmoved movement, to separate them from the circuits of “exchange” in which they are historically embedded. To see them as figures of the impossible itself (Given Time 7). Duncan, on the other hand, is interested in the possible, in “making,” in the poet as a “creature of exchange.” Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps closer to Duncan on responsibility when he notes that “knowledge of the other also demands sympathy or love, ways of being that are different from impassive contemplation” (Entre 5). The sentiment here is obviously close to what I have called Duncan’s poetics or erotics of response, an approach Levinas locates in the “interhuman” which “lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another” (100).

The gift of the other which prompts or calls forth the potentially loving response is, however, also a “command” or “imperative”: “All given things have a command over the artist” (HD Book 2: 2, 28). Giving is reciprocal, there is an expectation: what shall be returned? What will the poet’s response be to what he or she has read? received? Duncan explores this allusive reciprocity largely through his relationship with H.D. — the “master” to whom he is “apprentice” (2: 1, 105) — but he also reads it in H.D.’s relationship with Freud, who gave her both a “permission” and a “command” (2: 5, 69), as H.D. records it in the poem “The Master:” “you are a poet” (HD 455). In taking H.D. as his master, Duncan activates another “constellation in poetry” (2: 1, 104) which links H.D. back not to Freud, but to Dante: back of H.D.’s “over Love, a new Master” from Trilogy (HD 514) is Dante’s vision from the Vita Nuova in which Eros reveals himself as the poet’s “master” (Vita 6), and leads Duncan to his master’s role — his taking H.D. as “a new Master over Poetry” (HD Book 1: 2, 34). It can only be concluded that responsibility, for Duncan, is not what it is for Derrida: “freedom” (Derrida, Gift 16). Rather, it is “a subject to another” (Levinas, God 178) which leads to another form of freedom: freedom from the limitation, isolation, and singularity of the self, freedom to be other, to enter the disorderly orders of poetry’s alterity, to love and be loved, to see one’s words for what they are: the gifts of others and keys to our responsibilities.

4.

From a poetical scholarship to a scholarly poet, we must move on to Duncan’s “Dante Etudes.” “Writing verse,” argues Robert Crawford in The Modern Poet, “...is a critical as well as a creative activity” (Crawford 1). However appropriate to my current objectives, this view is not particularly common, and many still pose the question Charles Bernstein argues against in “The Revenge of the Poet-Critic:” “does critical thinking mar creativity...?” (Bernstein 5). For Duncan poetry remains, as it was for Ben Jonson in the Seventeenth Century, “another learning” (Jonson 70), and there is no question of the “critical” or “scholarly” being a blight on the poem. Study of past literatures leads directly to the writing of future ones as “my precursor attracts me to my future” (Howe 97). However, Duncan does appear to see the relationship between most literary criticism and poetry in the terms Ron Silliman offers in a relationship in which poetry is “a discourse colonized ... by criticism’s institutionalization” (Silliman 180). He thus sees his task — his responsibility as poet-scholar and poet-critic — as one of liberating the possibilities for reading in and through the poem.

His first move, nevertheless, is a disclaimer as to the “studiofulness” of his “Etudes.” “I mean a music not a scholarly dissertation,” he writes in the “Preface” to the sequence (Ground 94). However musical his intentions and the poems that result, Duncan’s sources is the unearthing of what remains vital in his sources as he “bends” the earlier poetry to his own purposes. In the early “Etudes,” working from Dante’s De Vulgari Eloquentia, clearly set out the poem’s overall concerns and tactics.

The first “Etude,” “We Will Endeavor,” both quotes and paraphrases Book 1 of Dante’s work, but it begins with the title quotation: “We will endeavor, / the word aiding us from Heaven, / to be of service / to the vernacular speech” (Ground 95). Many, although not all, of the “Etudes” are in part acts of merger and fusion: “to create gists of my intentions in Dante’s intentions” — “I draw my own thought in reading Dante” (94). Dante’s texts “remain,” Duncan tells us, “present...responsibilities,” suggesting, for one thing, that responsibility will be a key guiding principle in the “Etudes.” Here, as in The H.D. Book, it will be seen that responsibility involves gift and love, command and obedience, but there is also a renewed emphasis upon the temporality and temporariness of the response/study — upon its “sketchiness” as it arises from “attention to the truth of the moment in reading” (94). One is reminded that the essay, like the response-poem, is an attempt, a trying out, even an experiment — etymological roots that are secrets kept behind rhetorically polished surfaces.

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A peripheral re-telling of Duncan’s own story as poet — “gists” of his “essential autobiography” — is also present from the first “Etude,” as “reading writing” masters is for Duncan always tied up with the “initiation of self as poet.” As a “child of all that I have read” (Preface 6), Duncan recalls the “hermetic talk” of his theosophical childhood (a scene also told in The H.D. Book, 1: 5), responding here to Dante’s description of the vernacular as “that which we acquire without any rule, by imitating our nurses” (Vulgaris 15, Ground 95). Other references to Duncan’s poetical biography appear in echoes of past titles, as in the references to “passages” and “the structure of time” (Ground 97), and past lines, such as the change rung on “scales of the marvellous” in the line “predators of the marvellous” (100); in what appears to be an excerpt from a letter commenting on Duncan’s verbal “onslaught,” to use Peter O’Leary’s term (O’Leary 2, Ground 103); and in the reappearance of the decades-old dialogue begun by Olson’s “Against Wisdom as Such” (Ground 131). Call and response. Service and love — language acquisition occurs, Duncan writes, “for the love of it,” according to the unruly (erotic) rules of imitation (95). The “Etudes” originate in and consist of poetic responsibilities. However, Duncan’s responsibilities extends — although following the lead of Dante’s V卞gari Eloquentia — to the wider “world in speech” he is born into, where “Everything speaks to” the poet, “demanding / a hearing” to which he “answer[s]” (100, 101). “If the world does not speak to us, we cannot speak with it.” Duncan writes in his 1965 essay “The Sweetness and Greatness of Dante’s Divine Comedy” (Sweetness 145). For the poet the possible world is one that is always already language, as Duncan writes in the introduction to Bending the Bow, “The poem is not a stream of consciousness, but an...
area of composition in which I work with whatever comes into it. Only words come into it (Bow vi).” Where the world is speech, “demanding / a hearing,” the poet’s responsibilities are imposing to say the least, and “a service” this great may indeed require “heavenly” assistance.

After the initial poems responding to the De Vulgari, the main intertext switches to Dante’s De Monarchia. It is exactly here that Dennis Formento has criticized Duncan’s re-reading of Dante’s politics, beginning with an apparent paradox: “How does Duncan reconcile Dante’s monarchism with modern egalitarianism?” (Formento 76). According to Formento’s “Robert Duncan: Anarchist Prince,” Duncan sees no contradiction here as he “seems to accept Dante’s politics uncritically,” reading “Dante’s monarchist language as enlightened individualism” (83). While Formento is obviously right to doubt the efficacy of medieval monarchism for the contemporary political world (although one is tempted to read Dante’s notion of “empire” against Hardt and Negri’s), he makes the mistake of assuming that Duncan is proposing practical political solutions in these poems. Duncan is, as he states in the “Preface” to the “Etudes,” employing Dante’s texts and terms as “translated powers” — whatever they once were in a world of popes, city states and emperors (Ground 94). In this he is, or ought to be, Dante’s manipulating his source material — choosing what to respond to, what to ignore — but this is no different than it would be with any other writer, poet or critic. Furthermore, Duncan’s sense of response here is, as I noted above, one sensitive to the time (“moment”) of composition and the temporariness (“sketchiness”) of the “Etude:” the poet’s responsibility in this exercise is to respond to what calls in the improvisational “moment in reading,” following particulars in language and “exploiting” in each moment “one kind of passage.”

The main difficulty Formento gets into lies in his overlooking of the fact that for Duncan Dante’s texts are part of a “world in speech” — “presiding presences in a realm of poems” (94). For Duncan the poetical always transcends all other possible worlds (religious, political, social); Dante’s monarchism is “translated” into his own poetic pluralism, just as he sees Christianity “translated” in the poetry of H.D., where there is “Not a conversion to Christianity, but a conversion of Christianity to Poetry” (HD Book 2: 4, 37). This is not to burden Duncan with some sort of a return to high-modernist, apolitical aestheticism; Duncan’s thinking here is in many ways in line with the linguistic turn of contemporary theory; the political extension of his “worrying speech” is to be found in his decentering of the author (who becomes “derivative,” servant not master, reader not writer) and in his insistence upon a radically pluralistic and multiphasic poetics. Poetry is a gift of the givenness of language and no poet holds property rights over it, but owes it his or her service and responsibility. Poetry is radically communal, and the modernist development of collage — the quoting poem parading its “reading writing” — is one expression of this. The politics of Duncan’s poetic form is thus not only anarchist, but anarco-communist, and the presiding “anarchist prince,” if there is one, is Peter Kropotkin and his anarchist-communism.

The commune of poetry is depicted in many of the “Etudes” in the entangled merger of poem and polis, as in “The Householders,” where “district” and “stanza” correspond. Working from a discussion of rhyme in the Vulgari in which the greater poetic “licence” is seen as “the principle source of the sweetness of an harmonious whole” (Vulgari 56), Duncan writes

He always wove into his stanza
“one line accompanied by a rime
which he called a key”

others having their resonance
in other parts of the city
so that district by district
in the canzone reminds us
in the arrangement, every
wisht for licence conceded

(Ground 111).

Thus poetic and political “licence” blur, as they do in “Enacted:”

a civilization depending upon each
one in time
having his right
one Poetry
the poem belongs to —

(118).

It is the image of the concert of minds, each contributing to the whole of the “potential intellect” for which “there needs must be multiplicity in the human race,” that most attracts Duncan. Dante’s “unique principedom” in which all nations are part of the over-arching empire corresponds with his conception of the Poetry to which all separate poems belong (all of Duncan’s sequential and serial poems — including the “Etudes” — operate on this basis — as decentred “federations”), and these in turn correspond with his notion of all poets “serving” Poetry and the language (so that what Dante does in his “district” is complemented, but not exactly mirrored, by what Duncan does in his, H.D. in hers, Olson and Susan Howe in theirs, and so on).

In many ways the “Etudes” are a treatise on the gift and the responsibilities inseparable from giving. As already noted, giving and responding both implicate separation — the receiver who is obedient to the love of the giver — and fusion — the loving merger of the one who would “draw thought” from the other and into whose thought the other would “enter” (Ground 94). In the more overtly political “Etudes,” working from the De Monarchia, Duncan is most often not “engaged” — “in the improvisational “moment in reading,” following particulars in language and “exploiting” in each moment “one kind of passage.”

Dante has it, “the Giver ‘who gives to all liberally...'” (Monarchia 4), but Duncan’s “Giver” is a “Commander” — a master poet and influential precursor whose “gift bestirs / like fluencies” (Ground 114).

Here is the real paradox in Duncan: how is the poet of the commons also the poet of “obedience”? My only answer is provisional, and has more or less been stated already. Duncan envisions a poetic anarchism that checks the ego (both Eliot’s modernist “impersonality” and Olson’s postmodern “lyrical interference of the ego” might be kept in mind here) without giving authority over to some centre. Authority is thus given to the centreless commons — all of past poetry
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