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ORPHIC ECOLOGY:
MELANCHOLY AND THE POETICS OF ROBERT DUNCAN

By

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Thesis

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Introduction

In the introduction to his 1968 text *Bending the Bow*, Robert Duncan announces an urgent impetus for this collection of poems:

We enter again and again the last days of our own history, for everywhere living productive forms in the evolution of forms fail, weaken, or grow monstrous, destroying the terms of their existence... Now, where other nations before us have floundered, we flounder. To defend a form that our very defense corrupts. We cannot rid ourselves of the form to which we now belong. And in this drama of our own desperation we are drawn into a foreign desperation. For our defense has invaded an area of ourselves that troubled us. Cities laid waste, villages destroyed, men, women and children hunted down in their fields, forests poisoned, herds of elephants screaming under our fire – it is all so distant from us we hear only what we imagine, making up what we surely are doing.

Duncan, *Bending the Bow*, i

Ostensibly, the poet is speaking of the war in Vietnam and of the terrible realities and ethical contradictions which that conflict brought to the forefront of the American consciousness. His language has a political charge, but Duncan speaks too of ecology – of the relations between organisms and the environments they inhabit “in this drama of our own desperation.”

This drama extends not only to humans, but to that which we inhabit (cities, villages, forests), and to those beings with whom we share that space. Duncan observes that our response to that closeness is one of imagination – we “make up” new realities rather than experiencing or responding directly to the pain and terror that that desperation demands. In other words, this violence elicits a melancholic response in both Duncan and his imagined audience.

In her discussion of the intersections of nature-nostalgia, commodity capitalism, and the necessarily melancholic response elicited in response to the AIDS crisis, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands echoes the sentiments articulated by Duncan above:

...At the heart of the modern age is indeed a core of grief...more accurately conceived of as a condition of *melancholia*, a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically “ungrievable” within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief.

...How does one mourn in the midst of a culture that finds it almost impossible to recognize the *value* of what has been lost?

Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,”
333

In this paper I will demonstrate that Robert Duncan not only adopts but *enacts* this “condition of *melancholia*” in two poems – “Cyparissus” and “The Fire Passages 13” – that he might offer a response to what Mortimer-Sandilands identifies above as the “psychically ungrievable.” I will suggest that this response is indicative of what I term “Orphic Ecology,” an instance wherein the seeming “Naturalness” of an environment is undermined, thereby enabling a politicized and melancholic response designed to confront the political, cultural, and environmental toxicity present in social and textual spaces.

I will argue in the first chapter of this thesis that in his revisitation of Ovid’s Cyparissus myth, Robert Duncan recovers the narrative from an implicitly homophobic subtext by re-evaluating the rigid notions of gender identity emphasized in the source material. I argue that Duncan recasts the myth to fit his vision of what the critic Eric Keenaghan identifies as “queer anarchism,” an inherently erotic ethic of language and poetry, designed to “transform the state by mediating embodied experience and promoting transformative passions, rather than through

rhetorically or physically violent forms of resistance.”¹ This “queer anarchism” enacted by Duncan coincides with Mortimer-Sandilands’ politicization of melancholy, in that one might understand melancholy *itself* as a form of nonviolent, experiential resistance.

It is Duncan’s reliance on “derivation” that informs my reading of his poetry as distinctly queer texts. Following the critic Michael Davidson’s reading of Duncan’s poetry as a “palimtextual surface,” one might understand Duncan’s poetics to be as erotic as the actual content of his work:

For Duncan, poetry instantiates a ritual “scene of instruction” that inaugurates the poem and then becomes one of its central subjects... The ultimate meaning of this “field” of origins is often a sexual mystery – an allegory of homosexual or bisexual love – that has been suppressed within canonical books... What differentiates [Duncan’s] poetry from its predecessors in the nineteenth century is its deliberate foregrounding of intertextual layers as they impinge upon a single moment of reading.

Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 175-176

In other words, Duncan’s treatment and use of source texts – “derivations,” in his own words – must be understood as an erotically complex act of reading and response, creating sexually charged conversations between the poet (Duncan), his source text(s), and the reader. In doing so, one might realize the potentially transformative power of pain and melancholy, just as Duncan confirms in his commentary on the Cyparissus myth that it is “Love” which “binds heart to human heart.”² Duncan’s notion of Love might therefore be understood as an act of textual

¹ Paraphrased from Eric Keenaghan, “Life, War, and Love: The Queer Anarchism of Robert Duncan’s Poetic Action during the Vietnam War.” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2008) (634-659).

² Duncan, Robert. “Cyparissus,” from *Roots and Branches*. (New York: New Directions, 1964).

practice, resembling the “arts” of Apollo – that is, poetry, music and healing – “that from the lyre send... notes to pierce the human soul.”³

Having demonstrated in the first chapter that Duncan’s poetry is designed not only as a series of “scenes of instruction,” but as an erotic practice, I turn to Duncan’s poem “The Fire” in the second chapter of this thesis in order to discuss what the critic Timothy Morton identifies in *Ecology without Nature* as the “ambient poetics” of texts, that I might explore the underlying ecological themes and devices employed by Duncan in this poem. In *Ecology without Nature*, Morton argues that the concept of “Nature” is itself an imagined field – a byproduct of early capitalist rhetoric designed to enable the commodification of space. When we term pieces of our space – our environment – “Nature” or “Natural,” we therefore commodify it, privileging a rhetoric of privatization that undermines an ecological perspective. Morton argues in his text for an intersubjective experience of nature, one which prizes an understanding of our planetary and epistemic ecology that does not rely on distinguishing between space and the beings which inhabit it, suggesting in turn that we attempt to perceive “the environment” in an innovative and anti-capitalist manner: as “a surrounding atmosphere, more or less palpable, yet ethereal and subtle.”⁴

By unifying an eroticized and palimpsestual understanding of Duncan’s poetics with a Mortonian sense of ambience, I will demonstrate in the second chapter of this paper how the poetic techniques employed by Duncan in “The Fire” effect an ambient poetics designed to counter the cultural violence instantiated by neoliberal rhetoric and the specter of imminent nuclear catastrophe, offering the condition of melancholia as a preservative and potentially

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Morton, *Ecology without Nature* 33

rejuvenative subject position. I argue that Duncan invites this radical response from his audience in his articulation of a distinctly intersubjective awareness of aesthetics and the environment, that we might reimagine the possibilities of what is “valuable,” and therefore “grievable,” within our culture’s discourse.

Chapter 1: *Masculinity and the Politics of Desire in Robert Duncan's Revisitation of Ovid's Cyparissus*

In this portion of the paper I will demonstrate how the myth of Cyparissus, included in Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is a particularly acute instance in the poem wherein traditional Roman conceptions of masculinity are undermined by the poet. Here, Ovid marks the "impenetrable" masculine identity of Augustan Rome as unstable via parody and the feminization of overtly masculine figures and gender-norms. In turn, I will argue that in his retelling of the myth of Cyparissus, Robert Duncan elaborates those themes of destabilized gender already present in Ovid, that he might expand his vision of what critic Eric Keenaghan identifies as "queer anarchism"⁵ – an overarching topos in Duncan's poetic project designed to rewrite contemporary, conventional conceptions of gender and sexual identity.

Understanding sexual discourse and gender identity in ancient Rome has proven a fruitful space for literary criticism and discourse for as long as there have been terms to accommodate the study and examination of gender identity.⁶ Ancient Romans lived in a cultural environment in which married men could enjoy sexual relations with male slaves without critical reprisal from their peers; in which adultery generally aroused more concern than pederasty; in which men notorious for their philandering might be called effeminate.⁷ These scenarios indicate obvious differences in the cultural constructions of gender identity, and what constitutes (or constituted) the binaric distinctions between taboo and normative sexual practices in Roman and

⁵ "An inherently erotic ethic of language and poetry...designed to transform the state by mediating embodied experience and promoting transformative passions, rather than through rhetorically or physically violent forms of resistance," Keenaghan, 653.

⁶ See Kirk Ormand, *Controlling Desires: Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: Praeger, 2009). Ormand bases his study on the "virtual explosion of scholarly discussion on the topic of Greek and Roman sexuality that began, in a variety of venues, in the 1970s" (p. 5).

⁷ Craig A. Williams, *Ideologies of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). "Introduction," pp. 3-15.

contemporary society. As such, Rome offers an interesting site of inquiry for critics. Whereas the physical bodies of humans have remained essentially unchanged,⁸ ideas about what constitutes “normative” or “transgressive” behaviors in sexual culture have shifted dramatically. Ancient Rome therefore offers the critic an interesting site to apply current theories of gender, queer identity, and sexuality.

Robert Duncan, writing from the fringes of a nascent San Francisco counter-culture, was concerned with alternative sexual and political identities, as his poetry, prose, and the work of critics and essayists have demonstrated.⁹ Duncan articulates his sexual and cultural politics via a “poetics of derivation,” a body of work concerned with reconsidering the strictures of conventional form and obliquely narrative, “confessional,” or representational content. His poetic and epistolary output challenges traditional prosody as often as it embraces it, incorporating “traditional” forms and radical styles in what he terms the “grand collage” of poetic discourse.¹⁰ In turn, this radical prosody served as a vehicle for Duncan to express his then-unconventional notions of gender construction, sexual identity, and politics. In short, his work engages directly with a global literary tradition while radically challenging and politicizing the conventional alignments of body, gender, and sexuality. Like his immediate literary

⁸ That is, barring reconstructive surgeries and hormone-chemical treatments, et cetera, that offer, perhaps, a more permeable sense of what constitutes binaric masculine and feminine bodies; though, as I demonstrate below in my discussion of Hermaphroditus, there was certainly a notion in Augustan Rome that the physical body might consist of non-binaric parts. See also Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), especially Chapter 4, “Representing Sex” (pp. 114-148), for a discussion of the prominence of eroded and unstable boundaries between sex and gender in Classical and Renaissance texts. Laqueur argues, following Foucault, that “So-called biological sex does not provide a solid foundation for the cultural category of gender, but constantly threatens to subvert it,” and discusses the Renaissance notion of “An open body in which sexual differences were matters of degree rather than kind...” (p 124).

⁹ See Anne Dewey’s “Gendered Muses” (*Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2009), and Keenaghan (whom I cite extensively below) for critical perspectives on the intersection of sexuality and politics in Duncan’s work.

¹⁰ Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1964) (from *Preface*, p. vii). See Chapter 2, below, for a more in-depth discussion of Duncan’s challenges to conventional prosody.

antecedents, Ezra Pound and H.D., Duncan draws upon a rich tradition of literature in the composition and conceptualization of his poetry – not least of all the poetry of Ovid.

The works of Ovid offer excellent insight into what constitutes “normative” and “non-normative” sexual behaviors in Augustan Roman society, and are therefore of exceptional value to the critic interested in the poetry of antiquity and theories of sex and gender.¹¹ In the *Ars Amatoria* and *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tasks himself with animating the sexual adventures, exploits, tragedies, and comedies of gods and mortals, drawing on a rich cultural and literary tradition that remains as vital to understanding the human condition today as it was in Augustan Rome. While the majority of Ovid’s erotic narratives traffic in identifiably heteronormative relations, frequently there are incidents and experiences which disrupt conventional heteronormativity. What Ovid accomplishes via his depictions of homo-, bi-, and pan-sexual experiences and individuals will serve as the thematic foreground for much of this chapter.

In Book X of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid engages in a discourse vis-à-vis the alternatively pederastic and misogynistic “Songs of Orpheus”¹² which exposes the anxieties of masculinity seemingly ubiquitous to Roman (male) sexual identity.¹³ By complicating the anxieties surrounding conventional gender roles, Ovid, perhaps inadvertently, reveals the instability inherent to the misogynist tendencies of Roman sexual politics. In his rendition of the Cypris myth, the ancillary preamble to the “Songs of Orpheus,” Ovid reveals the social construction of adult Roman masculinity to be particularly unstable.

¹¹ Of course, the issue of what constitutes “normativity” itself is open to debate. For the sake of brevity I will limit my definition here to a broad interpretation: those values a culture generally understands to be “acceptable” sexual practices – that is, values which do not violate major ethical codes or breach generally acknowledged taboos. From my bibliography I would direct one to Butler (1994), Canguilhem (1989), and Sedgwick (1990).

¹² Makowski, Gentilcore, and Fulkerson, approach this (i.e. pederasty and/or misogyny in Book X of the *Metamorphoses*) to various ends.

¹³ Although applying modern conceptions of gender roles to Roman psychology and literature is potentially anachronistic, there are many indications, as both Sharrock and Zajko demonstrate, that Roman sexuality (especially masculinity) was a site of frequent anxiety and, by extension, poetic discourse.

It is toward this often-overlooked tale from the *Metamorphoses* that I will direct the bulk of my critical engagement with Ovid in this section of the paper. Having offered some context concerning the notions of gender identity and sexual politics in Rome, and a close reading of some particularly salient and/or challenging myths from the *Metamorphoses*, I will then consider Robert Duncan's revisitation of Orpheus and the Cyparissus myth, arguing that Duncan's "derivation" reclaims the tale from an implicitly homophobic subtext. In turn, we will consider how the Cyparissus myth, revised by Duncan, offers a context and conceptual framework by which to consider the politicization of queer melancholy outlined by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*. In the following chapter, we will consider how Ovid and Duncan can afford us a venue in which to re-consider ecology, melancholy, and toxicity through a close reading of "The Fire."

Gendered and Queer Readings in Ovid

The instability of gender categories in ancient Rome has been well established by critics and theorists.¹⁴ In her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, the classicist Alison Sharrock demonstrates that the development and maintenance of gender was a major preoccupation in the Roman Republic and early Empire, and that in Ovid's work especially, engendering the self proves to be a task as crucial as it is unstable.¹⁵ In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the distinction between "masculine" and "feminine" genders is a site of speculation and fascination for both the poet and his audience alike. The myths of Tiresias (Book III), Hermaphroditus (Book IV), and Iphis and Ianthe (Book IX) are all tales wherein gender is indistinct, in a transitory state, or otherwise metamorphosed, to various ends. Tiresias,

¹⁴ Especially by Sharrock (2002); see Williams (1999) for a focused study in the ideologies of masculinity that governed public speech and behavior in ancient Rome. What mattered most for Roman men was maintaining congruity between social and sexual dominance. A Roman citizen was obliged under threat of ridicule to maintain their proper place in the hierarchy of penetration, whether oral, anal, or vaginal (Williams 160-66).

¹⁵ Paraphrased from Sharrock, "Gender and sexuality," *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, Philip Hardie, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) (Chapter 6; 96).

transformed into a woman for seven years (and then back into a man) for having struck two copulating snakes, uses his experience to settle a debate between Jupiter and Juno (Book III. 343-370).¹⁶ Hermaphroditus, the son of Mercury and Venus, becomes the object of affection of the nymph Salmacis, whom he spurns, uninterested in participating in an erotic relationship (Book IV. 320-425)¹⁷. The will of Salmacis, enacted by unnamed gods, transfigures Hermaphroditus into a man-woman hybrid, and she becomes incorporated into his body – “...not two, not double, / Neither woman nor man, and yet somehow both” (IV, 414-415).¹⁸ Iphis, a girl raised as a boy, is transfigured by the goddess Isis (the deified Io) into a man that she (then he) might marry Ianthe. Although ostensibly a tale with a “happy” ending, wherein the gods reward the child’s devotion with a successful transformation, critics have demonstrated how the subtext of the story advances an explicitly homophobic narrative (IX, 765-915).¹⁹ Although these tales vary as to what causes or is intended by the transfiguration of gender (“punishment” for Tiresias and Hermaphroditus; “reward” for Iphis), they share common ground in that they illustrate Ovid’s perception of “gender” and “sex” as mutable categories, open to destabilization and public commentary.

¹⁶ When asked whether males or females experience more pleasure during intercourse, Tiresias draws on his experience in the form of woman, responding that women do. Juno, offended, responds by blinding him; Jupiter, unable to undo the goddess’s act, offers restitution to Tiresias in the form of foresight – an early example of the “blind prophet” trope.

¹⁷ The name “Hermaphroditus” is a composite of his parents’ Greek names – “Hermes” and “Aphrodite”; in turn, it is the source, of course, for the designation “hermaphrodite,” a generic byword for an organism with ambiguous genitalia.

¹⁸ Zajko reads the outcome of this myth, in “Listening With Ovid: Intersexuality, Queer Theory, and the Myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis” (*Helios*, 2009), as being designed to reinforce “a conceptual status quo that is built upon a two-sex model in which the figure of the androgyne is an abhorrence and a threat to the purity of the position of the fertile male” (193).

¹⁹ A relative term, “happy.” I read it as such in that unlike so many tales in *Metamorphoses*, neither of the major characters are grotesquely transfigured or killed for their non-conformity – moreover, Iphis is not only pleased with her transformation, but desires it. However, reading the tale as having a “positive” outcome does not stand up to contemporary criticism. Makowski, in “Bisexual Orpheus” (*The Classical Journal*, 1996) names the myth of Iphis “Ovid’s most damning denunciation of homosexuality... The centerpiece of the Iphis story is the monologue for the pathology of homoerotic love (9. 726-63 [Lombardo, IX, 839-857]), a speech remarkable both for its rhetorical display and for its insistence on the unnaturalness of homosexual passion” (Makowski, 30-31). The implications of this subtext are discussed in more detail below.

Vanda Zajko, in her studied application of queer theory to the myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, notes that in contemporary twenty-first century medical and theoretical work, and indeed, in everyday experience, the sharp distinctions between masculine and feminine bodies, qualities, and modes of behavior can be perceived as hard to sustain.²⁰ The instability of gender categories is perhaps as true for our own society's experience as it was in Augustan Rome, and remains an interesting point of discussion and analysis. For, as Georges Canguilhem contends throughout *The Normal and the Pathological* (1991), it is the abnormal that arouses theoretical interest in the normal:

[Any] judgment of value about what is or what is not normal can never be seen as conclusive since all science, which is objective in terms of its method and object, is subjective with regard to tomorrow since, short of assuming it to be completed, many of today's truths will become yesterday's mistakes.

Canguilhem 212

As such, one must be careful in the discussion of gender and identity – especially in works that predate Freud, Foucault, and the emergence of psychoanalysis and “queer theory”²¹ – not only to avoid anachronistic interpretations, but out of respect for the very subjective nature of normality. That being said, Ovid's work permits, and even encourages, interpretations that accommodate both the reality of gendered Roman culture (as we understand it as twenty-first century scholars) and the emergence of post-Foucaultian queer and gender theory.²²

²⁰ Zajko 177, paraphrasing her reading of Butler (1990) and Flieger (2005).

²¹ A difficult “theory” to define, in and of itself, but I like Zajko's interpretation, and find it especially useful in this context: “Rather than focus on specific sexual acts or object-choices, queer theory affirms the diversity of the potential identities available to those marginalized and pathologized by normative models of heterosexuality. Queer identity is defined relationally, that is to say, by its distance from the normative and its practitioners” (Zajko 179).

²² Sharrock provides an excellent synopsis of the capacity for contemporary readings of gender in Ovid: “More than any other non-dramatic ancient poetry, male-authored as it overwhelmingly is, Ovid's work gives space to a female voice, in however problematic a manner, and to both male and female voices which reflect explicitly on their own gendered identity. It is also driven by a troubled relationship with the purveyors of Roman masculinity – the army,

Masculinity in particular is especially well defined in Roman literature, and in historical and poetic texts in particular. Sharrock's examination of gender and sexuality in Ovid assembles and interprets the available scholarship on Roman masculinity very neatly:

[In Rome] Masculinity is predicated not only on sexual performance but also on autarky, control of the self both internal (in the emotions) and external (in political liberty). If the very thing that makes a man (sexual power) also unmakes him (by undermining his autarky) then gendered categories are never going to be easy and stable.

Sharrock 96

A man, to be a man, must be *durus* (hard), but love (for which he needs to be *durus*) will make him *mollis* (soft). He must also be impenetrable. Historians of sexuality express something of the defining characteristic of Roman sexuality through the distinction between the active penetrator and the passive penetrated.

Sharrock 97

Building on Sharrock's identification of these terms and characteristics, I will demonstrate their usefulness in a brief study of the Hermaphroditus myth. In turn, I will apply them in detail to a more thorough study of the Cyparissus myth in the section that follows.

Born a male child and identifying himself as such, Hermaphroditus refuses to have sex with, to penetrate, Salmacis, despite her advances. For this lack of desire to display his *durus* qualities he is "punished" with a transformation that makes him penetrable. His refusal to enact his physically prescribed gender-identity (or rather, his lack of desire to do so) results in a change that enunciates the *mollis* aspects of his identity. Moreover, his "confused" gender identity becomes emblematic of this resistance to normative Roman behavior, and the pool from

politics, Augustus, epic, and so on. Moreover, the poet – *par excellence* – of the fluidity of identity clearly provokes a gendered reading" (Sharrock 95).

which he/she emerges metamorphosed is itself transformed through the agency of her/his parents:

“Father and Mother,
Grant to the son who bears both of your names
That whoever enters this pool as a man
Comes out as a half man, weakened by the water.”

His parents blessed the words of their biform son
And drugged the pool to engender confusion.

Metamorphoses, IV. 419-424

Craig Williams makes the case that Ovid’s use of the word *mollescat* (translated by Lombardo, above, as “weakened”) in the final line of Hermaphroditus’s prayer “makes explicit an assumption that is implied throughout the ancient sources: *softness* is the antithesis of *masculinity*.”²³ Williams’s reading encourages an evaluation of the myth that treats Hermaphroditus’s sexuality as a Roman model of deficiency or lack.²⁴ Her masculinity, “flawed” in that she expresses an unwillingness to enact it via sexual performance, is then rendered “different,” and thus “provides an explanation for the phenomenon of passive homosexuality in Rome.”²⁵ Ovid adopts a cautionary – if not outright condescending – tone in his transition to the tale of Hermaphroditus (Lombardo translates the opening lines as “Learn now why the infamous spring of Salmacis/ Enervates men who bathe in its waters”), indicating that the episode serves as a possible critique of a male’s failure to perform one’s socially prescribed gender roles.²⁶

²³ Craig Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) (128).

²⁴ One of Sedgwick’s definitions of “queer” applies to this model, and encourages the possibility of queer readings in Ovid: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 1994, 8).

²⁵ Zajko 192.

²⁶ *Metamorphoses*, IV, 321-322.

If read as a commentary on the presence of “non-normative” sexuality in Rome, the enunciation of Hermaphroditus’s acquisition of *mollis* qualities emphasizes that the boy fails to attain manhood, and is therefore punished for this failure. But whereas the myth of Hermaphroditus might be interpreted as providing an overt commentary on the failed acquisition of adult sexual identity in Rome, other tales in the *Metamorphoses* which exhibit this failure are far more complicated. In particular, the myth of Cyparissus in Book X exhibits such a “failure.” However, the contextual implications of pederasty, overtly parodic elements, and the presence of an already-complicated deity serve to confound a direct interpretation of the myth. As such, in the next section I will apply the terms identified by Sharrock and the readings already assembled by other critics toward a new critical reading of the performance of masculinity in the Cyparissus myth.

Re-Reading Cyparissus

If Ovid’s retelling of the myth of Hermaphroditus displays the potential outcome of the failure to acquire appropriate gender roles, the myth of Iphis at the close of Book IX complicates the entry into adult sexuality even further, as Iphis’s “successful” transformation relies on that implicitly homophobic subtext demonstrated by Zajko:

...the child wore boys’ clothes,
And its face was beautiful whether it belonged
To a boy or a girl.

Metamorphoses, IX. 822-824

... “what will become of me,”
[Iphis] said, “possessed by a strange and monstrous love
That no one has heard of?”

Metamorphoses, IX. 839-841

Critics have read the rhetoric of Ovid as anti-queer or homophobic:

Consonant with Ovid's attitude toward homosexuality is his view of effeminate males, whom he subjects to a good deal of censure and ridicule [see *Ars Amatoria*, I. 570-575] ...Female homosexuality gets no more positive treatment, as indicated by *Heroides* 15, where we can infer a negative view of lesbianism from Sappho's letter to Phaon.

Makowski 30

I agree with this interpretation, and contend that the myth of Iphis anticipates the overtly homophobic subtext of Book X, wherein Ovid's depiction of queer identity resolves in failure and death.²⁷

Book X of the *Metamorphoses* (part of which is conventionally subtitled "The Songs of Orpheus") revolves around Ovid's studied investigation of relationships that fall outside of conventional Roman gender roles. While male-female relationships certainly occur in this section, they are all products of unstable, transgressive, gender roles. Moreover, where male-female relations "successfully" occur (i.e., where penetration of the female is implied as the end-product), a subtext of misogyny pervading the narratives reinforces the complicated note of these seemingly "successful" relations. As Makowski shows, "homosexuality is no mere isolated detail of Orpheus' characterization but that...motif underlies much of the narrative's diction, imagery, and use of literary reminiscence" (Makowski 25).

One might argue that the "Songs of Orpheus" all depict "queer" relationships.²⁸ The tales of Ganymede and Hyacinthus are overtly pederastic;²⁹ the tales of the Cerastae and the daughters of Propoetius explore the theosophistic roots of prostitution; the myth of Pygmalion concerns a

²⁷ Ultimately, this homophobic subtext is deployed by Ovid as a decidedly negative critique against the Emperor Augustus, an analogue of the god Apollo; I discuss this critique in more detail below, following Laurel Fulkerson's reading of *Metamorphoses* in "Apollo, *Paenitentia*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*."

²⁸ Again, I rely on Sedgwick's broad definition of the term (n. 24).

²⁹ Their tones, however, are markedly different; in the Jupiter and Ganymede myth, Ovid depicts a conventional, "successful" pederastic relationship, and the boy is installed in Olympus as Jupiter's cup-bearer; the tale of Apollo and Hyacinthus, however, resolves in tragedy, with Hyacinthus's death and Apollo's experience of *paenitentia* (see Fulkerson).

man who carves a lover from stone, and their union produces Cinryas, sire of Myrrha, who desires her father; the consummation of that desire violates taboos of incest and in turn her tale devolves into utter grief. The litany of overtly “deviant” sexual experiences are appended with the tales of Venus and Adonis, and Atalanta and Hippomenes – both instances wherein a female character adopts traditionally masculine roles, or attempts (and fails) to ignore normative behavior entirely. This sequential litany of frustrated sexualities and desires, voiced through the mouth of the melancholic, frustrated, and suddenly queered Orpheus, are all prefaced by Ovid’s rendition of the myth of Cyparissus, one of the most deliberate depictions of frustrated desire in the epic. The tale of Cyparissus, while not explicitly homosexual or pederastic (unlike, say, that of Ganymede or Hyacinthus), maintains a homophobic undertone, underscored by transgressive gender-markers, “misdirected” desire, and elaborate expressions of grief at the botched site of desire. Though not recounted by Orpheus – “Ovid the narrator” speaks here – Cyparissus’s grief sets the melancholic tone of the songs of Orpheus that follow.

This tone adopted by Ovid (by way of Orpheus) invites some discussion of the theoretical potential opened up by an examination of melancholy. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler discusses “a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it” by posing the question “What *makes for a grievable life?*”³⁰ Her discussion hinges on a revisitation of Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, and seeks to distinguish between the two experiences:

I am not sure I know when mourning is successful, or when one has fully mourned another human being. Freud changed his mind on this subject: he suggested that successful mourning meant being able to exchange one object for another; he later claimed that incorporation, originally associated with melancholia, was

³⁰ Butler 20, 21.

essential to the task of mourning. Freud's early hope that an attachment might be withdrawn and then given anew implied a certain interchangeability of objects as a sign of hopefulness, as if the prospect of entering life anew made use of a kind of promiscuity of libidinal aim. That might be true, but I do not think that successful grieving implies that one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place, as if full substitutability were something for which we might strive.

Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.

Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20-21

If I understand Butler correctly, her distinction between “mourning” and “melancholy” suggests that melancholy, conventionally understood as a passive experience, might be *activated* in response to the loss of someone or something irreplaceable. I would suggest that Orpheus's “Songs,” ostensibly the product of grief, reflect this activation of Butlerian melancholy. As I discuss below, Cyparissus's inability to recover from the loss of the object of his love – a thoroughly burlesqued and effeminized stag – not only reflects the depth of the youth's grief, but illustrates the breadth of what might constitute what Butler terms a “grievable” life (*i.e.*, the lives of animals are presented as being rendered grievable in Ovid vis-à-vis Cyparissus's response to the death of the stag). I will then explore in the following section Robert Duncan's re-examination of the Cyparissus narrative, and how the poet's rendition of Ovid's implicitly homophobic aside extends grievability to queer experience. But some further contextualization of the Cyparissus myth must necessarily foreground that discussion.

The death of Eurydice and Orpheus's failure to return her to the world of the living need not be recounted in this space, save to say that Ovid treats this as the impetus for Orpheus's lyric turn to songs of lament, misogyny, and homoerotic pederasty:³¹

...Orpheus had rejected
All love of woman, whether because his love
Had turned out so badly, or he had pledged his faith.
[//...] It was Orpheus
Who began the custom among Thracian men
Of giving their love to tender boys, and enjoying
That brief springtime blossoming of youth.

Metamorphoses, X. 82-89

As preface to his lyrics "of boys/ Beloved by gods, and girls dazed by unnatural desire," (*Met.* X. 159-160), Orpheus, tuning his lyre, draws in an anthropomorphic arbor assembled to hear the singer's work. Makowski, in his readings on pederasty and parody in Ovid's Orphic cycle, notes how the arboreal catalog "contains a number of mythological undercurrents which alert us to Ovid's concerns with issues of gender and sexuality."³² Ovid emphasizes the presence of the laurel (referencing Daphne, treated early on, in Book I of the epic) and the lotus (an allusion to Dryope) as especially significant,³³ but the poet takes special interest in the last of the trees to arrive, relaying its mythic origins:

Among this crowd came the cone-shaped cypress,
Now a tree, but once a boy beloved by that god
Who tensions both the bow and lyre with strings.

Metamorphoses, X. 110-112

³¹ The explicitly homoerotic content of Ovid's rendition of the Orphic tradition is especially significant to the Hellenistic tradition, because, as Makowski notes, "in contrast, Virgil [Ovid's chief source for these poems] does not breathe a word on the subject of homosexuality, even though he was certainly aware of the Hellenistic tradition that made Orpheus the father of Greek love" (Makowski 25).

³² *Ibid.*, 33.

³³ Both women, love objects of Apollo, are metamorphosed as a result of short-sighted actions. Apollo's condescending treatment of Eros in Book I leads the younger god to confound his relationship with Daphne (I. 470-600). Dryope loses her virginity to Apollo, but marries his Delphic priest Andraemon. She is changed into a lotus for plucking a leaf from the already-anthropomorphized Lotis (Book IX, 366-418).

The god to whom Ovid refers is of course Apollo, patron of the arts and sciences, and Ovid makes especially deft use of the confluence of “tension” and music in order to properly contextualize Orpheus’s grief. But these initial lines of pathos in the Cyparissus sequence quickly give way to Ovid at his most parodic,³⁴ removing the audience from the overarching content of Book X, while simultaneously recalling the poet’s elaborate, critical, treatment of effeminate men in the *Ars Amatoria*³⁵:

[There] was once, sacred to the nymphs who haunt
 The Carthaeian plains, an enormous stag
 Whose spreading antlers steeped his head in shade.
 The antlers gleamed with gold, and a jeweled collar
 Hung down from his shoulders on his rounded neck.
 A silver boss, which he’d worn all his life,
 Dangled before his forehead from small leather straps,
 And pearls gleamed from his ears and hollow temples.
 He was quite tame, with none of his natural fear;
 He often visited people’s houses, and even allowed
 His neck to be stroked by the hands of strangers.
 But he was dearer to you than to all the rest,
 O Cyparissus, loveliest of the Cceans.
 It was you who led the stag to pastures new
 And brought him to clear springs. And you would weave
 Colored garlands through his antlers, and riding
 Like an equestrian upon his back would smile
 As you guided his soft mouth with purple reins.

Metamorphoses, X. 113-130

The overwrought description of the stag and his adornments has not been overlooked by critics. Makowski seizes on the parody in Ovid’s description, noting that “[the] contrast with Vergil’s creation could not be greater. The deer in *Aeneid* 7.489-92 is described with economy... [and seeing] the potential for comedy, Ovid presents his own ‘improvement’ on the deer with a

³⁴ Makowski makes much of the pine tree’s appearance just prior to the Cypress, noting that “the pine tree, even though feminine by grammatical gender, is no mythological heroine as we might expect but rather a male of sorts, the self-emasculated, metamorphosed Attis. So the pine tree is really a foppishly coiffed eunuch” (Makowski 33). The presence of the pine tree, *pinus*, might imply Ovid’s attention to the homoerotic content and context of this story, especially its humorous exaggeration of gender behaviors.

³⁵ See *Ars Amatoria*, I.570-575 (John Dryden’s translation).

congeries of details that overwhelms.”³⁶ The fantastic gilded horns of the deer, his jeweled collar, silver bell (a *bullā*³⁷), and pearl earrings all betoken a foppishness reminiscent of Ovid’s critique of effeminate males in the *Ars Amatoria*. Qualities which might be determined as *mollis* abound (the deer’s timidity, his garlands, and especially the “soft mouth with purple reins”), negating those *durus* qualities which one might anticipate in the depiction of an adult stag. The antlers, a familiar phallic image or sign, are especially effeminized, tricked out in gold and beflowered. In representing the deer as such, Ovid enunciates the instability of gendered roles in Roman discourse, prefacing the appearance of Cyparissus himself with descriptions that alert one to expect further commentary on gendered identity and masculinity gone *mollis*.

Having introduced the stag, the desired object of Cyparissus’s affections, as a foppish male clearly to be read as a passive, *mollis*, homosexual, only a few lines are spent in characterizing the events which lead to his metamorphosis into the cypress tree:

...The weary stag
Had lain down in the grass and was enjoying
The cool forest shade when the boy Cyparissus
Carelessly pierced him with a sharp javelin,
And when he saw him dying of the cruel wound
Resolved to die himself...

Metamorphoses, X. 132-137

Cyparissus’s affection for the stag becomes comically undermined by carelessness. Moreover, the brevity with which Ovid treats the narrative “action” of the scene (as opposed to the elaborate description of the stag preceding the act of inadvertent violence) serves to further undermine the attachment the boy feels for the stag. In treating the tragic instance upon which the narrative arc hinges as subordinate to the outlandishness of the beast, Ovid de-emphasizes the role grief plays

³⁶ Makowski 34.

³⁷ “[A] locket or amulet conventionally presented to a child on his birthday,” Makowski 35, citing Pliny *et al.* (n. 31 in Makowski).

in the scene, -indicating that Cyparissus's affection for the stag is not worth wasting ink the poet might expend describing it with care.³⁸

What one might determine as a juvenile inability to properly employ or maintain tools of the hunt becomes in itself a failure to successfully deploy masculine identity. The misuse of his phallic javelin wounds and kills the deer, and this act of unintentional violence renders Cyparissus vulnerable. In her discussion of the instability of gendered categories in Roman literature and society, Sharrock makes much of what might be entailed in suffering a "wound" in love:

[Even] though Roman sexuality is constituted on the basis of penetrability...even the penetrator himself can be characterized as suffering a *uulnus* through being a lover, and so the gendered categories will not stay neatly separate.

Sharrock 98

One can clearly see then Ovid's manipulation of masculinity and adult sexual identity at play, but coupled with the homoerotic undertones (a *mollis* male deer pierced by a *mollis* male youth) and the "drag" trappings of the stag, the pathetic (as in *pathos*) qualities with which Ovid introduces the scene descend into the bathetic. Ovid intends for his audience to laugh at the inefficacy of Cyparissus's masculinity, although in a modern context this reaction, if over-emphasized, would perhaps be read as insensitive. Regardless, Ovid's attempt to portray the strict gender roles of Roman discourse as unstable serves more purpose than to merely indicate a "queer" identity. Apollo's reaction to Cyparissus's poorly deployed masculinity, enhanced by the humorous undertones already present in the subtext of the story, results in a deeper indictment of Roman masculinity.

³⁸ One might compare this to the elaborate description of the scene and impassioned soliloquy with which Ovid (via Orpheus's song) treats Myrrha's flight from her father's house – an episode no less tragic nor steeped in cultural taboo (*Metamorphoses*, X, 546-575).

The resolve of Cyparissus, “beloved by that god/ Who tensions both the bow and lyre with strings,” to die brings Apollo to the scene. Ovid elaborates the bathetic qualities of the scene, especially Cyparissus’s ineffectual, immature masculinity. In turn, the poet emphasizes Apollo’s inability to accurately comprehend the source of the boy’s grief, or to effectively accommodate the experience of *paenitentia*³⁹ which that grief arouses in himself:

... What did Phoebus
Not say to comfort him, admonishing him to grieve
Moderately and in proportion to the event?
The boy only groaned and begged as the gods’ last gift
That he mourn for all time. And now, as his life
Ebbd away in endless weeping, his limbs began
To grow green, and his hair, which just now had hung
Over his snow-white brow, became a bristling crest,
And he stiffened into a tree with a slender top
That looks up to heaven’s stars. The god groaned,
“You shall be mourned by me, you shall mourn others,
And you shall always be where others grieve.”

Metamorphoses, X. 137-148

While ostensibly a story designed to explicate the ritualized, traditional burning of cypress at funerals, the sexual undertones already imported into the story demand that Apollo’s reaction and Ovid’s interpretation of this grief-culture device be examined further. Laurel Fulkerson’s examination of the respective divine and mortal interpretations of the emotion *paenitentia* is helpful here, especially with respect to the characterization of Apollo in the *Metamorphoses*. In the Cyparissus scene in particular, Apollo’s experience of *paenitentia* serves to emphasize the destabilization of Roman gender categories in which Ovid is engaged:

³⁹ “Kaster (2005) suggest that *paenitentia* is not the usual Latin term for our ‘remorse,’ but that the word may nevertheless carry moral implications. According to Kaster, *paenitentia* arises when something that *is* the case is compared with something that is *not* the case and found wanting; ... *paenitentia* may be seen as a uniquely human emotion, since it implies a lack of power; if you are a god and you want something that is not the case to become the case, you make it happen, which renders the feeling unnecessary” (Fulkerson 389-390).

We might well read Apollo as very much affected by Hyacinthus's death, especially when we consider that this story is vocalized by Orpheus, who has turned to pederasty out of misogyny, and so is likely to find the death of a beloved boy exceptionally tragic.

Fulkerson 395

Cyparissus, even though the death he causes is...accidental, accepts full responsibility for his actions. He cannot fix what he has done and is inconsolable; I would suggest that he thereby shows himself to be more fully a moral agent than Apollo. He chooses not to live as a way of making reparation for his offense.

Fulkerson 399

Grief and melancholy thus underscore queer desire in the scene thrice over: Orpheus laments the loss of Eurydice, Cyparissus mourns the stag, and Apollo mourns Cyparissus. As these instances of mourning and melancholia appear concurrently with a wounding, the emotional manifestation of a physical *uulnus*, the queered desire in the scene is enunciated. Apollo, as an adult male figure whose erotic attempts are repeatedly undermined in the *Metamorphoses*, complicates this with his overstated attachment to the boy, and the pederastic desire contextually implied by the Orphic laments. Orpheus, Cyparissus, and Apollo are rendered *mollis* (that is, they are effeminized) by their inability to appropriately maintain their *durus* qualities – Orpheus spurns the love of women, turning then to boys; Cyparissus inadvertently loses control of his javelin, underscoring his impotence; Apollo weeps and laments for a mortal's fate, undermining his august stature as a pitiless god.

Fulkerson goes on to argue that Ovid's depiction of Apollo may be designed to reflect on Augustus, undermining the emperor's claims of divinity. Citing the scholar D.C. Feeney, Fulkerson suggests Apollo's expression of *paenitentia* hints that "in his refusal to act as a morally responsible agent or to face the consequences of his actions in a constructive way,

Augustus, like his patron Apollo, is less than human.”⁴⁰ What Ovid has at stake in this depiction is difficult to discern, especially considering later events in the poet’s life – his mysterious exile, Augustus’s ban of the *Ars Amatoria*, and Ovid’s apocryphal, operatic, burning of the *Metamorphoses*.⁴¹ But it is clear that Ovid’s destabilization of gender categories and heteronormative desire coincides with a pointed criticism of an authority figure (though it is disguised as casual).

Although one must be careful in *certainly* naming Apollo as an explicit analogue to Augustus, the failed maintenance of gender categories and erotic desires in the Cyparissus passage hints at possible (even probable) political undertones. Even if he is not being explicitly critical of Augustus Caesar in this passage of the text, Ovid *certainly* attempts to depict potential frailty of a power structure designed around rigid, and therefore brittle, sexual performance and autarky.

The object-choice of Cyparissus, the stag, has some further bearing on my understanding of the poem. In her essay from *Queer Ecologies*, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands offers a reading of Judith Butler’s *Precarious Lives* that suggests a crucial distinction between “mourning” and “melancholy” when one considers late capitalist nature relations:

[Rather than] any kind of active negotiation of environmental mourning...at the heart of the modern age is a core of grief...more accurately conceived of as a condition of *melancholia*, a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically “ungrievable” within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and

⁴⁰ Fulkerson 401, citing D.C. Feeney *The Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) (216-217).

⁴¹ Richard Tarrant “Ovid and Ancient Literary History,” Philip Hardie, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) (Chapter 1; p. 24).

ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief... As [recent queer scholarship] has pointed out, melancholia is not only a denial of the loss of a beloved object but also a potentially politicized way of preserving that object in the midst of a culture that fails to recognize its significance. Melancholia, here, is not a failed or inadequate mourning. Rather, it is a form of socially located embodied memory in which the loss of the beloved constitutes the self, the persistence of which identification acts as an ongoing psychic reminder of the fact of death in the midst of creation.

Mortimer-Sandilands 333

As such, one might identify Orpheus, Cyparissus, and Apollo as distinctly *melancholic* figures, given the suspended nature of their grief. Orpheus's lamentation for Eurydice exceeds the expectations of a mourning husband, as in response to his grief he "reject[s] all love of women" (*Metamorphoses*, X, 82-83). It is not that Ovid presents Eurydice as "ungrievable" (in a social sense) which activates Orpheus's melancholic response, but his choice to actively *embody* grief – to allow that grief to consume him, so to speak – that acts as what Mortimer-Sandilands identifies above as "an ongoing psychic reminder of the fact of death." Rather than "moving on" and allowing his period of grief to pass, the bard lingers in his maudlin state, taking up, in turn, the custom of pederasty and fretting his lyre to the tune of songs wherein the unhappy potential outcomes of love affairs are emphasized. Orpheus's response to grief is to *adopt* and *embody* that grief, and it becomes not only the focus of his actions, but the sole subject matter of his art. Ovid therefore (inadvertently) demonstrates the power of melancholy as a force of preservation.

Ovid emphasizes the melancholic character of Orpheus via the insertion of the Cyparissus myth – the subject of which parallels Orpheus's loss, as I have demonstrated above. Indeed, the Cyparissus narrative codifies melancholy into Roman culture, as its repetition of and proximity to the Orphic lament enunciate both queerness and sadness. For rather than suggesting, say, that Cyparissus's grief is inappropriate or ought be subject for scrutiny and sanction, the earnest

persistence of Cyparissus's grief becomes an occasion for commendation. Cyparissus, in being transformed into the *Cypress* tree, comes to embody sustained grief – melancholy – when Apollo announces ““You shall be mourned by me, you shall mourn others, / And you shall always be where others grieve,”” (*Metamorphoses*, X, 147-8). In turn, we can appreciate this myth for its aetiological qualities (an aspect shared with many of the stories in the *Metamorphoses*), as it is designed to explicate the use of *Cupressus sempervirens* in Hellenic rituals of mourning (a practice that can be traced back, through Rome, to Athens).⁴²

But the death of the stag itself demands some closer examination, as it serves as the thematic linchpin by which the melancholy experienced by Orpheus is shown to be similar to that of Cyparissus and Apollo – a thematic parallel activating grief and melancholy in the scene. It is interesting that the stag – a non-human subject – is considered by Ovid (however sardonically) to be *worthy* of grief. In his essay “Sovereign Violence and the Figure of the Animal,” Tobias Menely, by way of Hobbes and Agamben, explores the susceptibility of animals “to this unjustifiable yet justifying violence... [which renders it] possible for animals to metamorphose into political subjects.”⁴³ Menely's study of sovereignty focuses on the paradox of exceptionality which the sovereign might derive from performative violence (namely, the highly ritualized hunting parties of early 18th century England), observing that:

Although the hunt ought to stabilize the distinction between human and animal, as an act of sovereign violence it renders indistinguishable justice and tyranny, as well as reason and passion, the very terms that secure ontological species difference.

Rather than suggesting that under the reign of Anne the distinction between animal and human has been stabilized in the just exercise

⁴² Servius, in a note to Virgil's *Aeneid* (3.680) makes it clear that Cypress was burned with ritualistic significance at Roman funerals. The formal Latin name for the cypress, *Cupressus sempervirens*, translates literally to “cypress, always green,” inflecting the significance of the name with a certain pathos.

⁴³ Menely 567

of sovereignty, the second hunting sequence [of Pope's *Windsor-Forest*] reveals animals to be indistinguishable from humans in their subjection and their suffering.

Menely 572, 577

As such, we might understand Cyparissus' zoophilic object-choice to have potentially radical political undertones. Not only does the Cyparissus passage call into question the rigid distinction between what marks an "acceptable" love-object (essentially "queering" the narrative) but Cyparissus's obviously melancholic response to the death he inadvertently causes reinscribes his affection with a sense of the ironic fragility of designating what might be construed as an appropriate object of affection. This coincides, of course, with Mortimer-Sandilands' exploration of how society constructs that which is "justifiably grievable" (*sic*). We might find a similar connection, with similar political undertones, between the "worthiness" of Cyparissus' grief for the stag, and that of Apollo's grief for Cyparissus, given that Apollo (a god) might be understood (within the context of the poem) to be ontologically distinct from Cyparissus (a "mere" (*sic*) mortal).

In this light, Apollo's experience of *paenitentia* does not so much undermine his stature as a god as it underscores the melancholic tone of the scene. The god is humanized, and this suggests in turn that Cyparissus, a mere mortal – and one possessing *mollis* qualities at that – rather than being "psychically un-grievable," is indeed worthy of genuine grief.⁴⁴ Moreover, by suggesting that the melancholy of Cyparissus ought to be valorized and, in a fashion, rewarded with a kind of immortality, it is implied that Ovid understood of the potential preservative power of grief (although this is embedded in the myth, beneath an ostensible desire to enunciate the lampooned qualities of Cyparissus and Apollo).

⁴⁴ Mortimer-Sandilands 333.

As I have demonstrated, one might come away from this passage with a more “humanized” understanding of the gods than perhaps Ovid intended. The poet, in being critical of Apollo (and, by extension, Augustus), underscores the social, transformative, power of grief and melancholy. In the next section of this paper, I will discuss how Robert Duncan responds to Ovid’s rendition of *Cyparissus*, offering a rendition that attempts to recover the source-text from its implicitly homophobic undertones. I will explore how Duncan’s “version” of the myth highlights the *recuperative* powers of melancholy already present therein, thereby offering a far more radical vision of queer identity. In the chapter that follows, I will turn my attention to how the recuperative powers of melancholy are used by Duncan in order to confront the psychic, social, and environmental toxicity brought about by the advent of the war in Vietnam.

Robert Duncan’s “Cyparissus”

In his revisitation of Ovid’s *Cyparissus*, the 20th century American poet Robert Duncan exaggerates the already-present homoerotic undertones in the myth. In doing so, he recovers the piece from Ovid’s homophobic subtext by re-evaluating the rigid notions of gender identity emphasized in the source material (specifically, what might be implied by one’s possession of *mollis* qualities). In turn, Duncan recasts the myth into his vision of what critic Eric Keenaghan identifies as “queer anarchism,” an inherently erotic ethic of language and poetry, designed to transform the state by mediating embodied experience and promoting transformative passions, rather than through rhetorically or physically violent forms of resistance.⁴⁵ This “queer anarchism” identified by Keenaghan coincides with Mortimer-Sandilands’ politicization of melancholy, in that one might understand melancholy itself as a form of nonviolent, experiential,

⁴⁵ Paraphrased from Eric Keenaghan, “Life, War, and Love: The Queer Anarchism of Robert Duncan’s Poetic Action during the Vietnam War.” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2008) (634-659).

resistance.⁴⁶ Through the “queer anarchism” advocated in the “Cyparissus” poem, Duncan offers a melancholic tone that Mortimer-Sandilands characterizes as a “psychic and potentially political response to homophobia: a preservation of both the beloved and the fact of love itself in the face of a culture that barely allows, let alone recognizes, intimate queer attachments.”⁴⁷

Robert Duncan’s textual and sexual politics have been well noted by critics, especially by Michael Davidson, whose essay “Marginality in the Margins” describes Duncan’s tendency to foreground his work in the material of other writers, treating the poem as what he terms a “palimtextual surface”.⁴⁸

For Duncan, poetry instantiates a ritual “scene of instruction” that inaugurates the poem and then becomes one of its central subjects... The ultimate meaning of this “field” of origins is often a sexual mystery – an allegory of homosexual or bisexual love – that has been suppressed within canonical books... What differentiates [Duncan’s] poetry from its predecessors in the nineteenth century is its deliberate foregrounding of intertextual layers as they impinge upon a single moment of reading.

Davidson 175-176

Duncan’s poetry, then, might begin as a line or lines reflecting briefly upon a source text, and then turn to offer (via a revisitation of that work and meditation on its contents) the poet’s own “take” on the matter at hand. In turn, one might understand Duncan’s “derivative” poetic techniques as a complex act of reading and response, creating an erotic conversation between the poet (Duncan), his source text(s), and the reader. Although bearing some similarity to, say, Ovid’s reinterpretation or re-evaluation of classical Hellenic myths (as in the case of the

⁴⁶ Although conventionally identified as a “passive” experience (i.e., that melancholy is “suffered” rather than “enacted”), my understanding of Mortimer-Sandilands’ conceit of melancholy (above) is that it might be *actively* experienced or undertaken as a condition *in response* to marginalization – that is, as a preservative force.

⁴⁷ Mortimer-Sandilands 339.

⁴⁸ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*. (Chapter 6: *Marginality in the Margins: Robert Duncan’s Textual Politics*). (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Press, 1997) (171-195). See also Edward Haley Foster’s chapter on Duncan, “Aspirations of the Word,” in *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets* for a reading of how Duncan’s anarchism and theosophic background coincide with his sexual identity (especially, pp 130-135).

Cyparissus passage, wherein the *mollis* qualities of Virgil's austere stag are burlesqued by Ovid), Davidson reads Duncan's use of this technique as a distinctly erotic practice:

[Sexual] and poetic emergence are complex acts of reading by which the poet is ravished by a language he cannot, as yet, understand. Duncan appropriates the romantic lyre to speak of speech so eroticized that it seems to come from someone else. And since these poems *do* come from another source, the poet may "send" them back in the expectation of some response. Wayne Koestenbaum has described this form of collaboration as a kind of "double talk" in which men who write together engage in a "metaphorical sexual intercourse," producing a figurative child in the form of the text they exchange between them.

Davidson 181

Duncan's upbringing in the theosophical tradition perhaps informs his tendency to deploy sustained textual conversations in the composition of his verse, a technique invested in allowing "archaic survivals of cultic and atavistic religions whose doctrines propose a unity of spirit and form, of soul and eros" to intrude into the text, invigorating it.⁴⁹ In turn, we might read Duncan's derivative textual practices as not only mere quotation or citation, but as a distinctly "queer" mode of composition.⁵⁰

A recurring figure (among many) throughout Duncan's *oeuvre*, Orpheus serves not just to foreground the lyric intensity or chthonic awareness of a piece, but to serve as a guide to an emerging metamorphic experience of sexuality and queer identity. In "El Desdichado," Duncan revisits the first of Gerard de Nerval's "The Chimeras," applying his characteristic intertextual commentary. Orpheus figures here as a specifically melancholic figure, one invested in the manifestation of the melancholy concurrent with erotic desire:

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁰ One might understand Duncan's incorporation of source material into his own poetry as a "receptive" act of textual and sexual practice (and therefore "feminine" or "queer") as opposed to Ovid's "active" – that is, heterosexual – appropriation and refiguration of Virgil's narratives.

I am the dark one, – the widower, – the unconsoled,
The prince of Aquitaine at his stricken tower:
My sole *star* is dead, – and my constellated lute
Bears the black *sun* of the *Melencolia*.

In the night of the tomb, you who consoled me,
Give me back Mount Posilipo and the Italian sea,
The *flower* which pleased so my desolate heart,
And the trellis where the grape vine unites with the rose.

Am I Amor or Phoebus? ... Lusignan or Biron?
My forehead is still red from the kiss of the queen;
I have dread in the grotto where the mermaid swims...

And two times victorious I have crosst the Acheron:
Modulating turn by turn on the lyre of Orpheus
The sighs of the saint and the cries of the fay.

Duncan, “El Desdichado (The Disinherited),” *Bending the Bow*, 1968

Simultaneously acquiring, commanding, the material attributes of Orpheus (“the dark one, – the widower”) and the ephemeral (“unconsoled, desolate heart”) Duncan takes on the spirit of Orphic sensibility and melancholy, adapting it to his own experience in the final unrhymed triplet. Duncan aligns himself with Orpheus in the same instance (the poem) that he undertakes to make a textual connection to Gerard de Nerval (by revisiting his poem). Sexual mystery and the unstable identity engendered by confronting it – “Am I Amor or Phoebus?” – resonate within the piece. We are recalled by Duncan, through Nerval, to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the frustrated erotic pursuits of Apollo throughout the text, as well as the complicated examinations of sexual identity demanded by Ovid of his characters in Book X. Duncan, in claiming to be *like* Orpheus, therefore modulates the textual, poetic, and “real” experiences of the reader at a chthonically charged site of sexual instruction, initiating a queer or queering response from his audience that he might invite an active experience of melancholy. The poem emphasizes the melancholic aspect of Orpheus in tandem with his bardic sensibility – “my constellated lute/ Bears the black *sun* of *Melencolia*” – privileging the grief of the demi-god as a meaningful,

transformative, aspect of his character. In turn, we might undertake to read Duncan's reading of Orpheus as a distinctly melancholic figure as an anticipation of Mortimer-Sandilands' later argument that "melancholia is a psychic state of being that holds the possibility for memory's transformation into ethical and political environmental reflection."⁵¹ This is especially clear in Duncan's revisitation of the Cyparissus myth, which is instructively entwined with both Ovid and Duncan's visions of Orpheus.

I would argue that the recurrence of Orpheus throughout Duncan's work signals the poet's sustained fascination with the interstices of the lyric, erotic desire, and the transgression of "normative" gender or sexual identity. As I have demonstrated, Ovid's version of the myth of Cyparissus is deeply entwined with an Orphic sensibility, emphasizing, via reflection, the melancholy experienced by the principal. Duncan, clearly aware of this, makes use of these politicized and melancholic resonances throughout his *oeuvre*. In his revisitation of Ovid's Cyparissus myth (in *Roots and Branches*, 1964), Duncan elaborates upon the source material of the piece, investing his own understanding of sexual awakening, awareness and experience into the story, that he might reclaim from the parodic, unsympathetic, tone of Ovid's original narrative a sympathetic reading of the emergence of queer identity. I would argue that this revision is underscored by a resonant, distinctive, note of queer melancholy, designed as political commentary operating in tandem with that vision of "queer anarchy" outlined by Keenaghan.

Duncan's revisitation of Ovid's Cyparissus myth is simultaneously a revisitation of Henry T. Riley's prose translations of the *Metamorphoses*, and the poet makes good use of Riley's footnotes.⁵² However, Duncan's use of intertextual derivation does not merely engender

⁵¹ Mortimer-Sandilands 354.

⁵² Duncan makes especial use of Riley's notes on the "*spina*" ("resembling the cone"), which Riley reads not as a device of phallic imagery, but as an observation of its similarities to the Roman Circus chariot circuit architecture.

commentary on the story or transliterate an extant text, but allows the poet to *inhabit* the scene and to address Cyparissus directly. Although much of Duncan's poem bears a striking similarity to Riley's translation of Ovid, Duncan's commentary (embedded in certain stanzas throughout the poem) underscores those melancholic aspects of the Cyparissus myth which, in turn, enunciate a politicized vision of grief:

How did you wound him? It is
as if man had great need of some agony,
for the youth Cyparissus,
knowing, yet unknowing,
pierced the lordly heart with his spear
and drew the life blood from his side
so that now as the god Orpheus sings
his song remembers the grief of that wound.

I too, drawing the story again from Ovid's pen,
know the bewildering knowledge in the beast's gaze
that search with trust in his lover's eyes
and found his own wound repeated there.
For love binds heart to human heart
and would sound the depth
from which the mortal life cries out. Apollo's art
that from the lyre
sends notes to pierce the human soul
from which the life of music flows
sends the arrow from the bow.

from Duncan's "Cyparissus" (stanzas 8 and 9)

Duncan correctly identifies the wounding of the stag as a key moment in the narrative, suggesting that the melancholy engendered by that wound is a crucial psychic element embedded in human experience – "as if man had great need of some agony." In Duncan's "Cyparissus," melancholy is not just found, encountered, or experienced, but is actively *sought out* by the poet as a means by which to incorporate the reader into a conversation demanding vulnerability and anticipating the preservation of a (queer) experience deemed taboo by society, and conventionally figured as "ungrievable." As such, we might read Duncan's line as operating

parallel to Mortimer-Sandilands' interpretation of a passage from Judith Butler's *Precarious Lives*, in that both authors suggest how the *private* experience of grief and vulnerability might come to signify a *public* address via that sustained ritual of mourning, melancholy:

... "[Loss] and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (Butler 2004, 20) – in other words, although we are constituted as social beings by loss and its continual possibility – not all losses are created equal, and only some attachments and relationships are considered “real” enough to merit public consideration.

Mortimer-Sandilands, 339-40

Duncan realizes in the above stanzas that Cyparissus's fatal action – the unfortunate and unintended spearing of the stag – reveals an underlying aspect of experience that, activated by melancholic experience, makes possible a *connection* between subjects. The realization of one's sexually mature identity (especially that which is conventionally identified as “queer”) is an emergence from a private space into the public sphere. Especially in the “queer” experience of our society, this emergence – what we call “coming out” – can be unnecessarily painful, albeit necessary, to undergo. Duncan's very public acknowledgement (in a published and widely circulated collection of poems) of that “great need for some agony” thus underlines the acquisition of the “bewildering knowledge” that one's lived experience can be, and often is, a site or state of melancholy and grief. And yet Duncan realizes the potentially transformative power of this pain in observing that “love” which “binds heart to human heart” resembles the “art” of Apollo “that from the lyre sends notes to pierce the human soul” – yet another provocative avenue of intersubjective communication. Love, for Duncan, operates as much in the realm of the “painful” as it does in the “harmonious” or musical, and when brought into the public sphere – as Cyparissus does when he “pierces” the stag – this love can enact a shared psychic pain that resonates throughout human experience.

Perhaps Duncan's sympathy for the stag's experience of the "wound" and for that "bewildering knowledge" stemming from Cyparissus's "failed" initiation into erotic maturity are rooted in his youth, in an experience of physical and sexual violence in which he was simultaneously cast as both victim and perpetrator. In an interview with the magazine *Gay Sunshine* in 1976, Duncan recounts being pursued by an older boy in a formative sexual encounter, during which he was beaten, subsequently detained by the police, and forced to admit his own complicity in the violent seduction. In taking on the status of being doubly marginalized – of being beaten and then forced to reject his "victim" status – Duncan's initiation into erotic maturity inscribes violence into sexual experience.⁵³ From this "margin," then, the source of the poet's empathy for the stag – as well as Cyparissus – becomes more apparent. In spite of having been violated, though, Duncan continues to reject this overt victimization within the story in the interest of constructing a mature identity, "binding heart to human heart," that "Apollo's art" (poetry, music, and especially, it must be remembered, *healing*) might flourish.

In "Cyparissus," as in "El Desdichado," Duncan adopts an Orphic character or sensibility, perceiving here, perhaps, his, the stag's, and Cyparissus's wounds⁵⁴ as akin to Orpheus's cause for lament ("his song remembers the grief of that wound"). Ovid's critique of the instability of gendered power is retained, but Duncan re-defines the site of the critique, composing a poem that destabilizes the marginality imposed on victims of sexual violence, rather than indicting those who would not conform to social constructions (Roman or contemporary) of gendered identity. Duncan therefore conducts a full-scale re-evaluation of gendered identity in his rendition of the Cyparissus myth, overturning the value system that would condemn one's

⁵³ Paraphrased from Davidson, 188-189.

⁵⁴ (Be they biographical, spiritual, physical, sexual, or psychic wounds.)

mollis qualities by emphasizing “*mollis*” as the source of love, art, and wisdom, and the vulnerability to others entailed in this.

Duncan’s commitment to politicizing sexuality and melancholy, rooted not just in early tragedy but in an early alignment with political anarchism, clearly figures within his “marginal” disruption of Ovid’s original tale. Keenaghan reads Duncan’s work as inherently anarchistic, and as a poetry designed to resist the strictures imposed upon an individual’s identity by society:

In Duncan’s anarchistic philosophy, poetry is not a revolutionary’s tool; rather, it is a creative means of striving toward an alternative vision of life, one rivaling the state’s idea of what life ought to be. Despite popular misconceptions, anarchism is founded upon creative, rather than destructive, modes of opposing the state... Creativity might help expose a forgotten groundwork for human collectivity wherein individuals act freely yet, because they cooperatively work together, do not interfere with others’ liberties.

Keenaghan 634-635

Social constructions of gender identity (queer, straight, trans, et cetera) are thereby reconceived in Duncan’s work. Language, “an erotic vehicle mediating embodied experience and promoting transformative passions”⁵⁵ becomes a means to facilitate resistance to dichotomizing attitudes and brittle structures of identity. His activation of a Butlerian sense of “melancholy” in *Cypris* facilitates the politicization of queer identity further. Whereas Ovid’s rendition of *Cypris* indicts the principals (the stag, *Cypris*, Apollo, and Orpheus) for their failure to conform to the rigid gender assignment of Roman society, Duncan treats the story as a site in which gender identity and sexual preference might be explored and transgressed sympathetically. This coincides with Menely’s argument in “Sovereign Violence...” that “humans and other animals, as sentient and vulnerable life, are equally subject to the disfigurements of sovereign

⁵⁵ Keenaghan 653.

violence,”⁵⁶ in that Duncan emphasizes the viability of Cyparissus’s grief for the stag, reinscribing what might be characterized as “transgressive” affection with sympathy and empathy, thereby affirming the appropriateness of a sense of politicized melancholy engendered by the loss of a queer, non-human, subject.

For where Ovid implies Apollo’s expression of *paenitentia* to be an indication of weakened or unstable gender identity, Duncan realizes the god’s experience of melancholy (and its underlying political potential) as a positive attribute. In Duncan’s revision of the myth, Apollo’s expression of emotion not only offers a means by which the god becomes reinvigorated, but as a site in which one might encounter a rejuvenative experience:

For what did Apollo know befor Hyacinth
that all men know of death and loss?

But moved by the beauty of Cyparissus
he removed him into the beauty of pure lament.
He bent grief, as he bends Love ever,
into an immortal fever without relief.

So that Cyparissus begd of our Father Zeus
some lonely change in what he was
that he might mourn, some form
to emerge from his inconsolate weeping
– his hair stiffening into black leaves,
his body flung out against the sky
as if speaking forever
man’s stark cry remembering death.

Then Apollo filld therefrom
the need for sorrow the Sun has.
For the deep of the god’s light
is a cup that needs man’s weeping to be filld
and He brings ever
changes of joy and grief therefore, like Orpheus,
deriving his art from what men suffer,
and would strike at the heart

⁵⁶ Menely 570.

to make his song.

from Duncan's "Cyparissus," (stanzas 11, 12, and 13)

Duncan maintains the critical spirit of Ovid's original rendition of the Cyparissus myth,⁵⁷ but realigns Ovid's subtextual homophobia to advance his distinctly *anti*-homophobic agenda.

Whereas Ovid depicts the frailty of a power-structure in which the boundaries of gendered identity are strictly enforced, casting Apollo as emblematic or symptomatic of a flawed power structure, Duncan embraces the transgression of "normative" behavior. Perceiving this

transgression as a vehicle to recover society from the violence implicit in homophobic

philosophies, Duncan's vision of queer anarchism and politicized melancholy activates the

myth's untapped empathetic capacity. In turn, Duncan poses Cyparissus (the myth, Ovid's text, and his own "version") as a site from which transformation might be enacted in the reader.

Duncan's poem, therefore, co-opts the "penetration" at play in the myth, activating in the reader an erotically charged reassessment of his or her own notions of transgression, phobia, and empathy.

The penetrability of Cyparissus (and, by extension, of the stag, and even Apollo) implies their capacity to experience and engage in acts of politicized melancholy – to "[derive] art from what men suffer." Vulnerability, the capacity to receive a wound and a marker of (subordinate) femininity in Roman culture, becomes in Duncan's work a mark of artistic and creative strength, and therefore a means by which an alternative vision of life – one rivaling the vision of the heteronormative hegemony of "the state" – might be realized. In "Cyparissus," Duncan thus rewrites a potentially problematic myth – one which might be deployed as an unfair critique of

⁵⁷ See the previous section for my discussion of how Book X of the *Metamorphoses* serves, perhaps, as a critique of Roman sexual practices that might today be termed "deviant."

“failed” masculinity – re-casting it as a means by which creativity and sexual nonconformity coincide with nonviolent erotic and political activism.

In the following chapter, we will consider how this capacity for a politically-charged sense and experience of melancholy engenders a potent critique of political and environmental toxicity, and how the specter of Orpheus – disembodied in a sense of what I term “Orphic Ecology” – guides the reader to a “queered and anarchistic” (*sic*) understanding of one’s various physical and ideological environments.

Chapter 2: *Ambience and Toxicity in Robert Duncan's "The Fire"*

In his essay "The Plural Text: 'Passages'" (1979), Ian Reid offered a reading of Robert Duncan's then-incomplete series of poems, "The Passages," outlining the mythopoeic framework upon which Duncan's text relies. In Reid's reading of Duncan, the tropes of "Love," "War," and "Harmony" form the conceptual bedrock through which Duncan's "Passages" poems may be read. Following Reid's understanding of the poem, Duncan poses *Love* as the conceit against which the oppositional relationship between War and Harmony gains tension and is made universally experienceable. In *Bending the Bow* (1968), Duncan's third major work, the poet focuses his attention on the *arc* of that bow "til the end rimes in the taut string/ with sending... 'there is a connexion working in both directions, as in/ the bow and the lyre.'"⁵⁸ Speaking (evasively) of his poetic techniques in the introduction to *Bending the Bow* Duncan identified these "connexions" as "Rimes, the reiteration of formations in the design, even puns, lead[ing] into complexities of the field," sensing (or perhaps conjuring) the latent connections between words and their referents.⁵⁹ Duncan goes on to invigorate his notion of "rime" with a sense of how it corresponds to the entire "form" of a poem:

The artist, after Dante's poetics, works with all parts of the poem as *polysemous*, taking each thing of the composition as generative of meaning, a response to and a contribution to the building form.
Bending the Bow, ix

Duncan's *rimes* thus reflect the parallel tensions, identified by Reid, between music and violence, affection and mistrust, and illness and death, and these tensions are then reflected in the forms Duncan's poems take. In the *Passages* poems, Love and War and Harmony are tensed against each other, and as the *bow* might just as well be put to the work of violence as to the

⁵⁸ Duncan, Robert. "Bending the Bow," in *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968) (7).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vi.

work of music (and, in its verb form, might imply deference, i.e. “harmony”) the possible tensions of the bow take on a mythopoeic significance, framing the *Passages* poems in what Duncan terms “a field of ratios in which events appear in language.”⁶⁰ In this chapter of the thesis, I will explore these apparent tensions in “The Fire,” the thirteenth of the *Passages* poems, discussing how the erotic intertextuality of form activated by Duncan (explored in the prior chapter) is both describable and consistent with theoretical ecopoetic terminology.

Reid’s essay observes that in Duncan’s work *War* is an erotic affair, entwined with *Eros*, and that therefore the Harmonies brought forth by music, perhaps in the service of Love, might too be turned to violence.⁶¹ The poetry of Duncan is informed by War – it is not resistant to it, or *in resistance* against it (as in the protest poetry of his protégé and sometime-friend Denise Levertov) – but is in *Harmony* with it, and depends upon finding some concordance between creation and destruction – so that something *more* might spring from the ashes. Duncan acknowledges, accepts, and perhaps seeks to *guide* the harmonies he perceives in the subjects of his texts, turning his Gnostic articulations of theology, politics, song, and (above all) *rime* toward a mimetic rendering of that *Anima Mundi* (Latin for “world soul”) which threads the world, giving definition to an indistinct, ephemeral, “world spirit.”⁶² In his own words:

The ground is compounded of negative and positive areas in which we see shapes defined. In the immediate work, puns appear. The line of the poem is articulated into phrases so that phrases of its happening resonate where they will. Or lines stand as stanzas in themselves of our intentions... This is not a field of the irrational; but a field of ratios in which events appear in language.

Bending the Bow, v

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, v.

⁶¹ Reid, Ian W. “The Plural Text: ‘Passages.’” in *Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous (Insights, Working Papers in Contemporary Criticism)*. Eds. Bertolf, Robert J. & Reid, Ian W. (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1980) (161-180).

⁶² Davidson succinctly addresses Duncan’s complex spirituality, and its impact on his poetic thinking, in his essay: “[Duncan] identified with heresies, whether Albignesian, Kabalist, Manichaeian, Black Mountain, or Protestant, and saw his poetic vocation as part of a brotherhood of poetic adepts, locked in battle against the establishment... This commitment to marginality was, to some extent, derived from his upbringing in a theosophical household where esoteric texts and spiritualism were part of everyday, middle-class life,” (Davidson, 174).

I would offer a reading of Duncan which encounters this field, making use of the poet's mythopoeic renderings, textual forms, and prosodic choices in order to parse out what I see as the ecologic imperatives of the text. In response to the eroticism explored in the first chapter, I would offer a reading of Duncan as an environmental poet, and as a poet of environments.

Robert Duncan's poetry tends to be as anarchic as its *auteur*. As such, his poems are resistant to criticism, especially critical formulae which rely upon conventional readings of texts. One encountering his texts for the first time might sense their *music*, their lyricism, but the *meaning* of that music (as such) is elusive given Duncan's tendency (especially in the "Passages" series of poems) to obfuscate traditional prosody and narrative with his "rimes," puns, and lineation.⁶³ Whereas critical work on Duncan has tended to focus exclusively on parsing out what might be entailed by his field of references, or on what is implied or informed by his biography in relation to the texts, I would try a different tactic here, and offer a reading (informed, of course, by prior parses and implications) of the *ecologies* of Duncan's work. By reading Duncan's poetry as ecological – that is, as a series of interrelations between distinct and yet entwined subjects and objects – some clarity might occur, and deep, exciting implications for the reader might be made more clear. Specifically, I am interested in reading Duncan through the field-work (so to speak) of a similarly elusive spirit, the critic Timothy Morton.

In his book *Ecology without Nature*, Morton grapples with Hegel's Beautiful Soul, with the consumerist implications of perceiving "Nature" as an object distinct from its subject, and toward a reading of ecology that does not rely on simple understandings of the subjective state. Morton outlines a mode of reading ecomimesis and ambience in texts and environments, posing a vehicle of ecocritique that resists what he terms the "Beautiful Soul syndrome" inhabiting some

⁶³ In short, much of Duncan's best work might be categorized as "obscure."

tendencies of environmental writing and eco-criticism. Following Hegel, Morton identifies the *beautiful soul* as a by-product of Romanticism's aestheticization of nature, "a persona of the 'unhappy consciousness' that separates humanity and nature."⁶⁴ "Beautiful Soul syndrome" occurs when the aesthetic is fused with the moral domain, and the beautiful soul "maintains a split between self and world, an irresolvable chasm created by the call of conscience" while simultaneously "yearn[ing] to close the gap."⁶⁵

Morton identifies the *beautiful soul* as "the ultimate hypocrite...which cannot see that the evil it condemns is intrinsic to its existence."⁶⁶ For example, one experiences "beautiful soul syndrome" when perceiving Nature (for instance) as a reified object – something "over there," and distinct from our own subjective experience – to be prized on the one hand and yet commodified by the other. I would argue that Duncan's formal and aesthetic techniques undermine this tendency toward "Beautiful Soul syndrome" (*sic*), and that we might therefore understand the ecology of his poetics as radical spaces in which to experience our ideology and intersubjectivity.

Specifically, I am drawn to the terminology Morton outlines in the first chapter of *Ecology without Nature* – a rhetoric for describing and understanding ecomimesis which relies on the terminology of art and music criticism. I would deploy those terms in a reading of Robert Duncan, whose poetry is informed by similar fields of expression. In turn, I will apply the work outlined by Morton and Catrolina Mortimer-Sandilands in their essays conceptualizing "queer ecology," offering up an ecologically aware reading of Duncan that reconciles his politics, art, and techniques with the ecological framework apparent in his poem "The Fire: Passages 13" from *Bending the Bow*.

⁶⁴ Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature*. (Harvard University Press, 2007) (117).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

My goal, then, is to bind “queer” and “environmental” readings of texts in pursuit of what I term “Orphic Ecology,” a poetic mode operating in a queer “space” which (via the Butlerian *melancholia* and politicized mourning explored in the first Chapter) inspires and anticipates an ecological awareness that is resistant to political and environmental toxicity – those aspects of “Beautiful Soul syndrome” which simultaneously affect and denigrate our intersubjective experiences. Orphic Ecology notes that the term “Nature” (a “dirty” word in Morton’s text, where it is the conceptual boogeyman of postindustrial society) is a product of capitalism, and relies on Morton’s argument that “nature does not necessarily take us outside society, but actually forms the bedrock of nationalist enjoyment... [and is] a way of establishing racial and sexual [privilege].”⁶⁷ Vis-à-vis melancholic expressions, the subject in danger of succumbing to a “Beautiful Soul syndrome” might politicize that danger and come to privilege (and even take pleasure in) one’s own intersubjective state. As I will demonstrate, in “The Fire” Duncan’s technique of ambient poetics confronts and destabilizes the anxiety of distinction experienced by the *beautiful soul*, advocating for a perceiving-perspective that encounters toxicity without succumbing to a notion of anti-futurity (on the one hand) or complacency (on the other) by way of the preservative-melancholic response outlined in the first chapter.

Ambient Poetics in Duncan’s *The Fire Passages 13*

I agree with Morton’s assertion in *Ecology without Nature* that “*Ecocritique* is critical and self-critical [and] similar to queer theory [in that] it thoroughly examines how nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category,” and believe that Duncan’s *The Fire* might

⁶⁷ Morton, 15-16. Morton, citing the queer theorist Georges Canguilhem, also notes that “The normal was set up as different from the pathological along the coordinates of the *natural* and the *unnatural*.” We might therefore see how some disruption of the concept of “Nature” might advance the anti-homophobic critique outlined in Chapter 1.

be complicated (and therefore invigorated) when read through the critical lens developed by Morton.⁶⁸ Although he is not generally identified as an “environmental” poet in the sense that one might ascribe this label to Wordsworth or Gary Snyder (for example), I will demonstrate in this section that Duncan’s poetics resound with ecomimetic tactics and effects, and an ecologic understanding of experience significantly informs his work. Duncan’s poetry consistently calls upon the reader to experience and then *actively engage with* the ambience of experience – what he sometimes refers to as *Anima Mundi* (as in his introduction to *Bending the Bow*). This engagement with ambience follows, in part, one of the “poetic imperatives” laid out by Charles Olson in his essay *Projective Verse*, namely that “One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception”.⁶⁹ Olson’s dictum certainly informs the prosodic⁷⁰ aspect of Duncan’s sense of *Anima Mundi*, but the gnostic and theosophic background of the poet make his perceptions palpably *real* insofar as the thematic elements of the poems are concerned. Duncan’s “perceptions,” what he called “rimes,” are manifestations of the ambient web of correspondences between works of art and working artists (living and dead alike).

In his critical introduction to the work of the Black Mountain poets, Edward Foster identifies Duncan’s use of rime as an acknowledgement of the links “between one’s own voice and the voice of other poets... so Duncan believed that all poetry, indeed all art, participated in a single grand system.”⁷¹ As such, Duncan styled himself a “derivative” poet, considering his

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁹ Olson, *Human Universe & Other Essays*. Ed. Donald Allen. (San Francisco: Auerhahn, 1965).

⁷⁰ My conceit of “prosody” in this paper (unless otherwise noted) does not necessarily concern the conventional domain of prosody (i.e., rhyme and meter), but, rather, reflects the concept of “derivations” and “rimes” outlined by Duncan in his introduction (explored at the beginning of this chapter), and the intertextual charge and potency of the lines and words that compose a poem. In this sense Duncan understands prosody in the sense understood in the field of Linguistics, as a phonological reflection of various features of the speaker or utterance (such as their emotional state) and aspects of language not necessarily encoded by grammar or vocabulary. See Nespor.

⁷¹ Foster, Edward Halsey. *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1995) (125).

poetry engaged – in all senses of the word – with the world, art, and gnosis.⁷² This derivative sense does not merely concern the relationship between Duncan and his various sources, but implies that the poet’s “connections” (for example, *to* his audience, *through* his poems, and *with* his sources) are every bit as present and palpable “in the poem” as the poet himself. These connections made through derivations are, of course, coherent with the sense of erotically charged textual conversations outlined by Davidson in *Ghostlier Demarcations* in the previous chapter. Duncan’s understanding of art as a “grand system” of participating experiences resembles the “mesh” developed by Morton in *The Ecological Thought* and (later) *Hyperobjects*:

A mesh consists of relationships between crisscrossing strands of metal and gaps between the strands. Meshes are potent metaphors for the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences. When an object is born it is instantly enmeshed into a relationship with other objects in the mesh.

Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 83

In *Ecology without Nature*, Morton offers intersubjectivity, “an entanglement of minds with other minds and perhaps nonmental or inanimate things,” as a term for understanding both “the field” and “the body” as post-industrial aspects of environmental consciousness – in other words, the experience of consciousness in the human subject (in Morton) is as palpably “environmental” or *of* the environment as those material objects which make up the environment itself (trees, carbon, water vapor, and mountains, for example).⁷³ Morton advocates for an intersubjective awareness of ecology as a means by which one might counter the neoliberal colonization of “nature,” wherein, following the industrial revolution, “[E]nvironmentalism...runs the risk of

⁷² Duncan, Robert. “Introduction,” *Bending the Bow*, 1968.

⁷³ Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 106. Morton’s thinking, here, resembles the work of Deleuze and Guattari in their work *A Thousand Plateaus*, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s *Chiasm*.

being a rebranded version of regular economics.”⁷⁴ Duncan’s work with “rime” and “derivation” is perhaps similarly attuned. By way of his riming and deriving, the poet dispenses with notions that the text might be understood as a product of capital, preferring to understand art and artistry as “belonging” to a collective gnostic or theosophic world spirit. In turn, one must understand Duncan’s writing as operating in an ambient mesh of intersubjective pieces – an ecological poetics.

Morton’s work in outlining, defining, and deploying a critical rhetoric for ambient poetics is crucial to understanding Duncan’s work as an “environmental” poetry. Focusing on how one might encounter ecomimesis as “an authenticating device” in poetry, Morton works to establish how one might read and understand “the environment” in a broad-thinking, anti-capitalist manner: as “a surrounding atmosphere, more or less palpable, yet ethereal and subtle” (Morton 33). His crucial work in the first section of *Ecology without Nature* articulates how experimental ecomimesis in various mediums uses several elements of ambient poetics in order to enact an ecomimetic rendering of the world that does not rely on mere imagery:⁷⁵

There are six main elements [of ambient poetics]: *rendering*, the *medial*, the *timbral*, the *Aeolian*, *tone*, and, most fundamentally, the *re-mark*. These terms overlap, and are somewhat arbitrary and vague. Rendering refers to the result of ambient poetics, its telos. Tone describes the material makeup. Medial, Aeolian, and timbral refer to technical or “efficient” processes – effects. ... The fact that the terminology derives from diverse forms reflects the significance of multimedia in general, and synesthesia in particular, in inspiring the notion of an ambient poetics.

Morton 34

Duncan’s tendency to compose poetry in an intersubjective field of referents – whether we call them “derivations” or a “mesh” – invites a close reading by way of Morton’s terminology of

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-35, paraphrase.

ambient poetics. The sometimes elusive qualities of Duncan’s prosodies and narratives – readily apparent in his series of poems “The Passages” – demand a close reading that relies on a technical appreciation for the aesthetics of prosody not readily available by way of attention to what might be entailed in the direct correspondences to his references as such. Duncan’s poem “The Fire” is ecomimetic in that it offers a sense of the “mesh-quality” of intersubjective experience by adopting a transhistorical, interconnected purview of social, political, and environmental toxicity.

This “toxicity” is not rendered by way of “imagery” (i.e., statements such as ‘the world has grown toxic because *X looks like Y*’) – a “weak” form of ecomimesis that, although potentially appealing aesthetically has little substantial meaning – but by consecutive renderings of experience and perceptions *through* time and art (as one might, perhaps, come to understand the contents of a culture by walking through a museum). This is to say that “imagery” in art or poetry – when it occurs as mere description of a place or scene – does little to actually place one in an environment, or to impact the viewing-subject’s potential for a meaningful relation for that which is being described. By contrast, “strong” ecomimesis reduces or disrupts the aesthetic distance between the subject and whatever aspect of “Nature” on display for the subject’s imagination. Morton offers a passage from David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* as an example of ecomimesis that succeeds at offering compelling *imagery* but fails to destabilize the aesthetic distance between the subject and “Nature,” therefore reinscribing the “Beautiful Soul syndrome” onto his audience.⁷⁶ Whereas Abram and similar thinkers would craft a non-reflexive ecomimesis designed to render the mediating voice of the author invisible, as I will demonstrate below, Duncan’s ecomimetic techniques immerse the author and audience in the *field* and *form*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 128-133, paraphrase.

of the poem, thereby engaging the reader in an immersive experience. In reading Duncan, we commune with the poet, and, likewise, with the field of correspondences that he invokes to convey an aesthetic experience. Moreover, we are perhaps expected to “enter” the poem and “lose” ourselves in it, so to speak. “*The Fire: Passages 13*” (in *Bending the Bow*, 1968) offers an especially interesting course for interpretation, as it operates, significantly, between the juxtaposed aesthetic spaces of Renaissance paintings, American neo-liberal politics, and a classical mythography.

Generally received as a critique of the Vietnam War, “The Fire,” the thirteenth poem in Duncan’s career- and book-spanning “Passages” cycle, relies heavily on the derivative techniques employed by Duncan (and explored in the first chapter of this project). In “The Fire,” Duncan’s critique of the war in Vietnam and of psycho-social toxicity is embedded within a narrative that finds the poet variously encountering, describing, and reflecting upon the techniques of multiple paintings and passages of prose and poetry. The poet approaches war and toxicity by way of two Renaissance paintings, Piero di Cosimo’s *A Forest Fire* and Hieronymus Bosch’s *Christ Carrying the Cross*,⁷⁷ identifying a “Devil’s chemistry” at play in the latter painting which recalls him to the “devilish” chemistry employed in the development of agents of large-scale destruction – namely, the atomic bomb and that which might be most succinctly

⁷⁷ Bosch painted three versions of this scene, all conventionally referred to by the title *Christ Carrying the Cross*; the paintings reside in various cities – one in Vienna (painted ca. 1480), a Madrid version (ca. 1500), and one in Ghent (ca. 1520); stylistically, the Viennese and Madrid versions are very similar. It is somewhat unclear as to which version of the painting Duncan is referring, although he describes the scene as “The faces of the deluded leer, faint, in lewd praise,/ close their eyes in voluptuous torment,/ enthralled by fear...” indicating the Ghent version – the faces of the figures there are grotesque. However, the Madrid version of the painting (which corresponds to the date offered by the poet) employs the *sfumato* technique with which the poet is fascinated in the background, as part of the skyline. I would suggest that it is perhaps valuable to look at each version of the painting, as Duncan very well might be “riming” their features.

identified as the military industrial complex.⁷⁸ In doing so, those forces which seek “to conspire, to coerce, to cut down” are exposed by Duncan as agents of destruction – not only of an identifiably *human* peace, but of an ecologically-attuned sense of “Eden,” where “natural” forces are systematically violated by human and human-inspired oppressors. Orpheus figures in the poem in a distinctly *bardic* capacity, whereby Duncan reminds the reader that Orphic music is both generative and regenerative, composed of “chords and melodies of the spell that binds/ the many in conflict in contrasts of one mind.”⁷⁹

I would argue that in “The Fire,” Duncan communicates a state of political and ecological emergency, using the structure and prosodic qualities of the poem as the vehicle by which to communicate anxieties pointed up by the advent of the atomic age. A state of queer melancholy (following Mortimer-Sandilands and Butler) inflects the subliminal text of the poem, offering a means by which one might reconcile the toxic politics and ecology which confront the reader-subject. In effect, this is similar to the politicization of melancholy enacted by Duncan in his rendition of *Cyparissus*. However, whereas Duncan arrives at this effect in “*Cyparissus*” by way of an immediately perceptible interjection of commentary (“I too...”) in “The Fire” Duncan’s political articulations and anxieties are conveyed via an ecomimetic rendering and re-rendering of “the environment” of the poem itself. I would argue then that the poem serves as a primary exemplum of the ways in which radical ecomimesis might be deployed as a vehicle to question the sociopolitical and ecological status quo. Where in “*Cyparissus*” we are politicized by commentary, in “The Fire” Duncan mobilizes his audience by way of textual, formal, practice.

⁷⁸ Given that the poem is responding in part to the war in Vietnam, one especially thinks of napalm here, as it is Fire weaponized utterly. Duncan does not mention napalm specifically, but its use by American forces in the destruction of both human and arboreal life in Vietnam (as well his closing lines of the poem – “They are burning the woods, the brushlands, the/ grassy fields razed”) of course conjures the image of napalm.

⁷⁹ Duncan, “The Fire,” *Bending the Bow*.

“The Fire” begins and ends with a series of words arranged in a grid, approximating what Ross Hair, following Christopher Beach’s work on Ezra Pound in *The ABC of Influence*, identifies as resembling “the Chinese ideogram”:

Here the words can be read in any direction within their arrangement (either horizontally, as in English, vertically as in Chinese, or even backward or diagonally). Thus, the words themselves, removed from any fixed syntactic or sequential relation to each other, can serve as visual images as well as units of language...The words take shape in the reader’s mind both as individual mental images, as parts of a more complex picture made up by the whole square, and as a complex ideogrammic configuration.

Hair 134-135

The resemblance of Duncan’s word-grids to the structure of Chinese ideograms is one of the more singular aspects of “The Fire,” and we might read the form of these sections to be, in effect, a reflection of Taoist cosmology, which, in its graphic form (that is, poetry), “retains a direct visual connection to the empirical world.”⁸⁰ In doing so, we might begin to understand how Duncan’s prosodic choices (in “The Fire,” especially) demand a reading which accommodates an understanding of his poetic techniques – especially the ideogrammatic arrangement of words in systems – as innately ecological.

In his discussion of the adoption of Chinese poetics by twentieth century western writers (especially Pound, Williams, and Robert Creeley), Wai-Lim Yip suggests that part of the appeal of this particular form to modernist and imagist poetics might coincide with the understanding of “the Chinese ideogram as an amassing vortex.”⁸¹ Indeed, the formal demands of the ideogram initiate a poetics “authenticating the fluctuation of concrete events in Phenomenon, their ability to preserve the multiple relationships in a kind of penumbra of indeterminateness, [which]

⁸⁰ Hinton, David. *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*. (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) (xx).

⁸¹ Yip, Wai-Lim. *Chinese Poetry: Major Modes and Genres*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976) (30).

depend to a great extent upon the sparseness of syntactical demands.”⁸² When adopted in the twentieth century by modernist poets and their successors (especially, Duncan), these formal attributes effectively adapt the Taoist cosmology (first expressed in the Zhou dynasty – ca. 1050-250 B.C.E.) to a (then-) contemporary worldview. In his introduction to *Classical Chinese Poetry*, the scholar-translator David Hinton suggests that one might understand this particular Taoist worldview to operate in a similar mode as those ambient ecological poetics explored by Morton in *Ecology without Nature* and *Hyperobjects*:

... [Taoist cosmology and poetics are] deeply ecological, weaving the human into the “natural world” in the most profound way (indeed, the distinction between human and nature is entirely foreign to it)...

The deep structure of the Taoist/Ch’an cosmology is shared not only by the poetic language but by consciousness as well. Consciousness, too, participates as an organic part of the dynamic processes of the cosmos, for thoughts appear and disappear in exactly the same way as presence’s ten thousand things.

Hinton xxiii, xxiv

Of course, we must not assume that Duncan is seeking solely to advance an explicit Taoist worldview – however, the poet’s adaptation of the ideogrammatic technique is significant in that it bears such a striking resemblance to the ideogrammatic structure of classical Chinese poetry. In turn, we might be well advised as readers of “The Fire” to appreciate the deeper ecological connections between words and the empirical world which Duncan subtly alludes to in his adaptation of ideogrammatic technique; this, of course, resembles the intersubjective mesh theorized by Morton in his works on ecological poetics.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 25.

This technical appreciation for the prosodic “nature” of the text of the poem is valuable, but does only a little to accommodate what Duncan might be attempting to communicate via the “content” of the words which compose the ideograms themselves. They are, generally speaking, words with “natural” entailments – “leaf,” “sun,” “earth,” “fish,” et cetera – but they are not, by and large, words with wholly concrete referents. Some of the words (“jump,” “close,” “rise,” and so forth) might be read as either verb or noun, and many (“boat,” “coin,” “purl,” “harbor,” for instance) indicate a certain degree of “human” entailment. A range of syllabic structures (“downstream” vs. “wet”) and the scales between euphony and cacophony (“circle” vs. “plash”) are ranged, but there is little here to indicate what focuses *the intent* of the poet’s language. Moreover, while some of the words which compose the ideogram perhaps offer “concrete” idea-referents (“coin” and “foot,” for instance), others are more abstract notions (i.e., “dark” and “new”).

As such, these ideograms offer little in the way of an identifiable narrative structure, and yet they invite the reader into ontological terrain that is at once familiar and unfamiliar. Moreover, the words which compose the ideograms are “ambient” in that they demand the reader immerse his or her self in a linguistic field, one which activates a series of subjective correspondences grounded in an aestheticized awareness of objects – experiences and knowledges of “jump” or “dark” or “waver” will vary from reading-subject to reading-subject, and yet there is an ontological stability shared by Duncan’s potential readership. “Circle” remains, essentially and substantially, “circle,” though two people might imagine shapes of different sizes, colors, et cetera. The ideogrammatic arrangements in “The Fire” make the “meshiness” of the (Mortonian) “mesh” palpable, therefore immersing Duncan’s audience in his

field of correlations. In turn, the audience becomes aware of its ecological relation to Duncan, and of the ecological relations rendered and intensified by the poem.

Indeed, Duncan's ideogrammatic arrangements are simultaneously resistant to comfortable categorization and yet familiar enough to invite reflection or appraisal from the reader. Significantly, the ideogrammatic structure is rearranged in its second manifestation at the close of the poem – the grid of six-by-six words is rotated counter-clockwise, as if the ideogram itself had been spun on an axis.⁸³ One possible reading of these words relies on a generalized understanding of their epistemic entailments – they are, broadly speaking, “natural” things or notions, that is, objects and concepts which occur in a “material” sense or via material sensation or understanding. This is a *very* broad and *very* generalized understanding of the “contents” of these ideograms, but that generalized breadth is perhaps necessary to accommodate an understanding of one's initial approach to the poem. For Duncan demands that we encounter, and become intimately aware of, “the big picture” in our approach to his texts; in turn we are immersed in the ambient field in which his poetry operates.

More than a few ambient effects of ecomimesis are in play in these sections of *The Fire*, and Morton's critical terminology is therefore useful in garnering a more nuanced appreciation of what Duncan may be effecting via the ideograms which bookend the poem.

Drawing on the work of “the concrete music composer and cinema theorist Michel Chion,” Morton offers the term “*rendering*” as a way to understand those techniques which “generate a more or less consistent sense of atmosphere or world.”⁸⁴ The technique of rendering, as employed by Morton, might best be understood in this context as an attempt “to simulate

⁸³ The words at “the center” of the arrangement – “under boat/ bronze dark” – are therefore re-ordered “dark boat/ bronze under,” et cetera.

⁸⁴ Morton 35.

reality itself...that we [might] obtain an *immediate* world, a directly perceived world beyond our understanding...no matter how stylized it is, language can render real things, that is, ecological ones.”⁸⁵ As such, Duncan’s ideograms in “The Fire” might be read as renderings of environmental or epistemic *substantia*. In a way, these collections of words – whether understood as being arranged intentionally, at random, or as something categorically in between – convey a contextual sensation that might be termed “environmental.” “Day,” “dark,” “circle,” and “waver” (for instance) have no “concrete” connections as such, save for the fact that they are conceptually “grounded” here (as a *collective*) in their rendering of objective experience⁸⁶. This is an ambient mode or understanding of experience, and significant in that it draws the reader’s attention to Duncan’s poetics of derivation. The ideograms “rime” in their rendering of the natural world, and “rime” might therefore be understood as the ontological point of intersection between abstract concepts and their material referents. Morton’s observation that “experimental ecomimesis [might] affect layers of significance other than just imagery” coincides with what is effected by Duncan’s ideogrammatic renderings in “The Fire,” and we are drawn in to experience the world for its tangibility *and* its intangibility in the poem.⁸⁷ The poet instructs us here that one need not rely on mere “images” in order to be in aesthetic communion with the world. Rather, Duncan immerses his audience in the referential field of the poem, relying on an ambient sense of textuality that resists *visual* tropes and privileges instead of a tactile experience of the contents of the poem.

We can use Morton’s discussion of “the medial” in order to appreciate the significance of the ecomimesis which this “rendering” effects in the ideograms of “The Fire.” As “the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸⁶ Although one might, as if casting and re-casting an epistemic I-ching, draw or observe infinite connections between these words *ad nauseum*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

environment” conveyed by the ideograms is rendered so as to denote an ambient awareness of dimension, we realize the point of contact – the page – to have some significant bearing on the “content” of the poem.

Medial writing...highlights the page on which the words were written, or the graphics out of which they were composed. Medial statements pertain to perception. ...When ecomimesis points out the environment, it performs a medial function, either at the level of content or at the level of form. *Contact* becomes *content*. Ecomimesis interrupts the flow of an argument or a sequence of narrative events, thus making us aware of the atmosphere “around” the action or the environment in which or about which the philosopher is writing. ...The idea is to reinforce the illusion that the dimension of reading is the same as inscription: that reader and writer inhabit the same dimension, the same *place*.

Morton 37-38 (original emphasis)

If Duncan is writing so as to convey a sense of intersubjectivity, the ideograms that bookend “The Fire” guide the reader of the poem toward an experience of ambience. Moreover, if our understanding of the poem accommodates Morton’s theorizations of ecomimesis, we might understand the words which compose these ideograms in their conceptual field as points of contact between Duncan, the contents of the poem, and the poem’s potential audience. Therefore Duncan effects an ambient environment, not only “in,” but *by way of* the poem, one which invites the reader to appreciate a sense of intersubjective awareness between “things,” “beings,” and “effects” (broadly speaking). Moreover, if we are to read the ideograms which “frame” the poem as medial points of contact between the poet, his “sources,” and the audience in tandem with Morton’s assertion that in the function of the medial “*contact* becomes *content*,” the ecomimetic properties of the text become far more salient than when initially encountered.⁸⁸ An appreciation for Duncan’s use of the medial as a *technique*, then, points up the possibility of

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

reading Duncan's text as uniquely ecomimetic; following Morton (further): "Avant-garde and experimental artworks that are not directly ecological in content are environmental in form, since they contain medial elements."⁸⁹

We might understand this through an appreciation of the ambience Duncan "accomplishes" by way of his ideograms. More importantly, this gesture toward (and with) the medial as a means to convey ecomimesis occurs elsewhere in the poem, especially where the poet turns his gaze to the painting by Piero di Cosimo, *A Forest Fire*. Duncan's fascination with this painting specifically revolves around his appreciation of di Cosimo's use of the *sfumato* technique, favored by other members of the Italian Renaissance, wherein the consistency of oil pigments allowed artists to create images "without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke or beyond the focus plane."⁹⁰ As Peter O'Leary notes in his study of Duncan, *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness*, Duncan draws attention to the smoke in di Cosimo's *A Forest Fire* ("From the wood...panic") "ensconcing himself in a terrifying conflagration. ...[but Duncan] is only looking at a painting ... What the poet is drawn to is *sfumato* – in the smoking technique the painter employs, not only do the fleeing animals 'hide' from our sight, so too do magical and mythical ideas hide."⁹¹ In "The Fire" Duncan's "voice" activates a medial connection that invites the reader deeper into an intersubjective field of vectors, undermining, as Morton would have it, "the normal distinction we make between medium as atmosphere or environment – as a background or 'field' – and medium as material thing – something in the foreground."⁹² The *sfumato* of the poem – following Duncan's *rendering* of this technique via our exposure by him to di Cosimo's painting – serves to encode the poem with ecomimetic

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹⁰ Earls, Irene. *Renaissance Art: A Topical Dictionary*. NY: Greenwood Press (1987). (p. 263).

⁹¹ O'Leary, Peter. *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2002) (81).

⁹² Morton 38.

properties. In turn, we are “drawn into” the poem, to inhabit and experience it not as an “audience” (a reader or readers distinct from the work – reading the poem, say, at home, in a chair) but rather, *with* the poet himself.

But prior to introducing *sfumato* as a guiding concept of the poem Duncan has already “invited us in” to “The Fire,” to view the painting which incites and inspires the poem. By way of the initial ideogram Duncan renders an ambient, ecomimetic, sensation. This sensation is enhanced through Duncan’s work in the medial mode, and our sense of “environment” becomes *ecological* in that, as readers, we are drafted into the text. But the *tonal* quality of the ideogram heightens this sensation. Duncan’s placement of the words – arranged in columns and rows, six-by-six, with “drafty” space between each row – demands attention from the audience’s instinctual reading of syntax and prosody. Although Duncan has a tendency to compose, more or less, in a *lyric* mode, here lyricism is supplanted by an ideogrammatic substantialism. The music of the words *themselves* guides the reader as if in the lyric mode, but without the benefit of tone or euphony delivered by “the line” as a distinct component of poetry. As such, Duncan’s ideograms in “The Fire” rely on the poet’s attention to what Morton terms “the *timbral*”: an ambient quality “about sound in its physicality, rather than about its symbolic meaning.”⁹³ Although of course, being *readers* (and, by extension, *discerners*), we cannot too easily distinguish or separate the symbolic meaning of the words that form the ideograms of “The Fire” from their epistemic referents – but we can, simultaneous to our discerning, appreciate the words for their objective “music.”

The construction of the poem, then, encourages us to conceptualize these words as “sounds” *as well as* “objects.” Duncan’s arrangements, here, invite us to encounter the words of

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

the ideogram – “jump stone hand leaf shadow sun” *et cetera* – as experiences of pure tone. What Duncan points to, with this technique, is the ambient “nature” of “Nature” and our complicit conjunction with that “environment.” Morton is correct to suggest in his discussion of the *timbral* that “[w]hether we think of nature as an environment, or as other beings (animals, plants, and so on), it keeps collapsing into subjectivity or into objectivity.”⁹⁴ As such, we can understand Duncan’s ideograms to be drawing our attention to what Derrida has identified as “the difficulty of distinguishing properly between inside and outside.”⁹⁵ The ideograms of “The Fire” and the *sfumato* technique which “echo” their ambient rendering, engage our “ear” as well as our conceptual command of distinction between subjects and objects.⁹⁶ In turn, following Morton’s reading of Heidegger, we encounter the paradox of encountering “perceptual phenomena [possessing] material thingliness.”⁹⁷ In “The Fire,” Duncan posits these phenomena as aspects of the ideogram, and as “*sfumatic*” renderings operating in medial, timbral, modes. This furthers the suggestion that Duncan requires us to “enter” or “encounter” “The Fire” as a distinctly “ecomimetic” text, but it does not account for the full scope of ambience enacted by the poem.

In turn, we encounter Duncan’s “The Fire” with no direct referents – no subject or author, *per se*. The ideograms which frame the text as intro and outro might therefore best be understood as “working” via Aeolian effects, having “no obvious source.”⁹⁸ Morton identifies this ambient property of ecomimesis as “acousmatic” or “*Aeolian*” – “disembodied sound emanating from an

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40, following Derrida.

⁹⁶ An ecological understanding of prosody in “The Fire” might be complicated (and enhanced) by understanding syntax itself as analogous to “outline” in painting; therefore, when Duncan suspends (or entirely disbands) syntax in his ideograms, *sfumato* occurs grammatically, enacting what Morton might identify as “strong” ecomimesis.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 40.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

unseen source.”⁹⁹ Where Morton suggests that in the context of an *Aeolian* rendering “[t]he form of the poem heightens the physicality by playing with typographical arrangement,” he could be understood to be speaking directly of the ideograms in Duncan’s text. The ideograms are *uncanny*, to a degree, and this uncanniness is central to the poem’s tension. Duncan’s strongest ecomimetic work in “The Fire” hinges on an appreciation of the *Aeolian* qualities he employs in the poem. Having rendered, via medial and timbral effects, a series of objects, effects, and images, an ecomimetic “scene” from the ideogram, the poet disrupts this “concrete” *Aeolian* scene or sensation with a seemingly disembodied deployment of narrative:

The day at the window
the rain at the window
the night and the star at the window

Do you know the old language?
I do not know the old language.
Do you know the language of old belief?

Duncan, *The Fire*

A *voice* enters the poem, and demands the reader’s attention to that which it encounters. The encounter is wholly separate or distinct from the work done by the ideogram, seemingly unrelated in fact, but ecomimetic nonetheless, as if the poet were pointing toward that ambience rendered from the ideogram’s disembodied *timbre*.

Writing about the unadorned, minimal, style of these first few lines of “The Fire” (so at odds from Duncan’s otherwise lush lyricism) Peter O’Leary suggests that “[f]or a poet whose mode is nearly always intensely musical, this writing feels like a regression [...] this selection

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

ends with an indeterminate sense of *the old language* adds to the impression that we are seeing a child at a window trying to recover something lost.”¹⁰⁰ I would add to O’Leary’s sense of the scene by suggesting that this “old language” which Duncan seems unable *to know* might have something to do with the acousmatic effects created by the ideogram.

As much as the words which compose this ideogram have direct object- or conceptual referents, they are “unvoiced,” as such – *encountered* by the reader (or perhaps the poet), rather than specifically *heard*. In turn, Duncan engages his audience in a kind of challenge – showing that one must open oneself up to “hearing” the old language before one might “know” it. That the primary ideogram which opens the poem is followed by a secondary, much more concise, ideogram has thus far been elided in this essay, but here I think it is imperative to introduce it to the discussion.

Prior to the almost-lyric narration, “The day at the window” (*et cetera*), Duncan charges his poem with a brief vision of:

blood disk
horizon flame

Duncan 40

Although ostensibly similar to the ideogram preceding it, this second, briefer, ideogrammatic rendering sets the tone of the poem in a mode of violence, reconciling, in some way, the relative tonal disjunction between the title (“THE FIRE”) and the pacific ambience of the initial catalogue of objects, concepts, et cetera. As the poem progresses, we might see, perhaps, how this ideogrammatic “image” of a disk of blood and flame on the horizon¹⁰¹ precipitates the

¹⁰⁰ O’Leary 81, my emphasis.

¹⁰¹ One possible transliteration of the lines; an alternative might be simply “dawn;” I offer this construction to describe the image cultivated by Duncan, to speak to the ecomimetic power of poetic lines devoid of conventional

“narrative” elements of the poem – the scene of terror rendered in di Cosimo’s *A Forest Fire*, the vision of “Hell break[ing] out” viewed in “Bosch’s illumination” (identified by Ross Hair in his essay “Derivation or Stealth?” as the “Madrid version” of *Christ Carrying the Cross*)¹⁰² the catalogue of “Satanic” politicians and scientists, and the chaos at the edge of the horizon after the development of the atomic bomb.

Duncan’s “narrative” in the poem, then, is guided by this second, smaller, ideogram, distinct in its *Aeolian* quality from the initial catalogue. But the juxtaposition between the acousmatic effects of these two distinct movements in the poem is exactly where the tension of the poem is introduced, and from where we might begin to make some sense of what Duncan is “doing” with “The Fire” (beyond our exploration of the ambient qualities of the ideograms which frame the poem).

In his study of the properties of ambience, Morton follows his introduction of the *Aeolian* with a brief discussion of “tone,” referring, elusively, “to the quality of vibration... [which] accounts materially for that slippery word *atmosphere*.”¹⁰³ Morton’s most useful work in his exploration of tone revolves around his discussion of the “negative space” or *suspension* (in music) which anticipates our ascription of the term “tone” to an ambient effect:

Tone is a matter of quantity, whether of rhythm or imagery: strictly speaking, the amplitude of vibrations... Texts...exploit negative rhythm to generate tone. The absence of sound or graphic marks can be as potent as their presence. Gaps between stanzas, and other kinds of broken lineation, create tone out of sheer blankness. In terms of imagery, tone is also quantitative. It is not necessarily a matter of *what sort* of imagery, just *how much*. Just as words come

syntax, and to demonstrate the difficulty of translation from the Chinese language. This simple exercise speaks to the sheer variety and volume of translations from Chinese poetry. See also Hinton.

¹⁰² See note 77.

¹⁰³ Morton 43.

in phrases, imagery comes in clusters. Metonymic listing can generate an overwhelming tone.

Morton 45

Clearly Morton's discussion of how and where tone is made apparent is useful to our developing discussion of "The Fire," especially when looking at Duncan's use of ideogram. The suspension upon which the ideogrammatic rendering depends is a tonal effect, and is perhaps what accounts for the ecomimetic potential of the ideograms themselves. Moreover, Duncan's manipulation of *tone* is one of the more salient aspects of the poem, which disbands conventional prosodic arrangement, favoring "movements" between ideograms, narrative encounters and events, paintings, and political commentary. There are *tonal shifts* in the piece which make Duncan's "descriptions" not only ambient, but ekphrastic – that is, disposed to rendering the subject of a piece in a medium not of its original composition. When we encounter Duncan's description of di Cosimo's *A Forest Fire* (for instance), we do not "see" the painting, but rather encounter it by way of the poet's mediated perception of it – which in the case of "The Fire," therefore demands the immersion of the audience in the work itself. We might follow Morton's assertion (after De Quincey) that "tone gives us pause...*parenthesis* or *syncope*... abbreviation, and... a loss of consciousness."¹⁰⁴

Duncan's command of *parenthesis* in "The Fire" manifests as what Morton identifies as "suspension" – "when the time of the plot (the events as they would have occurred in 'real time') diverges widely from the time of the story (the events as they are narrated)."¹⁰⁵ From the initial ideogram(s), and "The day at the window," the poet's "spot of time" (in the Wordsworthian sense) is drawn *into* the series of paintings by di Cosimo and Bosch. This appraisal, or rather, the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

ambient connection with these works, becomes interspersed with extensive excerpts from passages by Marsilio Ficino (a fifteenth century Florentine priest and scholar) and Walt Whitman (a nineteenth century poet from Brooklyn), and from *there* into a confrontation with the toxicity of the present: “Now, the City, impoverisht, swollen, dreams again/ the great plagues.” It would seem that not only *time* is affected by tonal suspension in the poem, but space or “the environment” – Duncan’s “surroundings,” in a word. We cannot, however, “follow” the narrative of the poem as one might follow a path. Rather, the narrative is interrupted by and interspersed with a plethora of “voices,” agents, “places,” and images. However, Duncan’s decision to “close” this poem with a revised, rearranged, and noticeably *shifted* ideogram indicates not only that *change* has occurred, but that this change is temporal as well as spatial and substantial. We are returned to the beginning of the poem, as it were, and yet that “beginning” – that original state – has been substantially altered.

Duncan’s Melancholy and the “Queer Ecology” of “The Fire”

Thus far I have only briefly alluded to the environmental and political “toxicity” which we encounter in “The Fire,” and which, I contend, serves as (one) impetus for Duncan’s work in the poem. I have demonstrated how Duncan effects ecomimesis via prosodic choices, and how a reckoning of that effect is especially useful for parsing out the “meaning” of the ideograms which frame the poem. Via these ideograms, Duncan invites his audience to become engaged with the world (broadly speaking) via a prosodic maneuver akin to the *sfumato* effect of painting – “a softening of the outline,” in his words. As Ross Hair points out in his essay “Derivation or Stealth,” “For Duncan, *sfumato* provides a way of dissolving boundaries or blurring forms.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Hair, Ross. “Derivation or Stealth? Quotation in the Poetry of Robert Duncan and Ronald Johnson.” in *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, Eds. Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012) (142).

When we “enter” the poem, through “the window,” Duncan has already begun to blur the distinctions between the “audience” and “their world,” and “the poet” and “the world of the poem” – an effect which Hair designates as “a visual analogue for the consonance of the *Anima Mundi*.”¹⁰⁷ “The Fire” invites Duncan’s audience to experience an ambient intersubjectivity, after a fashion, and to encounter the art, writing, and music which, via *sfumato* (or artistic techniques from mediums beyond painting closely resembling it) similarly demand that intersubjective experience *with* “the environment.”

Significantly, Duncan introduces “music” as the mode through which this intersubjective awareness might be realized, offering Orpheus as the “primary mover” of that art, and Marsilio Ficino as the prime interpreter (in this poem) of its intersubjective, ambient, qualities:

...music

Orpheus first playd,

chords and melodies of the spell that binds

the many in conflict in contrasts of one mind:

*“For, since song and sound arise from the cognition of the mind,
and the impetus of the phantasy, and the feeling of the heart,
and, together with the air they have broken up and temperd,
strike the aerial spirit of the hearer, which is the junction of the
soul and the body, they easily move the phantasy, affect the
heart and penetrate into the deep recesses of the mind”*

Duncan, 41-42

As Ross Hair explains: “For Ficino, music is one of the most effective ways of initiating the soul’s ascent back to the Intelligible universe and beyond.”¹⁰⁸ In turn, Hair’s reading of the text from Ficino offers us some possible confirmation of Duncan’s attention to intersubjective

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

experience in “The Fire” (although the poet terms it differently, preferring “Anima Mundi” to describe the concept of intersubjectivity).¹⁰⁹ But that sense of intersubjectivity, enhanced by the stylized ambience of Duncan’s verse, becomes a point whereby society is opened to critique. “The Fire” is not a “happy” poem, but betrays the poet’s anxieties concerning nuclear Holocaust, systemic global violence, and a toxic political climate.

Having dispensed with the interlude by Ficino, articulating an ambient “junction of the soul and the body,” Duncan is confronted by the “sharp focus” of a vision brought on by the contents of an illumination by the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch:

Hell breaks out an opposing music.
The faces of the deluded leer, faint, in lewd praise,
close their eyes in voluptuous torment,
enthralled by fear, avidly
following the daily news: the earthquakes, eruptions,
flaming automobiles, enraged lovers, wars against communism,
heroin addicts, police raids, race riots...
Duncan 42

In short, Duncan confronts us with the “opposing music” of discordant intersubjection, with “a Devil’s chemistry” of politics and pestilence that stands as an abrupt departure from what some critics (especially Edward Foster) have identified as an “Edenic space” at the outset of the poem. In his study of Duncan in the text *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets*, Foster claims that the di Cosimo painting referenced by Duncan, *A Forest Fire*, might be characterized as “a transcendent vision of harmony,” noting that it resembles a “‘dawn of man’ or childhood

¹⁰⁹ Likewise, this intersubjectivity parallels the erotic potential of intertextual conversations explored the previous chapter.

scene.”¹¹⁰ Although I would agree with Foster’s suggestion that the painting offers a “transcendent vision,” I question whether or not it might be characterized as *harmonious*. Rather, the painting depicts “panic” (in Duncan’s words), and the flight of “our animal spirits” denotes a state of intersubjectivity that is already aware of and enveloped by the chaos called out by Duncan in the latter portions of “The Fire.” Duncan’s presentation of the ambient environment in “The Fire” relies on a notion of sustained chaos – of an already-corrupted experience of the world exacerbated by the riot and discord portrayed in his lyric rendering of Bosch and di Cosimo’s paintings.

The intersubjectivity effected via Duncan’s prosody maneuvers the reader toward a sense of the “queer ecology” anticipated by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands. Where on the one hand the objective of Duncan’s poem seems to be to locate his audience in the post-Edenic landscape of imagination between di Cosimo and Bosch’s paintings, on the other, the poet seems similarly concerned with communicating that this landscape has been rendered uninhabitable – a “waste land” wrought by political and cultural strife:

They are burning the woods, the brushlands, the
grassy fields razed; their
profitable suburb’s spread.
Pan’s land, the pagan countryside, they’d
lay waste.

Duncan, 44-45

¹¹⁰ Foster, Edward Halsey. *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1995) (160).

The toxicity of “epidemics” and “Great Evils” have so corrupted the space of Duncan’s poem that the pastoral *potential* sensed in early in the narrative seems to be a vulgar impossibility. This passage coincides with Mortimer-Sandilands’ key observation in the essay “Melancholy Natures: Queer Ecologies,” that the “condition of modernity” demands critical reflection:

[T]here is a relationship between an engagement with environmental loss and environmental responsibility, and that meaning is gained in negotiation with something that can be seriously considered grief over the condition of the world, suggest[ing] a dimension of environmental thought that has not been particularly well explored even if the fact of that loss seems...an all pervasive condition of modernity.

Mortimer-Sandilands, 332

Mortimer-Sandilands (correctly) identifies this “grief over the condition of the world” as a potentially valuable emotional investment, one which is tangibly (one might even say *ambiently*) related to our culture’s interaction with “the environment.” With “The Fire,” Duncan poses this grief as a tangible, *sfumatic*, property, one which pervades not only our own “present” (Duncan was writing in the 1960s) but all epochs of the anthropocene.¹¹¹ The temporal coordinates of the poem are broad to say the least (although they seem “focused,” in a sense, on the political agents of the early Cold War), but I would suggest that the ideograms which frame the poem, as well as Duncan’s ascription “as if in Eden,” to indicate that the range of his understanding, here, would accommodate the whole of the anthropocene era.¹¹²

¹¹¹ A term for the period of time, developed by the late ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer, wherein human affairs have come to effect and therefore substantially alter the material qualities of the earth’s ecosystems. Although the usefulness of the term “anthropocene” is debated by contemporary geologists (much in the way that “climate change” is occasionally contested), it is generally agreed upon by those scholars who *do* endorse the term that the anthropocene is a direct byproduct of the Industrial Revolution. See especially Zalasiewicz’s “The New World of the Anthropocene.”

¹¹² Duncan, “The Fire.”

What is *done* then, by way of these ideograms, is of remarkable interest. As I demonstrate above, the “original state” implied by the first ideogram is “subtly altered” in its latter form. Rendered in an acousmatic form so as to highlight their medial capacity, they are a “haunting” element of the poem, whereby the poet poses an intersubjective environmental “field” at once entwined with *and* distinct from the lyric narrative of the rest of the text. As one might read the narrative of the poem to encounter and accommodate multiple temporal fields, some sense of “progress” might be understood to be contained here, posed between these ideogrammatic renderings of the environment. We venture, as Duncan’s audience, from a “day at the window” and an Edenic post-lapsarian scene of chaos into greater lapse and chaos – to behold “Nixon’s black jaw” and “the great plagues” and a “pagan countryside” lying in waste.¹¹³ At the conclusion of “The Fire,” the ideogram which opened the poem reappears, but *shifted*. All the elements which “compose” it remain, but they have been re-*oriented* (*not*, re-ordered, significantly). It is as if Duncan were suggesting that *in spite* of the multifarious traumas visited on the world, that that world’s elemental “nature” remains – changed, yes; altered, yes; but not “destroyed,” as such. One might even suggest that it has been re-imagined, or better yet, *preserved* by the melancholic tone rendered by Duncan into the final lines.

I would therefore argue, following Mortimer-Sandilands, that Duncan’s “The Fire” expresses the “condition of melancholia” outlined by Mortimer-Sandilands:

...a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically “ungrievable” within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief...the object that cannot be lost also cannot be let go, and as a psychoanalytic perspective reveals, such disavowed

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

meet[ing]/ to conspire, to coerce, to cut down.”¹¹⁴ It is a bleak present, and a bleak and perhaps inevitable progression which Duncan foretells in “The Fire.”

The poet, however, does not call for a *mourning* of our toxic environment, *per se*, and this is significant given the context of Mortimer-Sandilands’ arguments, where she identifies mourning (in a Freudian sense) as “involv[ing] the transference of libidinal attachment from one object to another one... a constitutive condition of capitalist modernity.”¹¹⁵ In this sense, mourning fetishizes and commoditizes “Nature,” offering it as an object *distinct* from the subject-position and therefore presenting it as that which “can be bought to extend the reach of capital rather than prompt a criticism of the relationships that produced the loss in the first place.”¹¹⁶ Duncan, of course, does the exact opposite of “mourning,” expressing via the closing ideogram of “The Fire” a critical re-imagination of nature-rearranged, and condemning, in turn, the society and politics which would serve as purely destructive forces.

Mortimer-Sandilands turns to Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* for a more nuanced understanding of politicized mourning.¹¹⁷ We can see in “The Fire,” something akin to Mortimer-Sandilands’ reading of Butler, which focuses on how “melancholia suggests a present that is not only haunted but *constituted* by the past: literally built of ruins and rejections.”¹¹⁸ This sense of “constitution” informs my understanding of Duncan’s closing ideogram, and the sense that the poet includes it so as to offer something substantial to look toward in spite of (or *beyond*, perhaps) the raw toxicity presented as the focus of “The Fire.” A sense of critical melancholia is rendered by “The Fire,” standing in opposition to the architects of the Cold War (*et cetera*)

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Mortimer-Sandilands, 337.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹¹⁷ As I discuss thoroughly in Chapter 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

indicted by the poet, and therefore “furnishing a sense of political community...by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.”¹¹⁹ Duncan’s poem is bleak, yes, but it is nothing less than hopeful in its own right. The poet would have us experience a radical sensation of melancholy, that we might seek a means to preserve that which we have not yet lost to environmental toxicity and the strife of war.

In its ecomimetic moments “The Fire” serves as a means by which to “[grieve] the ungrievable” and as “a potentially politicized way of preserving that [lost] object in the midst of a culture that fails to recognize its significance.”¹²⁰ This happens most poignantly by virtue of what Morton terms the “*re-mark*,” a term analyzed and identified, in part, by Derrida as “a kind of echo, ...differentiat[ing] between *space* and *place*.”¹²¹ Morton’s analysis of the *re-mark* emphasizes that it “flips an ‘objective’ image into a ‘subjective’ one,” suggesting that:

To identify the *re-mark* is to answer the question: how little does the text need to differentiate between foreground and background, or between space and place?

Morton 49

In Duncan’s “The Fire” we can discern the occurrence of the *re-mark* in a number of instances, most clearly in the transitions between “narrative” and “ideogram” (or *vice versa*), but also by way of appreciating Duncan’s attention to the *sfumato* effects in di Cosimo’s paintings. In the case of the ideograms, the reader cannot help but notice the distinction between the “space” or “objecthood” of the first ideogram and the “narrative” aspect of the poem – or how we might think of that “narrative” as a “place” in its own right. However, when we come to the final

¹¹⁹ Butler, Judith. . *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2004) (22).

¹²⁰ Mortimer-Sandilands 333.

¹²¹ Morton 48-49.

ideogram, to find that ideogrammatic structure *re-rendered* (albeit containing the same objective components of the first) it might occur to one that this alteration implies a degree of subjectivity on the part of these word-images not initially realized in the perception of the first arrangement of words (standing in for objects, ideas, *et cetera*, as I discuss above).

The “foreground” of the text – Duncan’s discussion of art, music, literature, politics, *et cetera* – serves, in part, as a vehicle for discussion of its “background,” and those ideograms which communicate, in their ambient mode the intersubjectivity of “natural” objects, perceptions, events, *et cetera*. When we come to the final ideogram (and find it *familiar*, albeit *different* – altered), we might come to realize that what is *preserved* through the cataclysm of “The Fire” is not so much the *essence* of nature, but its *substance*. For Duncan, there is but a hairsbreadth of difference between “the/ inevitable • at Los Alamos” and the re-ordered, re-imagined, reconstruction of “nature” indicated by the “difference” between the first and second ideogram. “Essentially” these ideograms have been changed, but “substantially” they remain identical. In tandem with Mortimer-Sandilands’ reading of the political potential of melancholy, this would suggest that Duncan chooses to politicize the objectivity of the ideograms which he uses to “frame” the narrative arc of “The Fire.” One might therefore be inclined to think that the poet would perceive (or would have the audience perceive) that narrative space between the ideograms as *sfumatic*. The “foreground” and narrative content are indicative of “change” (*i.e.*, *fire*), and implicit to it, but yet wholly different from the “background” which remains unassailable from the toxic encroachment of Cold War society. Most importantly, the ideogram which “closes” the text *preserves*, by virtue of its alteration, the audience’s fixation with it – that we would linger not on the “contents” of the narrative, but on the possibility for movement or gnosis *beyond* the toxicity examined therein.

Conclusion

This study has sought to establish two major points: that the derivative poetry of Robert Duncan demands a reconsideration of “the Natural,” and that “melancholy” might be activated to serve as a vehicle by which to express and experience dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. In my exploration of the Cyparissus narrative I sought to explore not only the political agency engendered and enabled by a sense of melancholy, but to examine how a sense of politicized grief might enable a more inclusive and intersubjective experience which might therefore accommodate subject-positions vulnerable to marginalization and denigration. In my discussion of “The Fire” I endeavored to explain how Duncan effects this sense of intersubjectivity via *formal* conceit – not merely through his derivative techniques, but by way of an ambient rhetoric designed to expand the means by which ecomimesis might engender a political response in the reader.

Two major “toxicities” have been confronted in this text – the sociopolitical and rhetorical toxicity of homophobia, and the material toxicity embodied (for Duncan, as well as myself) in the atomic bomb. Though perhaps it is not immediately apparent, I understand these toxicities to be invariably linked; what we would denigrate in speech or thought or deed, we effectively seek to destroy; what we destroy, we sever from our intersubjective experience, denying agency to some part of the world (be it sentient or inanimate).

Duncan realized the imperative of resisting these toxicities, and “The Fire” serves foremost as a call to realize the potential dangers they posed to what he terms the *Anima Mundi*. Where in his rendition of “Cyparissus” homophobia is confronted through an act of textual reclamation, in “The Fire,” the poet offers the means to reconsider the material qualities of the “natural” or material world by deploying art and poetry as means by which to convey the sense

that our shared experience of *Anima Mundi* is imperiled. In turn, we might read “The Fire” as a political statement that exceeds its ostensible project of critiquing the war in Vietnam.

In this project I have attempted to develop some sense of “Orphic Ecology” – of a mode of poetic practice which destabilizes the conventional notion of “Nature” as a reifiable, stable, concept. Though Orpheus figures in “The Fire” as a relatively minor character, the conceit of a malleable and non-essential “Nature” entailed by his presence drives one to consider what might be effected, rhetorically and politically, via an affirmation of ontological anarchy. Part of this demands that we adopt and sustain a note of melancholy. I have demonstrated, following the work of others, how melancholy is itself a deeply political investment of emotional experience, and would hope that this might be realized literally by myself and the reader. In adopting a melancholic relation with those other Subjects with which we are inextricably linked, some ineffable core of grief that enfolds our experience might be made speakable, tangible, and therefore an agent of recuperation. Duncan demonstrates our self-engendered peril; a melancholic response might allow us to confront that peril, and to approach our fraught collective experience with some hope for physical and spiritual preservation and regeneration.

Poetry, especially as demonstrated in the radical techniques developed by Duncan, might be one vehicle through which this hope for the regeneration and recuperation of the psyche and *corpus* of the world (and our subjective experience in it) can be articulated, advocated for, and advanced. By attuning our sense of the world to melancholy, we might be better able to *hear* and *experience* that “music Orpheus first played” – the “chords and melodies of the spell that binds/ the many in conflict in contrasts of one mind” – enabling, perhaps, some greater attention to and appreciation for our collective, intersubjective, experience.

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