

## Ecocritical Reading and Robert Duncan's *Bending the Bow*

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**Abstract** *This article argues that the work of Robert Duncan should be read from an ecocritical perspective. Duncan's allusiveness and textual imagination are placed in conversation with key movements in ecocritical thought, including ecofeminism and the environmental unconscious, with the purpose of broadening the range of methods of reading ecocritically to include poets and poems that do not fit a nature-writing paradigm.*

In a 2004 book-length discussion of its major themes and debates, Greg Garrard asserts that ecocriticism is "an avowedly political mode of analysis" (3). He cites as corroboration Cheryll Glotfelty's claim in the 1996 groundbreaking *The Ecocriticism Reader* that "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" as well as Richard Kerridge's 1998 claim that "ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (3-4).<sup>1</sup> But the diversity of recent work in this field suggests that there is in fact no longer any clearly unifying political agenda. Lawrence Buell's distinction in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* between first-wave and second-wave environmental criticism acknowledges this to a certain extent: whereas for "first-wave ecocriticism, 'environment' effectively meant 'natural environment,'" for second-wave ecocritics "Literature-and-environment studies must develop a 'social ecocriticism'" (21-2). Despite the subtitle of his book, "Environmental Crisis and the Literary Imagination," Buell's discussion of the issues raised by this social ecocriticism ranges well beyond those bearing directly on environmental crisis. Nor is Buell alone in this respect. Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster in their 2001 collection *Beyond Nature Writing* represent ecocriticism as in need of an expanded sense of environment and of the potential topics for ecocritical analysis [which] will help ecocriticism grapple with one of its central conceptual challenges—understanding nature and culture as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct. (4) The kinds of inquiry into all sorts of writing opened up by ecocriticism are no longer confined to the discourses of environmental crisis. In the same vein, Steven Rosedale acknowledges in an introduction to another recent ecocritical collection that a "growing number of scholars are clearly interested in expanding the purview of ecocritical practice by widening the canon of texts for ecocritical investigation and placing environmental criticism in a more productive relation with other . . . theoretical perspectives and critical practices" (xvii). Ecocriticism has become a heterogeneous field of questions and approaches, not to be defined by a single ideological agenda or a neatly bounded set of values.

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In the field of contemporary American poetry this transformation is signaled by a broadening of ecocritical attention to writers not readily included in the canon of environmental literature. The canonical poets, it should be said, though few in number still receive a hefty share of attention in the field. Beginning with John Elder's 1985 *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*, many ecocritics writing about poetry have confined their focus to nature poets or a group of writers recently known as ecopoets. Recent instances of this kind of work are Leonard M. Scigaj's 1999 *Sustainable Poetry*, Bernard W. Quetchenbach's 2000 *Back from the Far Field* and the collection of essays *Ecopoetry* edited by J. Scott Bryson in 2002—all of which offer readings of writers for whom themes of nature, conservation, wilderness or environmental crisis loom large, writers who to a significant extent have identified their personas with some aspect of the environmental movement. But ecocritical questions are now also being brought to bear on contemporary writers who are hard to categorize as either nature poets or eco-poets. Both Angus Fletcher in *A New Theory for American Poetry* and Bonnie Costello in *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* have approached John Ashbery along these lines. John Gatta includes Denise Levertov in his discussion of contemporary poets who connect nature and religion in *Making Nature Sacred*. Eleanor Hersey has written on Susan Howe from an arguably ecofeminist perspective in "'Space Is a Frame We Map Ourselves In,'" and Elizabeth Dodd has explored the role of race in Michael S. Harper's imagining of swampland. There are other instances of this trend as well. While it is probably too soon to draw any conclusions about the impact of ecocriticism on criticism of contemporary American poetry, there is clearly sufficient reason to speak of contemporary poetry's contribution to the thriving field of ecocriticism, beyond the work of the canonical writers of environmental literature.

Bearing in mind the possibility that a considerable amount of the judgment of literary history on this poetry might be based on how deep or vital this contribution turns out to be, I would like in this essay to show how a writer who does not fit the environmental literature paradigm nevertheless engages substantially with a number of the questions and issues that animate the field today. The poet is Robert Duncan, an experimental writer whose period of creative activity from the early 1940's to the 1980's is contemporary with the progress of the environmental movement towards the mainstream of American cultural life. I am not the first critic to approach Duncan through the concerns of this movement. Jed Rasula's 2002 *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* includes Duncan among the quite stunning range of writers it covers, all of them connected historically, thematically or aesthetically to the Black Mountain school and all of them writing poems which Rasula reads as "ecosystems, precariously adjusted to the surrounding biomass" (7). The link between Duncan's poetics of organic form and the concrete models of organic life offered by ecology is indeed an important subject to address. But beyond that perhaps most immediate material there is a good deal more to say about the relationship between Duncan's poetry and ecocritical questions, and particularly the poetry of the later period during which Duncan became a forthrightly politically and socially engaged poet, a period that begins with his 1968 volume *Bending the Bow*.

As its title suggests, this book is engaged with the relationship of poetry to war, and although one could not call Duncan a practitioner of anti-war *littérature engagée*—the complexities of his vision of poetry and war are explored in Marjorie Perloff's "Poetry in a Time of War: The Duncan-Levertov Controversy"—it is clear that Duncan in that book saw the war in Vietnam as presenting a kind of crisis for American poetry which would make contemporary social issues more pressing subjects.<sup>2</sup> As Mark Andrew Johnson, the author of the only single-authored book-length study of Duncan puts it, the volume was a "response to a violently turbulent era"

which “projects a deeply concerned ‘political’ poetry” (98). Yet the political aspect of the book should not be seen as one-dimensional, limited only to Duncan’s intervention in the then very busy field of anti-war poetry. One could no more comfortably call the work forthrightly environmentalist than call it blatantly anti-war. But as an unusually textured political work of its period, *Bending the Bow’s* social engagement can be just as fairly assessed in the terms of ecocriticism as it can by the terms of anti-war activism.

In reading Duncan this way I am proposing a model of what I would like to call ecocritical reading, in which texts that are not obviously assimilable to the canon of environmental literature are nevertheless understood as engaged in thinking about aspects of the relation between the human and the nonhuman world. In the case of Duncan, ecocritical reading is perhaps unusually fruitful because of his highly textual and allusive imagination. If we maintain a broad field of attention in reading contemporary poetry from an ecocritical perspective, so that we focus not simply on representations of the natural world but look rather, as Wallace and Armbruster suggest, at the connections between literary contexts and the environment, we can see Duncan as quite substantially involved in helping his readers keep a maximal freedom in how they respond actually and imaginatively to the environment. At times Duncan seems to undo conventional ways of feeling connected to a landscape in order to mark a new experience of connection; at times he uses metaphors from the natural world to both support and articulate a homosexual identity often constructed as unnatural; and at times he offers a poem as an unusual kind of model for environmental awareness. I discuss all of these aspects of his environmental engagements in this essay. And part of what I emphasize is that all of these ways of relating to the environment are as much textual as they are experiential, so that the simplistic celebration of the connection of the poem to the world will not suffice. But as writing that models thoughtful ways of relating to the environment, Duncan’s textual innovations can contribute to a richer, more aware and perhaps more imaginatively alive sense of the presence of the nonhuman world in contemporary life.

## Speaking Like a Mountain

The question of how to represent the agency of nature in such a way that it can challenge anthropocentric ethics and values has been given a considerable amount of thought in the ecocritical field, with the conclusions focusing more on a common dissatisfaction than with any widely accepted strategy. As David W. Gilcrest suggests in *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics*, while there is a good deal of appeal to “the trope of speaking nature,” there is also good reason to be skeptical of the value of this trope for eroding anthropocentrism:

We might do well . . . to question whether the overarching strategy of identifying humans and non-humans in terms of linguistic competency is in fact the best way to establish a more heterarchical, ecocentric relationship. . . . While it is true that claims to linguistic superiority have been used to enforce regimes of human supremacy, it does not necessarily follow that a more egalitarian relationship between humans and nonhumans depends on some notion of linguistic equality. (53)

Gilcrest thoroughly presents how the notion of speaking nature insinuates itself remarkably widely into thoughtful considerations of how literature can foster ecocentric or nonanthropocentric values. Gilcrest and others have proposed alternatives to this arguably still

anthropocentric trope. Gilcrest himself joins Catriona Sandilands in arguing for a “radical democracy” in which the natural environment plays a role in a process of democratization whereby the significance of speech for agency (human or nonhuman) is diminished and “plurality” and “ambiguity” are valorized (57). Another thinker concerned with this subject, Eric Todd Smith, has suggested that “we drop the subject of the subject” in nature and think, rather, about multiple mediations and relationships, not marked out by membership in one of the two great camps of subject and object, but rather by specific embodiments, situations, and affinities. Instead of seeing “nature-oriented literature” and criticism as ways of giving “voice” to nature, I propose that ecocritics think about literature and criticism as simply particular kinds of relationships between things (35).

There is good reason to agree with Gilcrest, Sandilands and Smith that literature’s contribution to the development of nonanthropocentric values should not be conceived of through the metaphor of speaking nature. And their alternatives are hard not to assent to, phrased as they are in language that is appealing for its moral overtones or its commonsense ring. But one further alternative we might take from *Bending the Bow*, and in particular its poem “THE MOON,” is that of responding to the weight of an anthropomorphizing literary tradition in representing natural agency with perceptiveness and silence.

“THE MOON” is the fifth poem in the Passages sequence, a sequence that begins in *Bending the Bow*, where the first thirty appear. The poem begins with a description of the moon as “pleasing,” and then it extends two metaphors for its subject—first as “a great lady drawing / her tide skirts up” and then as a lord (1, 6-7). The lord is called “lunar moth king” and named as Oberon (15-6). In the second sentence of the poem, Duncan asks “From what source” the light on the lord and lady comes, and then answers—“the sun at the source of light”—before ending with the lines “Lifted • / Mount Shasta in snowy reverie / • floats” (17, 26, 28-30). The transition from moon to mountain is abrupt and puzzling in the poem that has concentrated on its eponymous subject with steady concentration. It is true that Mount Shasta might be visible from the coast, where most of the rest of this poem is set, and Duncan is at the close of the poem perhaps describing the effect of moonlight on the snow-capped heights of a mountain—suggesting that as it is lighter than the sloping body beneath it, it seems to levitate. But how is this implied observation of a piece with the rest of the poem?

The presence of Oberon in the poem explains a good deal in this respect. Oberon is the king of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play in which moonlight quite literally plays an important part. For not only are Theseus and Hippolyta at the very beginning of the play waiting out four days to a new moon in order to be married, but they watch at the end of the work a tragic play in which the role of the moonlight is performed by a craftsman. The moon is Oberon as “lunar moth king” because he is a center by which the other fairies of the play, including Robin Goodfellow, orient themselves. The moon and moonlight are *leitmotifs* in the play, and Duncan’s poem, which addresses the “Lord-and-Lady Moon” as they have merged into a single figure, appropriates the character of Oberon, who magically arranges and rearranges love matches, in order to suggest the erotic joining power of the moon. But this troping of the moon as a fairy king also creates one of the paths to Mount Shasta. For, as Duncan would likely have learned through his adoptive parents’ fascination with the lore around the lost city of Atlantis, Mount Shasta is fabled to be the home of a race of people named Lemurians, survivors from a lost continent in the Pacific Ocean. This legend has its origins in a 1905 novel by Frederick Spence Oliver (or Phyllos the Thibetan) called *A Dweller on Two Planets*. Among the magical

powers that Oliver depicts the Lemurians, a group living in a vast network of tunnels inside the mountain, to possess is the capacity to suspend the laws of gravity. Like the fairies of Shakespeare, the spirit people of Oliver are at home in a natural world that is somewhat alien to humans—and like the former spirits, the latter ones have magical powers that can be likened to the effects of the moon. Shakespeare's fairies are like the moon in that they join lovers; Oliver's spirits are like the moon in that they can seem to suspend the laws of gravity.

This, I would argue, is the line of association that brings Duncan from looking at the moon to looking at the effects of moonlight on the earth. There is a bookish supernaturalism that runs through this poem, at moments submerged and at moments perhaps predominant. In the context of environmental criticism, it is important to acknowledge the textually and literarily mediated quality of Duncan's relationship to the natural scenes he depicts. But it is important to draw attention, too, to the ecocentrism implied in Duncan's line of association. Thinking about the seemingly magical agency of the moon brings him to the scene of a mountain as a figure for supernatural agency or power.

The move in the poem from moon to mountain is thus ecocentric in what might be called a minimal way, in that Duncan seeks to capture a sense of nonhuman agency in terms first of an extraterrestrial body but then ultimately a natural environment. But at the same time its ecocentric development is propelled by a kind of anthropomorphizing, in which both the moon and a mountain are associated with supernatural, human-like beings. From beginning to end there is a note of textually-motivated fantasy or unreality in this poem. Yet this degree of engagement with literary tradition makes the poem's representation of the relation between natural and human agency significant. For the end of this poem is not only an extension of the line of writing that conceives of natural agency in supernatural terms. It is also an innovative intervention in the tradition of nature poetry about mountains in which the poet interprets or gives voice to the earth for his audience.

The classic instance of such a poem is Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc," in which the poet, marveling at the "primaeval mountains" (99), announces of the most majestic of them:

Thou hast a voice, great mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (80-3)

Duncan's poem remarks some of the same characteristics about its mountain as Shelley's does. Mount Shasta is "Lifted"; Mont Blanc rises "far above, piercing the infinite sky" (60). Mount Shasta is "in snowy reverie"; Mont Blanc is "still, snowy, and serene" (61). Mount Shasta "floats"; Mont Blanc "yet gleams on high" (127). But Shelley needs to speak for his mountain. His poem ends with a haunted question: "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-4). This question explains much of what the poem has taken pains to do—to give the sublime power of the mountain a human voice. Duncan's poem, by contrast, while perhaps alluding to a legend which populates the mountain with a race of magical people, stops short of offering an interpretation or voicing of the mountain. In a three line description, Duncan includes the poem among the

natural phenomena that the moon intensifies or casts some enchantment across, without carrying the needs of his own psyche any further into the picture that he evokes.

This difference between Shelley's version of mountainous sublimity and Duncan's more reticent association of a mountain with supernatural powers is somewhat remarkably nonanthropomorphizing if seen in the context of the number of Shelley-inspired poems about Mount Shasta, many of which are available in the College of the Siskiyous Library Mount Shasta Collection. From William F. Burbank's 1887 announcement in his poem "Mount Shasta" that "Heaven's voice calls out through silver bars / To Shasta's height; calls out below the stars" (7-8) to Chanera's 1934 "I think I hear You speak to me / From Your Pure Heights above" (9-10), there is a large body of poetry that filters an experience of the impressiveness of Shasta through the speaking-nature trope of Shelley. Duncan's comparative reticence in this respect is one remarkable difference between his poem and the majority of the poetry about the California mountain, and, on the regional level, it marks what could be called an ecocentric change in literature about the natural environments of the west coast of the U.S.

But there is more to this difference than reticence, and more than a regional sphere of significance for this poem, for Duncan has devised a marker for the silence with which he approaches the subject. Beginning in *Bending the Bow*, Duncan used a raised and darkened period, the "•", to mark what he called "a beat syncopating the time at rest; as if there were a stress in silence" (ix). This mark appears twice in the last three lines of "THE MOON": "Lifted • / Mount Shasta in snowy reverie / • floats". Both the pause after "Lifted" and before "floats" serve to emphasize the strangeness of the perception that Duncan wishes to convey—they are contemplative moments in which the effect of moonlight on the mountain is quite deliberately described as magical, as supernatural. The top of the mountain is indeed lifted by the volcanic layers beneath it, but the perception that the part of the mountain so raised up floats is of a piece with the "reverie" of the mountain itself. So Duncan is participating in a tradition of nature poetry that associates peaks with sublimity, with access to powers greater than human, and indeed he does this in a way that is specific to the fabled mountain he writes of—but instead of seeking to speak for these powers he makes visible his own silent relationship to them. The tendency of Shelley and Oliver, and indeed in the context of this poem we might include Shakespeare, to create human-like or anthropomorphic figures for the force that impresses them from a natural scene is absent from Duncan's concluding lines. What he does instead is to capture the experience of falling under the sway of a magnificent part of the earth.

Duncan's visibly marked silence is ironically of most significance to the ecocritical project of outlining nonanthropocentric values with which to conceptualize the relationship between human agency and the agency of nature at the very point where it might seem to be furthest from that concern—where it is engaged not with representing nature but with representing a human response to a natural scene. In the context of this poem's various forms of participation in a literary tradition of anthropomorphizing the agency of nature, its form of registering the poet's silent connection to a sublime scene is most noteworthy for the kind of voicing that it does not perform. Duncan's stressed silences are signals that while he perceives Mount Shasta through an anthropomorphizing set of associations, his original contribution to the literature around this mountain will record his awe without seeking to speak for its source.

## One Sexual Nature

Many of those who have sought to bring together an emphasis on the relationship between gender and explicit attention to the environment have been in some way affiliated with ecofeminism, a movement whose most influential and widely admired works are perhaps Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* and Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Both texts depart from the premise that, as Plumwood puts it, "women's inclusion in the sphere of nature has been a major tool in their oppression" (19). Ecofeminists have more recently, however, sought to carry off a delicate balancing act between intervening in this problematic traditional coupling on the one hand and avoiding essentialism in conceptualizing the category of the woman on the other. One book that has been a significant theoretical success in this regard is Stacy Alaimo's *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, which reads a range of the work of American women to lay out the argument that "feminists need not follow a transcendent path to liberation, but can instead engage in a kind of 'situated theorizing' that dwells precisely at the places where discourses of nature are implicated in classism, sexism, racism and heterosexism" (10).

Alaimo's idea of situated theorizing is most germane to Duncan's work with respect to the last of these terms, since, as Kate Soper points out in *What Is Nature?*, there has long been a "key role played by the discourse of 'nature' in constituting and endorsing certain sexual identities at the expense of others" (121). Though there might be reason, in talking about Duncan as a male poet in relation to the environment, to draw on Scott Slovic's notion that "male attitudes toward other humans and toward the natural world" in contemporary writing can be described, *pace* some ecofeminist representations, as a gathering of "environmentally conscious individuals demonstrating a caring, careful view of the more-than-human world," it seems more useful to benefit from the critical questions that ecofeminism has opened up than to add assent to Slovic's motivating complaint that "there is an implicit argument in ecofeminism that women are morally superior to men by virtue of their historical subjugation in certain cultures" (70, 72). The broad range of questions that ecofeminism has broached concerning the naturalization of gender and sexuality are, in some cases, as appropriate to male writers as to female ones—and Duncan, who was discharged from the army for being a homosexual and had a poem withdrawn from publication by John Crowe Ransom after he published a groundbreaking essay on homosexuality, is one such case. Though Duncan had as complicated a relationship to his sexual identity as he did to his identity as an anti-war poet, his sexuality did indeed play a role in both his public identity and in the development of his poetry, and the imputation that homosexuality is somehow unnatural was a prejudice that Duncan wrote at times passionately against.

One such place in Duncan's *oeuvre* is "THE TORSO" (Passages 18), which begins:

Most beautiful! the red-flowering eucalyptus,

the madrone, the yew

Is he . . . .

*So thou wouldst smile, and take me in thine arms*

*The sight of London to my exiled eyes*

*Is as Elysium to a new-come soul*

If he be Truth

I would dwell in the illusion of him

His hands unlocking from chambers of my male body

such an idea in man's image

rising tides that sweep me towards him

. . . *homosexual?* (1-12)

In a discussion of homosexuality in Duncan's poetry, Thom Gunn has written of Duncan's grappling in "The Venice Poem" with "the question of narcissism in the love of one's own sex" in that a "man loving another man beholds somebody *like himself*" (147). In the opening lines in the poem, as in its subsequent development, Duncan confronts this aspect of homosexual desire in "THE TORSO" as well. From the "male body" touched by the lover comes "an idea in man's image": desire and identification seem to be interfused in the form of thought that this intimacy provokes. The poem goes on to describe, rapturously, parts of the male torso—the clavicle, the nipples, the navel and the pubic hair—before evoking the memory of first falling in love with a man "long ago" (36) and ending with these two lines, the last of which is taken from Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, the source of the three italicized lines at the beginning of the poem: "For my Other is not a woman but a man / *the King upon whose bosom let me lie*" (53-4). These lines answer the question at the start of the poem—is he *homosexual?*—in a way that undermines in a number of ways any nature-based pathologizing of desire between men. For Duncan declares quite explicitly that his desire is *hetero*, that it is directed towards an "Other." And the allusion to the relationship between Gaveston and Edward the king in Marlowe's play—in which the married king's fascination with his male friend gathers him ever more enemies—not only sounds a reprise of the theme of the attraction of one man towards another man's torso, but also turns against the persecutory emphasis ("*homosexual?*") to suggest that love between men is socially threatening for its intensity and transgressiveness rather than any



pathological aspect. Where we might expect Duncan's response to the question to reveal its implicit essentialism, he seems rather at the end of the poem to assent to that conception of sexuality, and to question instead how the term homosexual is adequate or inadequate to the sexuality it describes. The implication of the close of the poem seems to be both that there is no one natural sexuality and that the sexuality Duncan is writing about does have a nature.

The poem, in other words, painstakingly distinguishes between a conception of sexuality which would use nature to pathologize eroticism between men on the one hand and Duncan's own interest to explore the interplay of narcissism and other-directed desire in his experience of the beauty of a man. "He / has brought me into heights and depths my heart / would fear without him," he says on the one hand, staking out a claim for the crucially other-directed quality of the relationship he describes (39-41). "Gathering me, you gather / your Self," he writes in the voice of the beloved, capturing on the other hand a particular identificatory dimension of desire which, though by no means unique to homoeroticism, is pronounced in Duncan's version of it (51-2).

As with "THE MOON," the poem carries out this exploration of a sexual nature in a textual field that is rich with allusion, in particular to the end of *Song of Myself* and Rilke's "Archaïscher Torso Apollos." But reference to nature also plays a significant role in the allusive echoing that contributes to this poem's definition of a sexual identity. A crucial word in this linking of nature and homoeroticism is "beautiful." "Most beautiful! the red-flowering eucalyptus, / the madrone, the yew," is how the poem begins, sounding a note that will return (1-2). When the word beautiful is used again, it describes the head of a man. One implication of this association is that it is no less natural for a man to admire a man's beauty than for a man to admire trees that grow to significant size—that homoeroticism is decidedly natural. The trees that Duncan celebrates add to this association in that they each have thin, scaly rather than rough bark and have longish trunks approximately two feet in diameter, which makes them, both in surface and in shape, perhaps as close to the male torso as natural forms grow. By implicitly gendering natural beauty, Duncan presents homosexuality more as an ability to respond to the range of the pleasures of the senses than a failure to desire the other.

But the poem may go a step further in its naturalizing of the kind of homosexuality that Duncan writes of, for there is a way in which the poem seems to naturalize the identificatory or narcissistic dimension of this desire too. In the context of the homoeroticism surrounding the trees in this poem, the quotation of Gaveston's homoerotic lines—*the King upon whose bosom let me lie*—becomes noteworthy for its re-writing of Marlowe's line. Gaveston's words are actually these: "The King, upon whose bosom let me die" (1.1.14). Duncan may have misremembered the line. Or he may have changed the line to interpret it, picking up the obsolete sense of "to die" as to swoon. But he may also have been conveying something significant in this revision about his experience of homoeroticism—that it holds at bay a sense of weakness or vulnerability through its presentation of the idealizing mirror of the beloved. The male bosom, which Duncan describes the nipples of as "like sleeping fountains / of feeling in man," is in this poem idealized even as it is presented in anatomic terms—it is no one man's bosom—and so it is a breast at which a man may draw to feel his own kingliness.

In the context of this conception of homosexuality there bears mention a striking image of a tree which appears in Duncan's Marlovian intertext but does not appear in his poem, for Duncan is clearly commenting as much on the tradition of homoeroticism in English literature in this

poem as he is narrating his own coming into a sexual identity. When Edward in the second act asks one of his enemies, Young Mortimer, to whom he is briefly reconciled, for an image of their reconciliation, Mortimer says to him:

. . . seeing you are so desirous, thus it is:

A lofty cedar-tree, fair flourishing,

On whose top-branches kingly eagles perch,

And by the bark a canker creeps me up,

And gets into the highest bough of all:

The motto, *Aeque tandem*. (2.2.15-20)

The image shocks the king; he perceives it as a mocking commentary on his relationship with Gaveston. He is right to be taken aback. Duncan's flowering eucalyptus is a symbol of the regal attractiveness of male beauty, but the "fair flourishing" cedar in Marlowe's play is the victim of a canker that, Mortimer implies, contrasts with the "kingly eagles." Marlowe's echo of Gaveston's early line, "The king, upon whose bosom let me die," is strong—in the mind of Mortimer, it is the lowly canker that clings to the bosom of the tree, and the eagles that simply rest there in their own kingly might.

Duncan comments on the aspersions that are cast on Gaveston's kind of idealizing homoeroticism by re-writing the natural image that is used to present him as a threat: "the torso is the stem in which the man / flowers forth" he says (31-2). Duncan extends the metaphor to figure the penis as a stamen, which can be seen as another instance in which natural beauty is gendered male in the poem. But more to the point of Duncan's naturalization of one kind of homoeroticism is the contrast between Mortimer's suspicion of Gaveston's attraction to the king as like that of a canker on a cedar trunk and Duncan's own presentation of the beauty of the male torso as like that of a flower's stem. In a poem that speaks as and comments on an idealizing male lover of a man, this image can be read as a defense against one nature-based attack on his homosexuality by means of another natural metaphor—a textured, not to say wholly textualized, account of one homosexual nature.

## Seeking and Speaking in the Environment-Poem

The argument that poems offer models for relating to environments has been made recently with varying degrees of literal intention. Mathew Cooperman suggests that "the question of relevance demands" "an environmental imagination" in contemporary poetry, and that those poems are most significantly responsive to this demand which move from "echolocation," mapping a place through voice, to "ecolocation," an experience of "the world in scale" (189, 187). From this perspective, poems are environments in that they map or describe places in a way that leads us "to relate ethically to where we live" (189). Angus Fletcher, in his outlining of a literary tradition of descriptive poetics that runs from John Clare to Walt Whitman to John Ashbery, offers a less concrete conception of the poem as environment:

Indeed for poetry, unlike science, human belonging and not belonging is the criterion for membership in any environment, and all environment-poems strive to present this structure on two levels: (1) the poetry will express the mere existence of those creatures who belong or do not belong, and (2) it will show how this belonging occurs, especially tracing the boundaries that define inclusion and exclusion. (127)

By focusing his interpretive attention on both the creatures that inhabit a poem and the various kinds of boundaries that create places and spaces within a poem, Fletcher is able to connect Clare's creaturely worlds with Whitman's human ones and Ashbery's at times surreally placeless ones, presenting all of them as interested in the interaction between entities on the one hand and their surroundings on the other. This conception of the "environment-poem" allows Fletcher to make a substantial argument that the descriptive basis of Romantic and post-Romantic nature poetry has been unduly neglected and to offer his own counter-tradition of descriptive poetry, which models an attunement to the environment that is not motivated by the longing for transcendence (24).

The link between poem and environmental awareness is probably most suggestively theorized, however, by Lawrence Buell, who has offered in his 2001 *Writing for an Endangered World* the notion of an "environmental unconscious." Drawing a contrast between Fredric Jameson's notion of a "political unconscious" and his own formulation, Buell states the claim that the environment has to recognition and acknowledgement in stark terms: "To my mind, however, embeddedness in spatio-physical context is even more intractably constitutive of personal and social identity, and of the way that texts get constructed, than ideology is, and very likely as primordial as unconscious psychic activity itself" (24). Clearly Buell does not mean to elaborate a series of correspondences between theories of the unconscious mind and his own conception of how "embeddedness in spatio-physical context" contributes to the construction of texts. But his examples—Frank O'Hara, Gary Snyder, Marianne Moore and Langston Hughes—are chosen to demonstrate the thesis that across a range of literary sensibilities "environmental sensitivity is basic to human psychophysiological makeup" (25). Poems demonstrate perhaps usually unconscious awareness of place that is perpetually at work in the mind.

The implication of these three theorists of the environmental poem is that the ultimate consequence of poems in which sensitivity to place and surrounding give shape to the poem is an increased awareness of that environment. The poet seeks a more substantial connection with the world around him or her and the poem allows for that connection to be realized. Duncan is a challenging poet in this respect, however, because the conclusions of some of his poems which are most clearly shaped by environmental awareness culminate not in an ecolocation or vivified description or environmental awareness but rather in a change in the phrasing or structure of the poem. Environmental awareness contributes primarily to the culmination of the process of shaping a poem, rather than most directly to that of relating to the world in a more deeply descriptive or referential way. Duncan's environmental poems seem to have a *telos* that is textual rather than ethical.

At least this is true of one of his most well-known poems, "My Mother Would Be a Falconress." Originally a part of a text called "A Lammas Tiding," which remains in *Bending the Bow* as a prose preface to the poem, "My Mother Would Be a Falconress" elaborates a dream in which Duncan was visited by a hawk by narrating over fourteen stanzas a vision of his own

unsuccessful attempt as a gerfalcon to fly free of his mother's wrist. The first three stanzas of this searching poem read:

My mother would be a falconress,  
And I, her gay falcon treading her wrist,  
would fly to bring back  
from the blue of the sky, to her, bleeding, a prize,  
where I dream in my little hood with many bells  
jangling when I'd turn my head.

My mother would be a falconress,  
and she sends me as far as her will goes.  
She lets me ride to the end of her curb  
where I fall back in anguish.  
I dread that she will cast me away,  
for I fall, I mis-take, I fail in her mission.

She would bring down the little birds.  
And I would bring down the little birds.  
When will she let me bring down the little birds,  
pierced from their flight with their necks broken,  
their heads like flowers limp from the stem? (1-17)

Again and again in this poem narration in the stanzas takes the same shape, moving through the description of flight and then falling into the language of constraint. Each of the first twelve stanzas, all between three and eight lines long, re-enacts this drama of failed escape in its language—"far, far beyond the curb of her will, / were the blue hills where the falcons rest," "to horizons of stars beyond the ringing hills of the world" is how Duncan describes the environment he longs to fly through before being brought back by the jess (51-2, 58). This longing description of the environment continues until, in the thirteenth stanza, the frame of reference for the story is suddenly changed:

My mother would be a falconress,  
and even now, years after this,  
when the wounds I left her had surely heald,  
and the woman is dead . . . (63-6)

And the image of succumbing to an external constraint which emerged at the end of the previous stanzas breaks off, formally and lexically, into a new dimension of insight in the last words of the poem:

her fierce eyes closed, and if her heart  
were broken, it is stilled •

I would be a falcon and go free.

I tread her wrist and wear the hood,  
talking to myself, and would draw blood. (67-71)

Four dramatic words—"the woman is dead"—have cut the poem loose from its repetitive patterns of flight and constraint. More accurately, the process of longing for and imagining a free relationship to the environment in stanza after stanza has brought Duncan to the point where the phrase that has haunted the poem—my mother would be a falconress—is transformed into the psychic reality that needs to be acknowledged if the compulsive flight and restraint is to stop tormenting the poet: "the woman is dead." The phrase that the poem has been avoiding through distortion from the start is finally spoken. For we can read the repeated line that gives this poem its title as substituting the word that insists on relation, mother, for the more objective word woman, and putting in the place of the present tense "is" the conditional or habitual past tense of "would," and covering over the painful adjective, dead, with the invented word falconress. A painful dream that keeps the mother alive even while it torments the son has been let go.

Both the form of the poem and the environment that it describes have worked together in this process of liberation. Each stanza that has repeated the pattern of flight and constraint has given the poet a more tantalizing and motivating sense of the environment that his illusive relation is keeping him from. What Duncan wrote of Marianne Moore in his essay "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," that in her work "the conformation of stanzas arise along lines, not of a self-imposed necessity but of a psychic need," could be as well said of him in this poem (94). The repetitive conformation of the stanzas to the pattern of flight and constraint arise from a need to work through the haunting phrase. But as this process is carried out the attractiveness of the natural world—its skies, its hills, its sun and its horizons are mentioned by Duncan, as well as the little birds that beckon the falcon as prey—becomes sufficient incentive for him to let go of the dream that has protected him from a piercing grief.

As with the other two poems discussed in the essay, Duncan seems here more concerned with the textual or artistic consequences of engagement with the environment than with the kind of experience of “embeddedness in spatio-physical context” that it will prompt him to record. But “My Mother Would Be a Falconress” makes a valuable contribution to the way of thinking about poetry that Cooperman, Fletcher and Buell have in common. Environmental awareness can lead not only to greater sensitivity and understanding of the natural world, but also to a change in one’s own ability to relate to oneself, and even to create differently. This is the development that Duncan’s poem records, having found through his longing for an environment that is denied him the words that can help to set him free.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Perhaps a more appropriate quotation from Glotfelty is this, also taken from the “Introduction” to *The Ecocriticism Reader*: “Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems” (xx).
- <sup>2</sup> Peter O’Leary in *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness* has gone so far as to suggest that Duncan’s poem “My Mother Would Be a Falconress,” an early work in *Bending the Bow*, catalyzed a change in his attitude towards poetry that led to a physically damaging rage at U.S. involvement in Vietnam and to a chain of medical interventions that eventually cost him his life. I have no qualifications to assess the plausibility of O’Leary’s hypothesis. I cite it here as an instance of how the change in his poetry beginning with that work has been understood.

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