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# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING The Autobiographical Subject in the Drama and Memoirs of Ronald Duncan

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING**  
**The Autobiographical Subject**  
**in the Drama and Memoirs of Ronald Duncan**

by

ANNA CLAIRE TRUSSLER

A thesis submitted to the  
University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH  
School of Humanities and Cultural Interpretation  
Faculty of Arts and Education

*in collaboration with*

THE RONALD DUNCAN FOUNDATION

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING:

*The Autobiographical Subject in the Drama and Memoirs of Ronald Duncan*

This study developed after considerable time spent collating and cataloguing data contained in Ronald Duncan's archive. Familiarisation with the material led to my identifying a need to explore the elusive nature of the personality that biographical material should hope to uncover. Duncan was prone to mainly confessional writing, a kind of writing that demands a causal inference between life and work. Furthermore, the archive supplies multiple data sources that serve to aid chronology, trace reliability, provide external corroboration and investigate truth-value.

My study follows a loosely chronological structure after discerning shifts in his thematic concerns. The years up until the mid-'60s are detailed because, from his youth until that time, Duncan is consistently idealistic but expresses preoccupations particularly manifest in society in each period. Chapters 1 and 2 study Duncan's concern with utopian politics (1930s); Chapter 3, his relationship to religion (1940s); Chapter 4, his part in West End Theatre in the 1950s; and Chapters 5 and 6, his tackling of issues of gender and sexuality (1950s and '60s). Each chapter draws upon the autobiography and related documents of those years. The thesis refers particularly to Duncan's dramatic writing, avoiding serious analysis of the poetry because it has been recently researched. Because theatre movements are imbued with popular cultural codes, these and his memoirs are chosen to convey how his texts centralise the idea of authenticity but also manipulate the idea using subjects and characters caught between idealism and despair, the textual and the historical.

Consequently, my approach to Duncan's work emphasises subject-hood rather than a pre-textual authorial presence which prompts the reader to seek an explanation for the work in its producer. Theoretical implications emerge from the association of Duncan's autobiographical personalities with the notion of writerly authority and its creations. With Duncan the 'question' of self-hood is ultimately conceived as a process whereby the text is attributed to the author through a complex and disparate set of operations, not referential simply to a real individual, but to several simultaneous selves and subject positions. Displacing a perception of the author as the origin of meaning, webs of intertextual voices are discerned within the texture of discourse.



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## Abbreviations

<i>BOD</i>	The Arthur Ponsonby Papers, the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Oxford.
<i>ESC</i>	English Stage Company.
<i>FL</i>	Duncan papers in the private hands of Mr. Frank Lissauer.
<i>HRHRC</i>	The Ronald Duncan Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
<i>LCP</i>	The Lord Chamberlain's Papers, the British Library, London.
<i>PPU</i>	The Peace Pledge Union Archives, London.
<i>RDF</i>	Papers held in the Ronald Duncan Collection: The New Papers, under the auspices of the The Ronald Duncan Foundation.

### Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

This study was completed with the aid of a studentship jointly funded by the University of Plymouth and the Ronald Duncan Literary Foundation.

Relevant seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was often presented, external institutions were visited for consultation purposes and several papers prepared for publication. A complete list of publications and conferences attended will be found at the end of this thesis.

Signed . . . Alexa Corder . . . . .

Date . . . . 12-01-02 . . . . .

# Introduction

## *i. Literary Profile*

Ronald Duncan, the subject of this study, was a poet and playwright who wrote twenty-five plays, two opera libretti, seven volumes of poetry and numerous other publications, and died in 1982 comparatively unrecognised and having achieved little critical acclaim. It is puzzling that so little is now known about this complex and productive author who, for a full decade, from the late 1930s to the end of the 1940s, was a conspicuous figure of his age. During this period Duncan epitomised the key concerns of his generation and seemed wholly in accordance with its *Zeitgeist*, until a point in the mid-1950s when his literary fortunes waned and he found himself at odds with fashion.

Despite his decline in popularity, the retrospective view of Duncan as a writer destined to obscurity certainly does not apply to his early career. As a student at Cambridge he was mainly absorbed in producing exotic films and making an adversary of his tutor F. R. Leavis. After this he was to become involved in pacifist politics and acted as a spokesperson for the miners of the Rhondda Valley. By 1937 he had published satirical pamphlets and worked for the Peace Pledge Union. Also at this time Duncan befriended the composer Benjamin Britten, corresponded with Ezra Pound and was about to visit Gandhi by invitation, at his Ashram at Wardha.

After a stimulating period of writing and editing which continued throughout the Second World War – and the subsequent networking with other writers and poets – the peak moment of Duncan's growing literary career eventually occurred in the year of 1946 when, as Colin Wilson comments 'Like Somerset Maugham half a century earlier, he had scored a hat-trick, with three plays running simultaneously in the West End'.<sup>1</sup> Duncan's verse-play, *This Way To The Tomb*,<sup>2</sup> was first produced at the Mercury Theatre with E. Martin Browne's Pilgrim Players and was part of the revival of poetic drama which was also to feature Christopher Fry's comedy *A Phoenix Too Frequent*. After an enthusiastic endorsement by Beverley Baxter in the *Evening Standard* (3rd November 1945), *Tomb* went on to run for a year, transferring to the Garrick in London's West End. It is significant, however, that *Tomb* remains the only title and,

<sup>1</sup>Colin Wilson, 'The Genius of Ronald Duncan' in *A Tribute to Ronald Duncan*, ed. by Harold Lockyear (Hartland Press, 1974), pp. 76-95 (p. 81).

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Duncan, *This Way To the Tomb* (London, Faber & Faber, 1946). Hereafter referred to in the main text as *Tomb* and TWTTT.

indeed, commercial success historically associated with Ronald Duncan in the public's mind. Fry, in contrast, followed his first dramatic achievement with at least three other West End successes and it is he, not Duncan, whose name is now repeatedly coupled with T.S. Eliot's as one of the most innovative dramatists of that era.

It is pertinent that this pinnacle year for Duncan was a consequence of two other artistic productions on which he had worked: the first, the opera *The Rape of Lucretia* was performed at The Sadler's Wells Theatre at Covent Garden in August, 1946.<sup>3</sup> By September, it had been received as 'a magnificent and moving work...' and the libretto described as 'a curious but successful blend of poetry, psychology, realism and formality'.<sup>4</sup> It was for this piece that Duncan had written the complete vocal score during intensive collaboration with its composer, by now his close friend, Benjamin Britten. Also in the same year, the writer's 'free' adaptation of Jean Cocteau's play *Azrael*, translated as *The Eagle Has Two Heads*, opened at the Lyric, Hammersmith in September, before a run at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket and its eventual launching on Broadway with Tallulah Bankhead as the female lead.

These concurrent successes should have denoted an authorial 'run' prominent enough to establish Duncan's name as surely as Fry's was to be. Duncan, however, never attained the same prominence. An interesting aspect of his literary career which will be examined in this study of his life and work, is the tendency to spread the genre-areas of his work so multi-directionally that he was never received as a writer whose work was easily grasped as 'typical of' himself. Duncan was next to conduct a brief flirtation with drawing-room comedy drama alongside fantastical satires featuring such characters such as Oscar Wilde and the Devil.<sup>5</sup>

A statement by Colin Wilson identifies this diversion:

*This Way To The Tomb* was a false start, he was represented as a follower of Eliot... . *Tomb*, *The Eagle Has Two Heads* and *Lucretia* suggest a neo-classic intellectual but Stratton, *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* make it clear that he is a romantic rebel. He had no easy, comfortable image to live up to, only the certainty of his identity as a poet.<sup>6</sup>

Reviewers and critics tend to expect their writer to adhere to either one stylistic school or another and in this case one notes that Wilson himself prefers his version of Duncan to be an 'outsider' type of rebel rather than a classicist, and his previous

<sup>3</sup>The Covent Garden productions were actually preceded by a short opening season at Glyndebourne in July 1946. The opera then successfully toured the provinces, including a production at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh.

<sup>4</sup>H.C., 'New British Opera At Glyndebourne', *Daily Sketch* (18th July 1946), np. Also, 'E.B.', 'Benjamin Britten's Second Opera', *The Birmingham Post* (1st July 1948), np. RDF

<sup>5</sup>These plays were *Stratton*, first performed at The Theatre Royal, Brighton in 1949, featuring Michael Hordern as Courteney (London, Faber & Faber, 1950). Also *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan*, which were presented as a double bill at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. Both (London, Faber & Faber, 1954).

<sup>6</sup>Colin Wilson, op. cit., 1974, p. 91. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Tribute*.



forays merely mistaken experiments. Such a view is far too simplistic for this multifaceted writer, though it is fair to say that the tendency to inhabit different roles and personalities was to become a necessity and a self-imposed trait of Duncan's lifestyle. The disposition for disguise had already been manifested through his use of pseudonyms for the satirical pieces and the sustained pose as a gypsy or tramp during a period of work down a North country mine.

As early as 1949 when *Stratton* was produced, Duncan was convinced that the critical establishment was bent on his destruction because the 'gossip writers... were interested, not in my play, but Marion's (Harewood's) dress'. (*HTME*, 201) Despite feeling discouraged by the confused reviews of his play, he was not deterred in his quest to rejuvenate culture through pure poetic vision. It seems that he gained a perverse but energising joy from what he saw as a public lack of appreciation and actually depended on this for his creative activity. Furthermore, it is disconcerting to note that Duncan embraced his own suffering so wholeheartedly. Frequent misfortune and misunderstandings were a consequence of his contentiousness and of the constant controversy that he provoked. The image of sensitivity, neglect and critical misunderstanding that Duncan cultivated in his later polemical articles was used as a spur to his writing. From 1964 until 1974 he worked on the epic poem *Man* (1970-74). Its cosmic imagery and mythical references aim to consolidate the discourses of art and science. *Man* was the last major poetic work of Duncan's career.

Duncan's somewhat eclectic literary choice of themes and subject-matter prevented him from making enough impact to attract favourable public attention or from inspiring any robust published criticism. This is summed up in H. D. Ziman's review of the first autobiography *All Men Are Islands*: 'Poet, playwright, librettist, fiction-writer, impresario, farmer, pacifist and pamphleteer, Mr. Duncan may be too capricious and impatient for any major achievement'.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the lack of general authorial cohesion, each creative endeavour by this writer has tended to be treated in isolation by ad-hoc critical reviews, with some exceptional comments by critics who express mystified curiosity as to which road Duncan might next be hurtling down:

He is a dexterous craftsman, and his versatility can be surprising. Some months ago I noticed an episode of Roger Moore's *The Saint* on TV, and Ronald Duncan was credited with the script.<sup>8</sup>

To date, the number of theses written on Duncan in Europe and the United States totals fewer than double figures. The published works on Duncan consist of the collection of essays that make up *A Tribute to Ronald Duncan* and a small number

<sup>7</sup>H.D. Ziman, 'Never A Foot Wrong', *Daily Telegraph* (16th April, 1964), np. RDF

<sup>8</sup>Philip Diack, 'In Praise of The Poet Who Walks Alone', *North Devon Journal-Herald* (28th November, 1968), np. RDF

of books by European scholars on aspects of his drama and verse.<sup>9</sup> Apart from these and numerous reviews, a search for Duncan references will reveal that an abundance of footnotes and allusions to him exist in other texts. In addition, however, his collected papers (recently collated and catalogued) can now be considered a rich and enlightening source of material for study.

## ii. *Life Comes Breaking In*

With such a dearth of critical source-material, a contemporary evaluation rather than re-evaluation, is necessary in the case of the author Ronald Duncan. The objective of this thesis is to undertake a biographical study that will analyse events, episodes and emotional encounters recorded from Duncan's autobiographical writing (that is, the autobiographies and archival materials such as diaries, letters and manuscript drafts) in conjunction with his fictional and poetic works, in order to evaluate historical context, discern recurrent motifs and internal textual tensions as well as the different social/sexual codes which affected his work and formulated its direction. Interestingly, Duncan often provides clues to the conception and genesis (or 'biography') of his own texts in his autobiographies. He points out that 'I was aware how closely I was following Eliot's 'Murder' where St. Thomas also has his four tempters' and also says:

And somewhere behind the Bosch picture of St. Anthony I was aware of Gandhi. I recalled an incident when I had motored to Wardha with him from his Ashram in Segoan.<sup>10</sup>

He goes on to expand on this memory and thus cites how the experience of meeting the Mahatmā prompted him to humanise the ascetic character of Saint Anthony in the play.

Considering these aspects necessarily entails analysis of how life-events are synthesised into art and become its main source-material. This is a trait especially distinctive and seemingly necessary for Duncan's writing. The play *The Catalyst* (banned by the Lord Chamberlain in 1957 for its lesbian theme), replicated a ménage à trois situation that had taken place in Duncan's own life. During rehearsals, the actress playing the mistress then took on the same part off-stage by becoming Duncan's next extra-marital partner.

At this point it is important to explain why a biographical approach is preferable to a study of Duncan's drama in isolation or, say, a solely feminist critique of the

<sup>9</sup>W.B. Wahl, *A Lone Wolf Howling: The Thematic Content of Ronald Duncan's Plays*, ed. by James Hogg, Poetic Drama No 19 (Austria, Universität CH Salzburg, 1973); W.B. Wahl, *Ronald Duncan: Verse Dramatist and Poet Interviewed*, ed. by James Hogg, Poetic Drama No. 20 (Austria, Universität Salzburg, 1973); Max Walter Heuter, *Ronald Duncan: The Metaphysical Content of His Plays* (London, Rebel Press, 1969).

<sup>10</sup>Ronald Duncan, *How To Make Enemies* (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968), pp. 30 and 23.

patriarchal nature of his literary discourse. The importance of the biographical approach is due to the fact that, the dominant feature of Duncan's work is its different layers of writing, some closer to the surface of the extra-textual 'real' world than others. A reader has access to these expressions, filtered through his subjective consciousness, in some cases represented as accurate and sometimes partly fictionalised.

Access to the personal papers and manuscripts in Duncan's archive, give an external dimension to his published literature. I will examine the ways in which the external dimension of archival material and other life-writing prompts a biographical reading of an artist's literary production. Such material acts as a yardstick against which all the different processes which function in his work can be gauged, on each level.

The ego-centric or 'confessional' writing to which Duncan was prone *can* be interpreted in and against current deconstructive trends rather than demoting him to an area of literature which is too much distorted by personality to address meaningful critical issues. I mean to show that the notions of authenticity, reality, the subject, closure and signification all become prominent within a critical analysis while a biographical approach to the subject's life is not incompatible with issues in modern literary theory. At the same time, this study will not limit itself to a traditional critical biography that re-constructs the author's life in terms of a 'true' portrait, with chronology, elaborate detail and interpretations of their published or finest work. Instead this study seeks to examine Duncan's complicated and constant consolidation of event and its written creation.

### *iii. Presence and Personality*

Sing high and aloof, free from the wolf's black jaw and the dull ass's hoof.<sup>11</sup>

Duncan often quoted Ben Jonson's lines to emphasise his scorn for lower forms of art produced for the common populace. However many documents testify to the fact that he moved between many different social spheres and undertook different types of writing for wide audiences. Each chapter discovers the construction of inconsistent textual selves: the genius artist and the pacifist farmer (Chapters 1 and 2), the verse poet and the existentialist (Chapter 3) or the progressive thinker and the typical man's man (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Inconsistency arises from the way he constantly deals with, constructs, injects and transforms personal experiences into texts, so that the experiencing 'I' is written as a focal point into his works of art, but with varying mediation. Duncan's fluctuating omniscience can be attributed to his frantically busy

<sup>11</sup>Ben Jonson, 'An Ode, To Himselfe' [1611], *Under-woods XXIII*, in *Poems of Ben Jonson*, ed. by George Burke Johnston (London, Routledge, 1954), p. 151. Also reference for the title of the first edition of Duncan's plays *The Dull Ass's Hoof* (Fortune Press, 1941).

personal life, characterised by a swift succession of affairs and fresh obsessions as well as a wide social network and extra-literary activities such as farming, beach-combing, fishing, holiday-letting and horse-breeding.

Such a range of different interests produced a duality of response and experience which filters through to the level of Duncan's narrative. He constantly tries to make sense of duality as he writes. It is the habitual self-consciousness and constant re-writing of his life that makes his work fascinating. What is seen to emerge is an obsession with self-identity in terms of genealogy, anxiety about his own originality, and periodic eruptions of vengeful loathing and invective. There is always the vindicating insistence that *I am not like them*. Testimonies from those who knew him intriguingly refute the impression of Duncan as an irascible, selfish pariah:

He was seen as some sort of mad fascist. He knew Pound who had dubbed him the lone wolf of English letters... I found it impossible to equate these representations of the man with the quiet, gentle Duncan I knew, the man whose pacifism had brought him together with Britten.<sup>12</sup>

As with the very existence of his wide number of acquaintances – which featured creative and influential people of the day such as Gaudier-Breszka, T. S. Eliot, Mary Pound, Henry Williamson and Gerald Brenan – the image of Duncan as always working in opposition to the mainstream of popular culture is similarly unjust. He was script-writer for the 1960s psychedelic film *Girl on a Motorcycle* which featured Marianne Faithfull, and he wrote regular columns for *The Observer* during the 1970s. It appears that Duncan, far from living the life of a recluse as was often suggested, followed a determinedly public career that was full of explosive and dramatic encounters. This is confirmed by the fact that Duncan wrote not only one but three volumes of autobiography during his 68 year life-span.

It is significant, however, in terms of subjectivity, that his life was placed with very minor changes into his art. Each chapter will discuss how Duncan's three autobiographies inhabit a place on the borders of conventional expectations of the genre. For example, they lack clear chronology and this draws attention to the difficulty of transmuting individual experience directly into memoirs. Episodes and experiences are sometimes toned down according to Duncan's subjectivity. Parts of the narrative reveal a sub-text of vulnerable defence-mechanisms. The autobiographical narrator remembers his wife Rose-Marie frequently appearing to be a dualistic, Martha/Mary character. But he does not seem to link her changes with the records of his episodes of infidelity which are the only occasions when this behaviour manifests itself. Rose-Marie's solidarity with a butch female friend clearly threatens his own position of male dominance and 'Gretchen' is described as a harridan from whom his wife must

<sup>12</sup>Rodney Milnes, 'A Legend In Another Time', *Times* (30th December, 1994), np. RDF

be saved. On inviting Rose-Marie to join him on a trip to Rome as he visits another actress girlfriend, he writes:

Of course she (Rose-Marie) knew Anna was my mistress. But she accepted, not out of connivance at that relationship, nor as a gesture of confidence in the deep affection between herself and me, but because she wanted to go to Rome and she knew I hated staying in hotels. This was the reason she gave and both Anna and I knew it to be true. (HTME, 274)

Here, he writes to justify his own behaviour but subconscious guilt is close beneath the surface, detectable by his need to add the reinforcement, 'both Anna and I'. This suggests that Duncan did not play such a consistently glamorous role in his everyday life as was ultimately projected; and rather than sustaining a lifelong and mutually supportive marriage, his ethics of polygamy and possession caused conflict and repression. Hence the biographer needs to elucidate how subjectively Duncan makes his role in his art work and how his experiences are inscribed through the activity of the subject writing them.

It is also clear that some of his most traumatic experiences were continually transcribed and inserted into his literary creations. When Rose-Marie is ill with tuberculosis, for example, her husband's vision of her invalid body draped on the hospital bed inspires the epitaph for Lucretia as she dies, hand trailing, 'This dead hand lets fall/All that my heart held when full...'.<sup>13</sup> More absurdly, some descriptions of unusual experiences are found to occur in the memoirs, as well as in short stories and topical essays. One of these instances is the description, in *Enemies*, of Duncan's 'dream' of waking up and throttling a dog as he cannot endure its incessant barking. In the morning he wakes to discover a dead hound under the lamp-post outside his window. The event was ultimately re-worked into a published article on popular psychology, ironically titled, 'But That's Another Story'.<sup>14</sup> This is an example of the intertextual effect of reading different representations of Duncan's life.

It is through this process of art/life assimilation that Duncan's writing constructs an ego-centric personality which obtrusively blunders into his fiction as well as his poetry. Thus, he is an author who provides rewarding subject material for a biographical study because his literary style is mainly first-person, omniscient and autobiographical. Also, he preserved all his drafts and jottings, kept innumerable diaries and journals and even hoarded menus and napkins on which he scribbled his poetry.

My study will also incorporate the notion of textual biography, a method that attempts accurate referencing or investigation of a published text's production. However, my approach acknowledges that a promulgation of material may only offer

<sup>13</sup>Ronald Duncan, *The Rape of Lucretia* (London, Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 41.

<sup>14</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'But That's Another Story', *You*, Vol. 73. No. 179 (January 1951), pp. 34 - 36.

mysterious lacunae. For example, Duncan's published autobiographies were not written from any one present position of retrospection, but collaged, taped together and re-written from diaries, transcriptions of letters and excerpts from early articles. Frustratingly also, many copies of the same poem show completely different dates, and some batches of correspondence are not dated at all.

Each chapter seeks to detect the interfaces between the personalities promoted in Duncan's memoirs and the personae revealed, primarily, in his dramatic works. These figures are the genius who yearns for sublime poetic expression and the self-conscious, earth-bound, 'animated ink-blot' who is envisaged in statements such as, 'At school I was called titch. When nobody was looking I did stretching exercises', (*HTME*, 279) and 'My hands are like paws, my fingers stubby; nothing of the artist about them'. (*HTME*, 280) Such descriptions epitomise the state of contradiction between Duncan's portrayal of himself as a unique romantic hero or martyr and at the same time, his identification with figures who are not unique but stereotypes, such as Don Juan. Fictional identification with other roles, as well as the dissemination of omniscience through dramatic characters, undermines his striving for originality. In the same way, the autobiographical assertion of the 'I' claims an exemplary life, while at the same time expecting the reader's empathy and identification as well as appeal to a mass audience. The tension in tone between didacticism and intimacy, arrogance and self-deflation that occurs in Duncan's work, creates an uneasy impression of a writer who asserts himself yet simultaneously undermines his own voice.

#### *iv. The Autobiographical Subject*

Is autobiography all, trivia most of it?  
And the whole universe remain inscrutable,  
Unknowable? What is, be always what seems?  
Can the astronomer never focus on anything but his past?  
Nor the poet on anything but his past:  
these rags which are the remnants of vision?<sup>15</sup>

Duncan's three published autobiographies will be the initiating texts for the study as they appear to be those in which the author, the written 'I' and the protagonist in the text all most easily coincide. These texts, along with the archival documents, act as biographical reference, yardstick and source. This, of course, affects my own biographical method of selection and construction of Duncan's life as represented in texts by himself, and by others.

<sup>15</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Canto 19', *Man, The Complete Cantos* (London, Rebel Press, 1974), pp. 63-64.

In each chapter I will identify the themes that emerge from Duncan's writing as the years pass. These are: the quest for ideal love and re-generation; fear of death; betrayal, suffering and solitude. The themes aim for a universal and detached expression but, because solipsistic, attempt to implement a personal ideology and agency. Each chapter identifies parts of Duncan's literature that accentuate 'agency'. Agency is the effect of the written 'I' or textual subject who fixes meaning and claims authority (as in the subject of a memoir who is the author of his or her own life). In his commentary on *Unpopular Poems*, Lane concludes that, 'The poetry contains the process of rationalisation, and indeed fixes its response according to what Duncan's rationality wishes to portray'.<sup>16</sup>

It will be demonstrated that rationalisation coincides with the desire for agency and is a particular fixation of his work, for even as he writes an introduction for an edition of poetry, Duncan's role as writer has to be defiantly included through anecdote and close interrelation with the other personae. The foregrounding of agency and subject-hood calls for an account of autobiographical theory but also demands that one consider different modes of intertextuality. This is because Duncan's creative process also highlights his struggle to inscribe the subject into writing. Literary self-consciousness and the relations between self and text are highlighted in memoirs such as early travel-diaries and the unpublished *Diary of A Poem*. What will emerge is the complexity and inconsistencies involved in the different written representations of the author and the subject of this work, 'Ronald Duncan'.

Duncan's writing frequently evades direct communication by setting up barriers to self-reference based on the very metaphors and themes he is using. Chapter 3, for example, examines how the theme of the nature of evil appears general and abstract but is, importantly, based upon the experiencing subject. The character of Stratton makes the theme specific to his proliferating self-obsession. In the same way, Duncan's creative output was affected by his personal life and social context. His memoirs and more particularly, the dramatic writing, will show that he tries to close off meaning but in fact, cannot. What my study progressively exposes then, with reference to Duncan's constructions of self and meaning, is that aspects of these constructions also destabilize conventional expectations of the autobiographical genre and of writerly authority.

<sup>16</sup>Daniel Lane, 'The Poetry of Ronald Duncan', unpublished PhD. (University of Plymouth, 1996), p. 109.

## Conclusion

Access to the Duncan Archive (and the related database of over 1000 filed items), has given a striking opportunity for close scrutiny of textual variations as well as the process of text production. A selection and viewing of unpublished texts and memorabilia displays the very precarious relationship which exists between fact and fiction. This precariousness is acknowledged by Duncan at the beginning of his second autobiography, as is the inauthenticity of self-portrayal:

An autobiography cannot give an accurate picture of a man's life if it is to be readable. Tedium, repetition and trivia make up most of our life. An accurate autobiography would never find a publisher, if it did, it would never hold a reader. (*HTME*, 15)

Different versions, key events and representations of facts emerge through external censorship and self-censorship, factors which de-stabilise autobiographical validity. For example, one of Duncan's mistresses is written into one brief episode of the first autobiography with her proper name, but this is retained only up until their second meeting. Here, the protagonist suddenly shifts his passions to her (fictional) best friend who is later killed off in a car crash. The crash is shortly after the original woman's engagement to another well-known person is announced. It is in the unpublished version that one sees the insertion of the new 'best friend's' name over the crossed out original. This manuscript is filed in Duncan archives at the University of Plymouth.<sup>17</sup>

My study will discover those features that destabilise the traditional generic 'truth' claims of autobiographical writing as well as of biographical study. The main issues – art and life and the inscription of the autobiographical subject – are self-consciously addressed from within the discourse of Duncan's life-story using the very subject and his writings for the analysis. This research, by considering both non-fictional and fictional texts, presents a reappraisal of the conventions of critical biography and of autobiographical writing. It gives an account of Duncan's subjectivity as a simultaneous shifting between different life narratives (roles) and between genres (the autobiographical, journalistic, poetic and novelistic).

Thus one expects to find that the autobiographical 'I' in Duncan's writing is most obviously revealed through his constant striving for unified self-hood and the focus on the individual. To some extent, this results in a sense of tragic impossibility which haunts his work, but this may be the one thing on which Duncan thrives. It is revealed that through his constant striving to depict a unified self, a focus on its inscription and by manipulating these impossible states, Duncan manages to make use of his own conditions of suffering. He exploits this as fuel for his artistic creation and methods of meeting the real world.

<sup>17</sup>From an unpublished draft copy of *All Men Are Islands*, housed in the archive, *The Ronald Duncan Papers: The New Collection* at the University of Plymouth, United Kingdom. Referred to in the main text as *RDF*.



# 1

## Duncan's Childhood and the Search For Utopia

### *i. The Early Works*

This chapter and the next will examine Duncan's early written works which had their genesis in the 1930s. The works include fictional and non-fictional texts such as the pamphlet *The Complete Pacifist* (1936) and an early play *The Unburied Dead* (1937). When Duncan, aged 21, graduated from Cambridge in the summer of 1936, he had not yet formulated any personal creed in terms of his identity as a writer, though he professed in his first autobiography to have read and written poetry mainly of the sentimental type since the age of fourteen. Duncan's youthful writing contributes to the picture of a writer just beginning his career, oscillating between different styles and forms. Very insubstantial records survive from before this time and the only account of the author's childhood and teenage years occur as reminiscences in the first published autobiography, *All Men Are Islands* (1964).<sup>1</sup> My examination of the surviving material will be less an attempt at reconstruction than an assessment of Duncan's past selves through textual methods of recall. The few documents from this period to be found in the archive consist of the parental marriage certificate and some material written by Duncan's father which was given to Ronald in 1931 when, aged seventeen, he returned to South Africa (his country of birth) to visit his father's grave.

In this chapter, original texts from the mid-'30s will be analysed to reveal how Duncan was informed by a rhetoric of radical protest or a utopian politics. The earliest surviving prose writing of his is a journal, *The Holmwood Diary*, which I shall examine here in conjunction with a later, more sophisticated form of memoir, Duncan's first autobiography. I will go on in the next chapter to show that Duncan sustained the youthful radicalism expressed in his early diary and went on to write political pieces such as the pamphlet on pacifism and the *Rexist Manifesto* (1938). Both chapters contextualise Duncan's politics by showing that they were produced by his particular engagement with historical events of national and international significance. This chapter refers to autobiographical writings and records which

<sup>1</sup>For my study I use the unpublished proof copy of *All Men Are Islands*. RDF. The autobiography was published by Rupert-Hart Davies in 1964.

reveal the events which affected him directly. These were varied and significant and deal with the life of Gandhi, hunger marches, miners' strikes and the Second World War. A critique of the autobiographical material is helpful as it brings to light Duncan's mendacity and how it developed from early feelings of difference. These feelings clearly complicate Duncan's political vision. Examples of adjunct duality and ambivalence appear in the earliest plays, *The Unburied Dead* and *Birth*, which are discussed in Chapter 2. Despite early ambivalence, there is a contrast between the work discussed in the first two chapters and that of Duncan's middle and later years, analysed in Chapters 3 to 5. The latter chapters discuss texts which are, in contrast, less optimistic, not overtly political and much less influenced by the sense of social obligation that marks the earlier work.

It is important that Duncan's work is studied in its historical context and beside archival texts from this era; letters, notes and diaries are therefore used as reference. These chance remains cannot reflect the whole story of the writer's developing self, as it is impossible to acquire every particle of his life's minutiae. No author is to be tied down by an all-knowing biographer who pretends to have a concerted grasp of his or her subject. As Michael Holroyd states:

The fluid, imaginative powers of re-creation pull against the hard body of discoverable fact. The inventive, shaping aspect of the story-teller struggles with the ideal of a permanent historical and objective document. Sylvia Plath once said that if poetry is like a closed fist, then fiction is like an open hand. On that marvellous analogy, then biography is something like a handshake, a handshake across time. But it is also an arm-wrestle, even if a friendly one, like most lively marriages.<sup>2</sup>

This study aims for 'a handshake across time', making use of texts viewed diachronically and thus assuming 'early', 'middle' and 'late' biographical periods for the writer. The diachronic perspective is stressed throughout this thesis, because of the manner in which historical references and contingencies reverberate in all the texts I have chosen. Looking at the first autobiography in conjunction with the diaries and plays, reveals how versions of events become transformed across time, highlighting the genesis and process of textual production. Reading written material tends to emphasise the differences between letters, diaries and journals and their interrelation.

The years in which Duncan was first obliged to live independently as a young adult were the years leading up to the Second World War. Despite economic depression in Europe and America this was a period when there existed a concurrent optimism. Duncan's 1935 poem, *Parish Church*, acknowledges poverty, but does not despair and demands compassion:

<sup>2</sup>Michael Holroyd, 'Biography - Inventing the Truth', *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Batchelor (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 20.

There's no prayer for the poor  
that can feed  
to their need.

Prayers for the dead  
Bread for the paupers!<sup>3</sup>

Duncan's optimism stretched to a hope for the attainment of perfection – possibly through God – and an ideal of human refinement through harmony with nature or love. The following poem was written only a year later and in contrast has an embellished style that demonstrates Duncan's versatility:

Not in this thing or in that thing  
in between or around the fingers and toes of spring  
in summer's broad brimmed abandon  
or in autumn's loaded lap, had he found Him

Wind took him and women took him  
while the pip grew to a tree to an orchard.<sup>4</sup>

The ideas of the eternal elemental force of God in nature still appeared in Duncan's later poetry and plays such as *This Way To The Tomb* (1946), but were increasingly set within a framework of indecision. Duncan's beliefs were clearly more optimistic during this decade.

During the 1930s Duncan addressed political issues openly. He joined the pacifist movement in 1936. It is important at this point to note that the movement did not nurture a coherent ideology and its incoherence has implications for the way Duncan always sought his identity through rather messy, contradictory forms and values. Martin Ceadel, writing on the growth of the peace movement in the mid-'thirties, observes that after the First World War there existed a general feeling of having failed to improve society through civil rights and moral deterrence. But despite society's mood of apathy, he says, 'in the sphere of international relations, particularly in the inter-war period, it [the mood] was clearly utopian.'<sup>5</sup> This statement occurs with reference to Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party in India, who had campaigned for Indian independence since the early part of the century and had visited London in 1931, becoming a household name in Britain by this time. His popularity signifies how quickly ideas of institutional reform and active movements could provide the community with a focus for optimism and influence opinion about its own survival. The Peace Ballot in 1935, in which Duncan voted, roused an overwhelming majority against conscription and re-armament demonstrating a new faith in the discourse of protest and scepticism towards Britain's traditional economic and defence policies.

<sup>3</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Parish Church', *Collected Poems* (London, Heineman, 1981), pp. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15. Hereafter referred to in the text as CP.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism In Britain* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 29.

Ceadel calls the mood of optimism 'utopian' and opposes it to the apathy, which had waned in some ways by the 'thirties. This idea is problematised by the dramaturge Dragan Klaic who states that the economic crisis stemming from the depression in the USA in the 1930s, 'prompted more dystopian reflection about the future of the capitalist system'.<sup>6</sup> For Klaic, utopia is correlated with the imagination, as the conception of utopian social harmony was primarily based on the philosopher's construction of detailed systems of rules and social institutions, all creating a perfect totality.<sup>7</sup> Klaic discusses the utopian imagination in terms of its shaping of the dramatic themes of plays concerned with 'ideas of the collective and individual future' (DK, 3) or the 'concept of steady betterment', which present utopia as an alternative future or 'an idealised state of earthly bliss.' (DK, 3) He makes special reference to twentieth-century playwrights and goes on to propose that:

Ambivalences, doubts and anxieties concerning the future have shaped the dramatic vision since the early expressionists and other modernists, especially after the disaster of Word War One, (DK, 3)

and:

The worldwide economic crisis throughout the 1930's prompted more dystopian reflection about the future of the capitalist system... the emergence of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes in countries severely hit by depression and the aggressive and expansionist ideologies of fascism and Nazism, which were often clad in Utopian terms, could only discourage utopian thinking and prompt sinister images of the future. (DK, 60)

Klaic's view of the inter-war period as dystopian does acknowledge utopian striving rather than consuming it altogether. But instead of being culturally and politically stable, the period is marked as one that engaged eclectic and fluctuating public values and concerns. What is germane is that Duncan himself participated in wider social events at this time, a participation which directly affected the forms of his writing and themes. Duncan's earliest writing contains a discernible element of social idealism as well as reflecting the divisions which arose from the underlying turbulence of the decade. Dystopian pessimism or division arises from 'the withering away of utopia, its gradual abandonment or reversal'. This can be presented as an unexpected and aborted outcome of 'utopian strivings'. Dystopia still implies utopia as 'a subverted or suppressed desire, an initial impulse left unfulfilled.' (DK, 3)

A striving for utopian perfection through various ideas and practices and the abortive results of this striving form a pattern evident in Duncan's early activities and writing career. When one reads his first autobiography, such striving can be linked to childhood episodes of early frustration and desire, as examined below. I shall argue that

<sup>6</sup>Dragan Klaic, *The Plot of the Future* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>Klaic cites Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* (1516) as seminal utopian texts. He also draws attention to how the term is defined paradoxically by the combination of two words: 'good place' and 'no-where', respectively – *eutopia* and *outopia*.

Duncan's early writing can also be identified as a record of his desire for an alternative reality based on a composite of social and ethical harmony, which can be seen as utopian. This desire, as signified in these texts, is bound up with his own preoccupation with personal legitimacy (which will be explored as a motif of the search for the father or the whole self), and his search for the perfect woman (the 'other', discussed in Chapter 4). Alongside this, the author's need to produce an inscribed identity for himself in the writing often *over-personalises* and frustrates the original, utopian model.

Duncan's early artistic conceptualisation is through a visionary, utopian discourse which gradually becomes outweighed by a dystopian pessimism. His later work continues to reflect social as well as inner conflict, but it is during the 'thirties that social issues have a greater bearing on both the writer's art and life, and the two are least disjunctive. Duncan followed and expressed the *Zeitgeist* of the 1930s through his decisions to join the both miners' strike and the Peace Pledge Union, to visit Gandhi at his ashram and to begin the community farm in Devon as the war began. In addition he pioneered the *Townsmen* at the end of the decade.

As we shall see, the struggle for individual agency could not be reconciled with community-based social ideals. Each of the texts studied below demonstrates Duncan's struggle to negotiate these two positions ideologically – the inner voice of poetry and that of protest – through writings of very different genres.

The earliest diary kept from Duncan's adult life charts the mining experience in Holmwood whereby the young man maintained a disguise as a gypsy in order to allay suspicion toward his motives for wanting to mine. His curiosity could have been stirred by a new scheme launched in the same year by Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge (educated middle-class observers) to collect statistical data on social customs and cultural habits: this activity, *Mass Observation*, was likened to anthropological research but was widely perceived as prying and to be the brainchild of left-wing idealists. The critic John Carey cautiously alleges that:

Its employment of a scientific model for the purpose of segregating and degrading the mass had a sinister counterpart in the assimilation of the masses to bacteria and bacilli.<sup>8</sup>

Duncan's own reasons for what can be seen as a similar exercise in social reporting and observation were more personal and densely engaged than Orwell's rather detached documentation of working-class life and habits in *The Road To Wigan Pier*, published a year later in 1937. Duncan's autobiography sets out his idealistic motives for joining the miners:

<sup>8</sup>John Carey, *The Individual and The Masses* (London, Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 25.

I immediately decided that I would live as the miners had to live. I thought that it would be good to see what the so-called progressive theories which my friends believed in looked like from the point of view of the person who had to be improved.<sup>9</sup>

But then the narrator shifts into the present of a more sceptical retrospect: 'I did not examine my motives any further, perhaps it was solely that I wanted adventure'. (AMAI, 111) This is typical of Duncan's personal commentary where genuinely honourable intentions are swiftly undercut. In his autobiographies, well-meaning intent is presented as contrived. Undercutting functions defensively to cover up the majority of Duncan's mistakes, offences and gaffes.

The original diary was clearly a more spontaneous piece of writing than the eventual memoir, published in 1964. The reworked and recollected experience is compacted into fourteen pages of narrative whereas the diary consists of over a hundred pages of detailed daily records, largely abbreviated and less prosaic.

Duncan's inscription of experience reveals the need to offer an eyewitness account of his sources. For instance, presenting himself as a participant as well as narrator, he assumes a position of privilege, claiming the experience for himself by being able to comment with authority on the events being recorded. This renders the accounts more authentic, in terms of the teller's own closeness and proximity to the event, such as mining work. Accounts of this type of experience, whether mining, community farming or being a tramp, inform a significant part of Duncan's literary output. The recording, authorised voice represents the writer's desire to be understood as a living person rather than a spectral author. Direct written representation of his personal viewpoint is central to and the focal point of the narrated scene. By this means his own identity is authenticated.

Though naturally at ease in this narrative mode, Duncan's capacity for experimentation is indicated by his production of the pamphlet *The Complete Pacifist* in 1936 and the satirical tract *The Rexist Manifesto* in 1938. The use of personal records is ultimately in conflict with the Modernists' literary inclination for the writer to efface him or herself in 'impersonal' narrative and devices of textual masking.<sup>10</sup> Duncan's pamphlets attempt to distance the author through a deferred presence or by means of the impersonal voice of deductive reason. Distancing also reflects the ease with which the writer continued to adopt different styles of discourse whilst not relinquishing too much authority. (This is discussed further in Chapter 3, p. 117.) The ease with which Duncan masks and unmask himself makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the consistency of his motives for writing.

<sup>9</sup>Duncan, op. cit., 1964, p. 111. Hereafter referred to as *Islands* in the main text and AMAI for page citations.

<sup>10</sup>Maud Ellman, *The Poetics of Impersonality* (Brighton, Harvester, 1987), p. 3.

By creating a blueprint for a future society, *Pacifist* shows a desire to achieve salvation from present deficiencies and to allay fears about a future where the world might bring about its own ruin:

Humanity has excelled itself in the invention of the means of its own destruction. (CP, 5)

The question is, can war be avoided, and, if so, how?

Those who think that war is our inevitable fate do so because they hold one or more of the following opinions: let us examine these reasons.

(a) 'THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WARS'

This may not be entirely true. Even so, it is not sufficient reason for believing that there must always be wars. (CP, 6)

The threat of technological development set against the need for human spiritual salvation are themes which mark much of Duncan's writing. During the inter-war period, he was concerned with the social reconstruction of a Europe decimated by war, and placed a particular emphasis on pacifist policies. This concern was increasingly expressed through recommendations for cultural change, notably those appearing in the manifesto of the first issue of *Townsmen* (1938). The statement appears to have crystallised his utopian concerns in the specific field of art, understood to function as an instrument for cultural change. (See Chapter 2, pp. 87-93.) Yet by the time that the Second World War had taken hold, the terms *art* and *culture* had become defined as realms somewhat isolated from their immediate social context, and Duncan was struggling with the idea of cultural regeneration for the mass. He could not relinquish the Romantic view of the visionary artist whose work offers a moral value (opposing – because not yet recognised by – society) naturally related to its aesthetic beauty.

Art had a relation to a true-er morality for Duncan but he loses faith beyond his own personal, esoteric understanding of the deeper order of things. Struggle and ambivalence are evident in his early written work and remain as motifs throughout his writing, taking the form of an underlying duality, a refusal to endorse his own statements or authority. This allows Duncan to escape clear-cut definitions so that his writing becomes the site of opposing forces, sometimes mainstream, sometimes rebellious.

The use of narrative devices such as particular methods of address of the reader; and (surprisingly) textual masks, pseudonyms and disguise (despite the autobiographical style), contribute to a complex self-presentation. These devices indicate that the writer's personal identity and anxiety concerning its possible displacement is a preoccupation. This anxiety originated in Duncan's early discomfort with his own ambiguous position in society, and from a crisis of identity arising from a ruptured family structure.

Duncan's particular modes of address foreground the idea of audience, or the act of addressing an audience. At times, the *Delhi Diary* (January-March 1937) is almost epistolary, as it makes Duncan's sister Bianca ('Bunny') the projected recipient whilst other passages address the self of the writer in the traditional diary style. Such writing signifies a method of reading the self whilst writing by means of a narcissistic process of mirroring and fragmentation. The use of the sister as an implied reader attempts to prevent this doubling from taking place at the same time.

The published autobiography, *All Men Are Islands*, presents episodes recalled from Duncan's early childhood through to his mid-twenties. A reading of the autobiographical narrative alongside related texts that cover the same episodes allows an analysis of how material is foregrounded or suppressed. Certain patterns of circumstance and behaviour recur inviting speculation as to the existence of unconscious impulses and obsessions which seek resolution in Duncan's work.

## ii. *All Men Are Islands*

Autobiographical writing inhabits a sphere of self-revelation wherein the autobiographer introspectively attempts to discover the meaning of his or her experience and confer motivations or assign responsibility as to his or her behaviour. Personal agency comes to be emphasised as much as is the self written into diaries or letters, modes which also centralise self-authorship. Because so much of Duncan's work is documentary in this way, its style is conspicuously self-conscious and confessional, and tends to highlight issues of responsibility.

Issues of responsibility and motivation in autobiographical writing have connected the genre to didactic narratives. The instructive, exemplary tone of outsider narratives is used to justify their publication. They may be written by the voice of the reformed criminal (such as the anonymous author of *Go Ask Alice*, a cautionary story of teenage drug-abuse)<sup>11</sup> or as a reflection of a type of person: ordinary (as in Haven Kimmel's *A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland Indiana*), minority or exemplary (as in Thatcher's *The Path To Power*).<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the speaker is an observer of human absurdity of the modern world, as with Duncan who portrays himself as an alienated individual struggling against adversity due to his special, misunderstood nature. Wilson notes 'It is as if he is convinced that a poet is bound to be misunderstood by the world, and is determined to compound the confusion'. (*Tribute*, 85) The description of events centred round mistakes and

<sup>11</sup>Anonymous, *Go Ask Alice* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1971).

<sup>12</sup>Haven Kimmel's *A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland Indiana* (New York, Doubleday, 2001) and Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London, Harper Collins, 1995).



understandings also produce a narrative that is, in parts, something akin to a parable. Duncan's memoir therefore fits into a writing convention which assumes superiority by its instructiveness and special perception of the world.

Early memories are described thematically: the achievement of material objects of desire; moments of emotion with his mother and sister; unfamiliarity with the father's side of the family; travel/holidays and sexual awareness. Duncan's early childhood and adolescent experiences make up the first sixty of the 280 pages of his first published autobiography. This first section, 'The Ceremony of Innocence', covers the years from his birth in 1914, life with his mother and sister in Clapham, schooldays, holidays and ends with Duncan's return from his lone trip to Africa just before he begins private tuition in preparation for attendance at Cambridge. The second section, 'The Birth of Being', recalls his visit to Pound at Rapallo in 1937 and his courting of Rose-Marie, to printing the first issue of *Townsmen* at the beginning of the war. The first paragraph of the first section reads:

We settle down to write our life when we no longer know how to live it. To pause is to admit defeat... The past is a wastepaper basket. We burrow into it only when we feel we have no future. I do not know what I will find in this dustbin. I have never kept a diary; I have never made a note in my life, believing that I could remember anything that was valuable, and what I couldn't was best forgotten anyhow. I had a notoriously bad memory... When we are lost and can't see the trees for the wood we can do little but look back at the path we have trodden. It has led nowhere. Nowhere is where I am. (AMAI, 9)

Expressing such a dismissive attitude towards one's past seems at odds with the very undertaking of writing an autobiography. The enterprise is immediately disclaimed. It is as if Duncan would rather admit tragic defeat in his life than any celebratory motive for narrating details of his life-story so far. There is a sense that he is trying to excuse himself from the act of writing and remembering, an act which has no 'value' because it leads to the present which is 'nowhere'. The apparently unfamiliar territory of remembrance is established as an unknown quantity for the narrator. His words do not suppose limits on history; they are not supposed to imply self-conscious archivization ('I do not know...', 'I never...').<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, these statements are in themselves, a narration and using the personal pronoun exposes the decision to reconstruct 'value' or unity.

Establishing a sense of ignorance or unfamiliarity about writing a memoir gives licence to reconstruct creatively, without diary or notes. The paragraph is full

<sup>13</sup>The opening statement seems in contradiction to the physical existence of the Duncan archive: a collection that signifies a place, unification and identification. It is known Duncan kept diaries and used them to contextualise his autobiography. See hardbound workbooks and appointment diaries, *RDE*. Instead of 'nowhere' there is placement: a notion also construed by Derrida's concept of 'archivisation'. (p. 3) The principle is one of consignment or depositing – a project of gathering together documents and their passage from the private to the public – a scene of 'domiciliation' (p. 2) where 'a house... becomes a museum'. (p. 3) See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998).

of oppositions such as past and present (integrated with the concept of future), remembering and forgetting, no-where and where. Phrasal inversion is used with the words 'trees' and 'wood' and signifies a state where all things are exchangeable and each term rejects or cancels out the other leaving the reader, along with the author, with a sensation both of affirmation and deficiency. This is characteristic of Duncan's narrative form. It has a provocative, seductive quality based upon absolutes and impossibility, and uses negation and points of failure to engage the reader in the challenge of its (the narrative's) fulfilment and interpretation. Are we to believe in his faulty memory, or enjoy a narrative based on such fragile terms? It is the complex textuality that exists between the referential and the non-referential which retains our interest and attention.

At the time of the publication of *Islands*, Duncan was fifty years old. The first typewritten version of the complete text is not dated. Nevertheless we can assume that the process of collation of earlier sources for this book – re-writing, adding, editing and cutting – would have taken several years. Benedict Nightingale's review of the book in 1964 draws attention to the self-consciousness of Duncan's remark, 'to pause is to admit defeat':

The 'pause' is far from sterile, nevertheless when a creative talent begins the old man's task of self-recording at the mere age of 50, one has doubts and worries. Mr Duncan himself anticipates them to an extent, by bludgeoning himself for past self-absorption. He may not realise that there are present signs of it in, for instance, the seriousness with which he speculates about childhood traumas and their effects. A 'pause' may be egocentric, and a self that looks inward may not see so clearly outwards.<sup>14</sup>

'Past self-absorption' is a common feature of autobiography which presumes that most of one's childhood is spent in a predominantly ego-centric state of consciousness. To Duncan at the time, events such as waiting for the delayed delivery of a Meccano set, are experienced as being poignantly traumatic. 'I don't think I have ever felt secure since that day' (AMAI, 32) is a serious comment on being lost at the seaside. Nightingale criticises the fact that solipsism is equally necessary for remembering childhood from a present moment of recall. Duncan's own remarks partly assume that recollection is flawed, and indeed, one can never reproduce past sensations and feelings accurately. However to speculate on the past is no less authentic than attempting (an in fact impossible) neutrality. The disclaimer for Duncan's 'pause' suggests that mulling over one's past is painful and punishing to the embittered, present self who 'no longer knows how to live it'. In this way the inward-looking writer is 'ego-centric' but it is necessarily enlightening to revisit past hardship even though the only enlightenment is the discovery of reasons for present stasis, 'defeat' or confirmation of the fact that 'I had a notoriously bad memory'. (AMAI,

<sup>14</sup>Benedict Nightingale, 'Inward Glances', *Guardian* (3rd April, 1964), np. RDE.

9) His statement, within the context of the genre, is self reflexive and shows that it is the genre itself that contains contradiction, instead of the author (who might then be embarking upon a misplaced and doomed literary project).

Minet's review suggests that Duncan's motives for writing *Islands* are 'to invite discussion' and that he has 'tried to explain what is an awkward period in anyone's life and apply some logic to an irresponsible youth'.<sup>15</sup> Despite the association of events with emotions and attempts at their explication, he thinks obscurities remain, for example, with regard to the kinship relationship between Duncan's mother and father which 'remains hazy.' (PM, 64) Obscurities and haziness may however be inimical to autobiographical reflection. The existence of the *Holmwood Diary* (73 pp.), the *Delhi Diary* (132 pp.) and numerous (primarily autobiographical) notes for journalism all disprove the assertion that Duncan never kept any diaries or notes about his life.

The autobiographical mode itself produces scepticism towards levels of recollection in which authenticity is a problem. Tension arises in the narrative of *Islands* when Duncan quotes extended passages of dialogue which only a mechanical recording could have inscribed. Aged five, he (allegedly) remembers his neighbour Mr. Beale describing imaginary panthers and quotes him in direct speech: 'See how cruel the hard jewels of their eyes are, like emeralds of hate' '. (AMAI, 14) The strategy is contradictory to other descriptions of absent-mindedness and statements such as 'I did not notice a person's face or clothes; such superficial details entirely escaped me' (AMAI, 71) and 'I can recall nothing at all of landing in Africa'. (AMAI, 49)

With memoirs, it is the convention to assume that most of the writer's early childhood has been recalled with the effort of memory unadulterated by falsification. This is because its presentation is generally styled chronologically to fit the conventions of a life 'story' and appear seamless. The onus lies with the reader whether or not to believe the accuracy of the ordering of Duncan's early experiences. Most are structured in a vague sequence but rely heavily on association and emotional response. The event which grounds Duncan's passion for Schubert leads on to a brief animated portrait of his piano teacher, Holloway. Rather than a chronological log of events, childhood memories are related as fleeting impressions. Whilst this adds a certain psychological truth-to-sensation, the authority with which the writer presents how he was as a child is, in this case, undermined.

Authorial accuracy is further disrupted by emphasis on Duncan's predilection for lying, deceit and insincerity: 'I learned to lie as soon as I learned to talk'. (AMAI, 17) Duncan's inclusion of bizarre events such as his 'playmate' Mr. Beale

<sup>15</sup>Paul Minet, 'Mr. Duncan's Autobiography Leaves Much Unanswered', *The New Daily* (20th May, 1964), np, RDF. Hereafter referred to as PM.

eventually being taken away in a straitjacket, focuses on his own difference from the rest of the run-of-the-mill world, 'always insisting on being the Red Indian if there were cowboys'. (AMAI, 21) Obviously the author's memory is the only legitimising source, not 'truth' per se, and to give an impression of being continually exceptional makes considerable demands upon the reader.

The book emphasises the variety and impact of different experiences Duncan has had as a youth; periods of stability are not dwelt upon. His uneasy subjectivity shifts from one unrelated episode to the next and this tends to leave areas such as informed description of external places, or political situations, lacking. Emotion has more impact than events: 'These moods of frantic activity alternated with fits of melancholia and lethargy.' (AMAI, 70) The topic of an obsession with cleanliness crops up in a disconnected narrative which lists every memory to which this neurosis is connected. Retrospective comments often tend to over-dramatise. The present narrator comments on a past event: that of tearing up a letter from a young girl-friend: 'It was an act of cowardice, an act of betrayal. There have been so many, so many...'. (AMAI, 36)

It is a characteristic of Duncan's autobiographical narrative to mix self-righteousness with effacing self-mockery. The memory of leaving Cambridge in 1936 prompts an image of himself as 'a typical 1930's figure, dining at the Café Royal and worrying abstractedly about the working class'. (AMAI, 128) The commingled tones are a common feature and, as a result, the instructive element of Duncan's autobiography is complicated. The ultimate impulse behind the writing of his own life story would appear to be the endless assertion of individual agency in the face of repeated obstruction to the goals he desires. The idea of his feeling of difference is presented as immutable but the writing also uncovers the ironies contained within the concepts of utopia and the island and reveals a written subject who participates in, as well as being isolated from, human society. After describing the epiphanic feeling of being 'of that divinity' after sex, the narrator adds hastily 'I record this not to give the impression that I am unique: on the contrary, I believe this is what many experience'. (AMAI, 171)

Instead of presenting an archetypally 'progressive' autobiographical narrative with realist versions of truth it is one of the liberating qualities of this work that childhood events and times of transition are not depicted as a smoothly consecutive string of events.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on subjective association results in material steeped in incompleteness and unreliability. This ultimately has repercussions for the biographical subject himself. Consequently, an authoritative portrait of Ronald Duncan is problematised by the way the text itself questions authorial presence.

<sup>16</sup> See Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992). Here 'progressive' refers to 'the dominant current in autobiography' and what its ideology of exemplary lives entails (p. 12).

### iii. Self-identity and the Psyche

When one is dealing with life-writing which professes to rely on the reconstruction of memory then the insights of psychology and psychoanalysis cannot be ignored. The confessional mode of autobiography endorses the narrator's self-analytical commentary and in Duncan's case, he consciously applies psychological analysis to himself. In terms of the general development of his work, it increasingly embraced a psychological perspective, salient in *The Catalyst* (1958) and still evident in *Mandala* (1967). *Islands* includes admissions of quirks and an interest in his own processes, exemplified in comments like, 'I still have a feeling of physical revulsion when I hear certain words' (AMAI, 100); (on Gandhi), 'to preserve my own tastes and habits I subconsciously began to seek points of disagreement' (AMAI, 149) and:

there are times when I am as unaware as a stone and can remember nothing about an event or a meeting except some detail which is wholly unimportant, (AMAI, 185)

and also, 'Like many children I suffered from an acute compulsive neurosis'. (AMAI, 37) Such remarks diverge from the more general opinionated commentary and straightforward descriptive recollection. They are not however overwhelmingly conspicuous and are nicely balanced with the rest of the text.

Such inclusions signify that Duncan wanted to construct an honest, uncensored tone and thus endear himself to readers of his autobiography. After the narrator has described entertaining visitors in the bath, he suddenly remembers a hand-washing compulsion later explained, he remembers, by seeing another incident which 'immediately' reminds him 'of an incident in my own life'. (AMAI, 37) There is an unmistakable reference here to Freud's psychoanalytic cure from tracing back memories. Duncan concurs with the theory that one is freed from control of previously repressed ideas by a new self-consciousness, saying, 'by the accident of seeing it repeated, I forgot the whole problem'. (AMAI, 38) At this point of discovery, the autobiographical self is wholly present to itself. Repression prioritises consciousness in a typical Cartesian affirmation of the subject.

Freudian theory goes further to open up the actual complexity of the self constituted by psychoanalysis. The existence of the unconscious reveals determinism but also deferral, i.e. how a determining event is almost always deferred. In other words, it is never experienced as such, but only ever reconstructed. In this sense autobiography's narrative reconstructions have correspondences to the process of the psyche and Duncan's narrative represents its paradoxes. His youthful character is depicted as sensitive as well as bull-headed and much more unaware of things than the present narrator. The early memory of being seduced by 'Mr Beale's' imaginary world is marred by him retrospectively naming the man a 'raving maniac' at the point

where he is seen being taken off by hospital attendants. Its significance is not explicit and the reader can only infer how the episode implies, for Duncan, his later non-distinction between fantasy and reality (manifest in his absent-mindedness, artistic production and belief in his own abilities, authority and virtue). It is clear that non-distinction, at this early stage, is sanctioned and en-acted by an adult. But Duncan is not overcome by permanent delusion. Fantasy is negotiated with the inevitable apprehension of social prohibitions. However differing levels of awareness emerge from this negotiation and reveal a tension between positions of practical, articulate adult and the absent-minded childlike artist.

*Islands* also presents resistance to satisfactory analysis. The psychological inferences obscure as well as illuminate his character. Duncan proposes self-analysis but defers causal explanation when he asks: 'Could it be that I was ashamed of shooting that sparrow?' (AMAI, 44) The possible reason is then dismissed with 'what is the use of explanations when they do nothing to remove the emotion? We are all children, crippled children'. (AMAI, 44) The determining influence of repressed experience is deferred at this point. He admits his urge to drench people with a soda-siphon, adding that, at forty his 'desire became stronger than my self-control. But that's another story'. (AMAI, 30) Here again he resists analysis to sustain a discourse of suffering. Elements of resistance and different discourses are supplied by language within text which does not cohere on every level. In this way, text also represents how the human subject is structured through language and indeed, how autobiography itself is not outside demonstrating the irresolution of the creatively structured self.

Consequently it is useful to survey how psychoanalysis as an interpretative technique might be applied tentatively to the creative process of the individual subject ( I take over where Duncan leaves off). The model must be tentative because the notion of the subject denotes an individual historical life and that notion is actually limited by biographical study, i.e. by the intention to discover the truth of the knowable subject. Instead documents may contain repetitions and compulsions that work to structure a life-narrative of actually random events. These form a gloss of familiar habits or patterns of behaviour. Rather than presenting 'types' such as dominant characters who have to dominate others all the time, or ones who have a natural love of democracy, Duncan's texts produce compulsively ambivalent selves who manifest dualistic behaviour.

There is duality regarding Duncan's evaluation of irrationality. Due to his 'revulsion against' the 'stream of consciousness diarrhoea of James Joyce and Henry Miller' (AMAI, 102), he soon abandons Hopkins's rhythmic experiments in verse that 'were carried over and used in my first full length play'. (AMAI, 102) He does not drink beer, is 'terrified by the thought of surgery' (AMAI, 193), and

has an adverse reaction to sedatives, escaping from the hospital where he has been given tests. However the amateur film he made in 1936, *Psychology*, is a seminal expression of the unconscious, owing its allegiance to dream sequences of a surrealist kind. There is also a recurrence in early works of the notions of absence and presence of authority (as in the father whom he never knew) which can be related to the Oedipus complex and its rupture. Duncan himself initiates this theme in *Islands*: 'His absence throughout my childhood was more ponderable than a presence'. (AMAI, 10)

The pattern of searching for a father figure and the sense of a divided personality are dominant both in *Islands* and in the additional texts studied here. Regarding division, the subject of *Islands* (begun in 1961), is shown to fluctuate between the assurance of a heroic ego and frequent self-effacement through mockery and adoption of different disguises. One aspect of this self-portrait is of a man marooned in élitist seclusion, but he is tempered by a pronounced wish to take on other personalities, as in the mining episode. The narrative follows a roughly conventional *Bildungsroman* structure, telling of the subject's steady conquest of various (quite typical) obstacles such as boarding school, illness, Cambridge, his naivety, social opposition and conventions. However, the character which Duncan creates for and of himself is depicted less as an individual experiencing progressive and cumulative events than one which presents the reader with incomplete remembrances and a myriad of partial selves. Each self invokes different interpretations. His uniqueness lies in his discontinuity and the tension which lies between disarming honesty and the reader's doubt and sense of fictiveness. We feel sympathy for the Duncan who was a cox at Cambridge and whose intellectual quirkiness led to victimisation and threats from the crew. He locks himself in his room listening to the cries of, 'We're going to drown Duncan! Duncan come out!' (AMAI, 91) But of his different activities he comments 'I was aware that I was only playing at these things' (AMAI, 99) which detracts any sense that he experienced moments in his life with any sincerity.

Duncan paints himself in sublime terms to suggest his difference from the common crowd: 'The only solid thing in my conscience was the determination to undermine every aspect of authority and be the unrepentant rebel'. (AMAI, 40) His opposition to the herd is emphasised by comments on how he tried to avoid the inevitable pain of following a poetic vocation: 'I posed as a young rake, going to race meetings and propping up saloon bars'. (AMAI, 73) Duncan's young life begins a cycle of suffering that results from the consequences of misunderstandings. It begins with his father's family initially rejecting his mother whom they confuse with a 'fast' stage actress (which may or may not have been her real-life sister, Pat, a music hall

Cochrane Girl). His father was interned as an alien though he could not speak a word of German. This pattern does not result in such a grand narrative as the quest or conventional parable; but because a narrated rendition of reality is inescapable, one is offered the story of an individual fated to be misunderstood as he struggles through life. Consequently the text also breeds a characteristic self-defensive tone especially when the narrator describes moments when he is offended or allowed to feel superior. Duncan remembers the unwanted generosity and attentions of an old school 'friend' whom he tolerates but, 'He was to me one of those bores who become as burdensome as a conscience. He was also a tedious snob'. (AMAI, 103)

In counterbalance to this rather lofty self-image and presumably to create some pathos, stands a figure who wallows in failure – 'I was entirely self-absorbed' (AMAI, 50) – and is only too aware of his mediocre characteristics and status. In 1919, the family go to 'live in a cheap house in Clapham'. (AMAI, 12) Duncan's autobiographical self is constructed with the sort of division inherent in the differences between his mother's status as daughter of a steam-engine driver and the arrogance and wealth of his father's family. The boy is dressed up in a Little Lord Fauntleroy suit and occasionally whisked off in a Rolls-Royce to see these relatives who 'used to pretend my mother was my governess'. (AMAI, 22)

The connection to the father is here signified by presence and non-presence, endowment and humiliation. Aged four, Duncan hears the news of the death of his already absent father. The event is naturally traumatic and developed through poignant moments, the pain described through a prolonged sequence of images which reflect each other. The narrator remembers himself as a young man standing by the graveside in Frankfurt, Johannesburg: a young man who, in turn, remembers the news of his father's death from influenza which came in 1918 when he was five. The loss is saturated with emotional resentment. At the graveside, 'I felt myself turning into a statue, solidified by the futility of existence'.<sup>17</sup> (AMAI, 54) There, his association is with himself aged five who, understanding that 'flu comes from flies, had interrupted his mother's grieving to catch a random fly and trap it. Watching it, 'I began to curse. I have been cursing ever since'. (AMAI, 13) The sentiment seems too adult for either age but it is easy to conjecture that the early experiences of loss and persecution described in this memoir led to the narrator's subsequent feeling of confused identity, and of standing out from the crowd, too prematurely aware of life's difficulties.

<sup>17</sup>Duncan's father died shortly before Armistice Day in 1918. He had been interned in a South African prison camp in 1914, just after his wife and young son left the country for England. This was due to having the German name, Dunkelsbühler. After helping out during an influenza epidemic among the tribal people, he 'contracted the infection himself and died within a few days'. (AMAI, 12)



Instead of a conventionally idyllic memory of distant childhood, the young boy's early pessimism is the reason for his persistent despondency in adulthood. However, Duncan the boy deals practically with loss, and compensates for it by creating other fathers for himself. During school, 'Uncle Vicky now became the father I had never had'. (AMAI, 43) Projection of affection onto Vicky fleetingly neutralises the impact of loss, until Vicky is killed. Having ostensibly forgotten his father, the author writes: 'His was the first death I experienced'. (AMAI, 172) These disclosures are the source of Duncan's tendency to identify with and reject patriarchal will. 'Will' is symbolised and implicit in the authority of ideological belief systems. The fruitless search for an adequate authority figure is given more resonance in Duncan's 1937 *Dream Diary* which foregrounds the idea of the hero-figure Gandhi, who at first symbolises coherence and paternalistic affirmation but eventually falls from his pedestal.

Duncan's youth is presented as unsettled and mobile. His early life story describes a constant movement of departures from and returns to a settled home. The movement imitates the scene of early uprooting, fragmentation and re-settlement of his family. In 1914, when Duncan was only three months old, he and his mother Ethel, then pregnant with Bianca, were compelled to leave his birthplace of Salisbury, Rhodesia. The retreat was enforced by their having a German name, 'Dunkelsbühler', at the outbreak of the First World War. Young Ronald would have had no conscious memory of these swift ejections from security, first from the womb when a thunderstorm frightened a bull which charged his mother: 'A few hours later I was born'. (AMAI, 10) The second ejection was from the family home at the start of the First World War. Ronald's father stayed on in Africa but was soon afterwards interned as an alien and the boy never saw him again. The child's most early experiences were those of up-rooting due to his family's migration (though common to many Russians, Poles, Jews and political exiles for centuries), and no doubt, rather than security a sense of injustice at his father's non-reappearance. Still a child, the uprooting was repeated by his being sent to school, and 'Homesickness was my first critical experience'. (AMAI, 24) He considered this a banishment from the warmth of his mother and sister, noting 'I didn't realise how close and dependent I was on my mother until I was sent to my prep-school'. (AMAI, 24 )

After this, Duncan begins to initiate his own breaking-away. In 1930 he was sent back from the boarding school he abhorred after accusing the house master of assault. Ronald achieved his object: to return to his mother. However, the year after, he learned of the inheritance he was due from the great grandfather on his father's side. With part of this, he embarked on the S. S. Umtali, to visit distant cousins in Africa, a journey which returned him to the land identified with his father. When Duncan arrived back in England, appalled by the system of segregation, he spent

three frantic years at Cambridge only to abandon ship again and travel, disguised as a gypsy, to work at the Holmwood mine near Chesterfield in 1936. Eventually, to his relief and unable to camouflage the stamp of the privileged class, Duncan 'the miner' was sacked only a few months later. Then began his brief association with the pacifist movement in London where his mother and sister still lived. After this, he set sail again, to sojourn at Gandhi's ashram in India in 1937.

All this displays the writer's explorative flexibility, the need to refresh himself with difficult and intense new experiences. Each of these formative experiences had its own social and political resonance for the young Duncan, 'I was so appalled by the way the coloured people were herded, segregated and humiliated, that I was constantly ashamed of being white'. (AMAI, 54) But by 1964 he had entitled his first autobiography *All Men Are Islands* which suggests his conception of the human individual was less philanthropic than solitary and self-concerned.

From Duncan's autobiography can be extracted a sub-text that explains his need to identify with various places and particular causes. Relations with these structures tended to be unpredictable and discontinuous. This emerges from the story of how the boy's school days were spent trying to evade its hierarchy of authority-figures and the persecution of those considered 'misfits', of which he was one. The years after school reveal an awareness and sympathy towards others whom he identifies as persecuted or misfits: the miners, the untouchables in India, the African people. On his 1936 voyage to Bombay, Asians are seated separately, so Duncan 'immediately stood up... and seated myself with the Indians'. (AMAI, 134)

Early experiences, such as the stay at boarding school in Bridlington (the 'penitentiary'), may have been the first environment in which the boy felt appallingly different. There he was unable to live up to or justify the discipline and educational dogma to which he opposed the salvation of literature, 'I didn't co-operate with the masters. I read novels under the desk'. (AMAI, 41) Here he may have developed the ability to laugh at himself as a defence. In his book *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, Donald Mitchell notices that former pupils of public schools would later create worlds where the mythology of such power-structures could be subverted and satirised. Subversion emerged from their need to survive in the classroom:

Out of the experience of school, with all its appropriate furnishings and laws and personnel, Auden, along with other thirties writers, created a world which could effectively symbolise the repressive, tyrannical and narrow authoritarianism which stalked the corridors and infiltrated the classroom and even the dorm. It was a world, a set of values, that young radicals were determined to subvert; and the instrument of subversion, more often than not, was a corrosive satire – a by no means ineffectual means of demolition, especially of the bogus, the callous and the pompous.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Donald Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* (London, Faber & Faber, 1981), pp. 104-105.

The boy frequently escaped school and spent time wandering through the Yorkshire countryside and also at the local town theatre where he heard Schubert for the first time. School is a 'monument of unhappiness' (AMAI, 40), no better than Wormwood Scrubs. Mitchell goes on:

One certainly cannot deny the importance of that experience to the generation: it seems to have been an absolutely central one, at least for the sons of middle class families. (DM, 113)

Much of Duncan's writing, and particularly his early pieces, have at their core a critique of orthodoxy (*The Complete Pacifist*, *The Rexist Manifesto*, *The Tomb*), and his ever-skillful journalism and satire demolish the pompous discourses of the politician and critic (*Jan's Journal* and *Pimp, Skunk and Profiteer*). Rather than showing steadfastness or an ability to integrate, Duncan's life reveals a pattern of precarious commitment. This is an underlying feature of his ambivalent personality and writings. During the 'thirties, being aligned to and abruptly withdrawing from causes, was for Duncan a more pronounced tendency and pivotal to the writing of this period.

In many of its descriptive passages the autobiography conveys a consciousness of childhood experiences as a motivation for later behaviour and responses. This is a theme which appears natural and intrinsic to the autobiographical perception of a life. However, there is again a perceptible tension around the construction of the self. Dislocation occurs, between the Duncan who is formed through spontaneous reactions to unexpected chance events (nurture), and the Duncan who is imprisoned within a pattern of destiny (nature). One example of the distinction is when Duncan remembers Bianca making him a cake, which he tactlessly criticises. Colin Wilson remarks on this saying, 'He is inclined to attribute personal characteristics, which may well be genetic, to specific incidents'. (*Tribute*, 79) So, rather than having been genetically inclined to tact, it is supposedly the particular accident that has enforced his vacillating and insincere behaviour. He often emphasises rootlessness and rejects the importance of pedigree, confessing 'I was always afraid that inherited traits would become manifest in me'. (AMAI, 50) This confirms his awareness of the nature/nurture difficulties and indicates his hope that it is environment that was predominant in shaping his reckless and independent identity.

It is discernible in *Islands* that Duncan always had a congenial or authoritative father-figure near at hand during his youth. His autobiography however avoids direct commentary regarding the lack of patriarchal influence:

My father's death did not affect me so much. He always remained an idea. Perhaps a hero, but no more a relative than Robin Hood. (AMAI, 24)

Also, one senses that Duncan's trip to Africa (the site of his father's death) in 1931, was probably less lightly undertaken than he implies. From what transpires, the trip

can be read as a romanticised family quest, but its romance and poignance is at first refuted by how the 'holiday' is only thought of after a casual suggestion from his mother because he is at a loose end. She makes the remark 'one day', stating 'It would broaden your outlook and the sun would do you good.' (AMAI, 49) Another unpredicted event: meeting the beautiful 'Betty' at university – becomes the factor which 'nearly got me sent down'. (AMAI, 93) His all-encompassing ardour springs from her imposition upon him being 'so pretty' but 'unresponsive'. (AMAI, 95) Impingement of an unwanted external event onto his world is part of Duncan's rationalisation for things when he is avoiding deeper analysis of his own liability. At these points his style is blunt and over-concise, and the self-portrait is sharper and less caring, of a man free and unconfined by conformity. When he ceases to monumentalise his own personal motivation, the image we may harbour of Duncan as an honour-bound adventurer, is complicated.

There is a sense that Duncan selects certain moments or decisions for their specific effect upon his psyche, yet when describing others, his insouciant tone barely disguises the extent of their impact. He again struggles with the nature/nurture issue when he discovers, from seeing a letter by his father, that 'my handwriting was almost identical with his'... 'here was proof that I was, as it were, a living extension of him. I never felt free after that'. (AMAI, 48) Thomas Docherty's comments are applicable here. He argues that the filial desire for self-legitimation and mobility comes from *within* the mythic structure of paternal authority. This is demonstrated when the son attempts to construct his own paternal superiority by, for example, buying his own house:

But success at such an enterprise entails its own failure, paradoxically, for what the son inadequately maintains, is precisely the name of the father, as an origin which guarantees validity of his own authority. No filial authority is possible in these terms, rather, simple conformity to an ideology of law is maintained, even at the very moment of rebellion against such an authority.<sup>19</sup>

Docherty centralises the law of the father as a motivating force for certain filial behaviour and this idea can be applied to Duncan's own concerns with property as a landlord. He shows rather arrogant wilfulness when he decides to buy a derelict cottage in 1932: 'This impetuous deal delighted my mother. She would never have made the decision herself'. (AMAI, 67) His early life story shows both an underlying acceptance of the father figure and a seeking to rebel against that very authority. This is explored in more detail in Chapter 3, with relation to *Stratton* (p. 125).

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Docherty, *On Modern Authority: The Theory and Condition of Writing, 1500 to the Present Day* (Brighton, Harvester, 1987), p. 34.

The autobiographical subject struggles rebelliously against his lineage, but cannot wholly escape it as he feels that 'I always had access to experiences I had never experienced'. (AMAI, 39) The most humdrum events are invested with melodramatic significance and subsequent revelation. Or, because a random memory exists, its idiosyncrasy and mystery makes it worthy of inspection: 'I used to go there because I found the smell of the fir cones fascinating' (AMAI, 43), and:

It is odd to recall the moments when we have been entirely possessed by our own capricious desires, and odder still to ponder what strange object has occasioned this identification. (AMAI, 27)

Such a motif moves Duncan's description of childhood beyond the anecdotal as run of the mill childhood events come to appear remarkable in retrospect. Generally, the narrative of *Islands* presents nurture as exceeding and opposing nature. But there is a sense that both apprehensions of experience render the individual powerless. Each event is perceived as an unlucky accident, beyond the subject's control or responsibility. Interpretation of the event is the only agency shown by the subject. These opposing ways of structuring events begin to overlap, as contingency of experience is transformed, through adult interpretation, into pre-ordained experience. Somehow, interpretation of events is contrived to highlight Duncan's aura of non-culpability. His various reactions to happenings that are interpreted as unexpected, and thus not his fault, are then excusable. Minet's review of *Islands*, states that Duncan's agreement to his marriage, 'overstates his grace'. (PM, 64) In the autobiography, it is mainly upon non-culpability that his subjecthood rests.

The skilful disassociation of event and self-accountability also allows the author a certain critical distance from himself in the text. Distancing is achieved when the contingency of narrated experience is represented by highlighting external chaos and unpredictable emotions. Visiting France during late 1937, Duncan leaves Leger's studio intending to call on Sylvia Beach, but 'I suddenly felt something stronger than homesickness'... 'My impulse was to fly back immediately'. (AMAI, 177) A degree of inexplicability about the subject delineated by the narration is sustained by the author who is himself the professed 'knower' of the subject. At West Mill, a wobbly primus spills boiling water over Rose-Marie's foot and 'within a few days the foot was septic'. (AMAI, 179) The distressing incident does not merit extended analysis but signifies in itself the struggle and primitivism of the Duncan's early inhabitation at West Mill.

But there are other forces at work which attenuate the contingency factor and produce an overall narrative tension. It occurs when the narrative makes evident that Duncan's authorial voice is a dramatisation contrived within the text. Despite its reference to 'real' life an autobiography, by being written, is always constructed. Its

existence as text demonstrates that the self cannot be represented with totally mimetic validity or without mediation. The pressure of Duncan's merely textual representation in *Islands* contributes to an overall discontinuity in style and structure. The rather haphazard form is appropriately characterised by Duncan's narrating voice, which textualises the autobiographical subject's erratic motion between the inevitable/his vocation and its renunciation. Because of this motion, along with the ironic effect of much of the language, the reader learns to distrust the narrator as well as the status of the remembered past subject, the author and indeed autobiography itself. The work draws upon apparently contradictory approaches – the narrative imposition of interpretation and patterning – with writing that employs discontinuity, pretence and an abundance of echoes and quotations. Due to the dualistic narrative the author's claims for a graspably authentic representation of self in the work are counterbalanced by aspects of his performance. It is worthwhile following this idea because performance itself is a notion not incompatible with psychological approaches to human behaviour.

In terms of performance, it is interesting to survey how Duncan artfully constructs his own family romance. The theme of illegitimacy is a preoccupation in the autobiography. His status in regard to his family establishes a less-than favoured subject position for Duncan. However there is another position available to him as, though the claim was suppressed at the time, the author mentions in retrospect that his Frankfurt-born father is the illegitimate son of the Crown Prince of Bavaria, Rupprecht Wittelsbach. It is first only mentioned in passing:

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My granny still took her drive in the park every day, alone - her husband had left her at my father's birth when he had discovered that my father was the son of the Crown Prince of Bavaria. (AMAI, 11)

Duncan is offered the romanticised rags-to-riches tale when his grandmother tells him, 'You've got Rupprecht's eyes' and shows the boy a chess table bearing the Wittelsbach coat of arms, 'Of course you shall have this and all his other things when I am gone'. (AMAI, 78) The matter of fact tone often Duncan often uses when describing outrageous or poignant episodes comes in to play here. The story behind the birth of Duncan's father, its glamour and mystery, compensate a little for the reality of his absence. He continues to summarise the relatives who liberate him into eccentricity, many of whom hang in the Sergeant Wertheimer Collection in the Tate, or 'The Chamber of Horrors' (AMAI, 78) as his uncles called it. When he imparts to the reader that his grandmother died from 'a surfeit of oysters', as did her two uncles on their honeymoons, we are aware of the secondary nature and possibly fictive orchestrations of such family narratives. Duncan as their mediator is placing himself into a tradition of dramatised scandal that reconstructs lives/past-existences through story-telling.

Though the young Duncan obviously benefits from the disapproving patronage of his father's family (upon whom his mother is dependant and to whom he himself becomes heir) he also mocks it by stressing their ridiculous eccentricities. The boy becomes aware that he is surrounded by larger-than-life personalities such as the tragic figure of his step-uncle 'Vicky' (the Prince Victor of Cooch-Bihar in India, with claim to the Bijni Raj); his mother's elder sister, 'Arv' (another nickname imposed by Duncan, as with his mother 'Mole' ), 'a woman who lived for crime... she had the reports of the Old Bailey Trials, licking her lips over the horrific details'. (AMAI, 30) Aunt Henrietta is 'a frail looking woman with a head like a pomaded turkey'. (AMAI, 74) Such images move Duncan's description of childhood beyond the anecdotal into the fantastical.

Duncan's youthful consciousness is constantly confronted by, albeit reluctantly, the importance of ancestry and the paternal. He must have felt rejected from a lack of paternal attention, consequently finding it difficult to feel reassured or completed. At eighteen, expected to integrate with adult values, he instead 'felt unidentified, a visitor, somebody passing through'. (AMAI, 66) His impression of 'level-headed'-ness is 'false, a masquerade' because inside he feels 'a river of sadness'. (AMAI, 71) Comments such as 'I now became frightened of my eyes' (AMAI, 71) suggest that his very mode of being felt under threat. To write down or inscribe could have been a method of assuring Duncan of his own existence and experiences. He recognises the symbolic nature of certain events and addresses his own hyper-sensitivity and the possible repercussions of his actions, as if he were always answerable to an overseeing omniscient parent, a process which he has, in reality, been denied.

Writing about his own personality he states, 'I had to contend with, not another single person but an entire crew'. (AMAI, 99) Interestingly, this account coincides with a central aspect of my own theorising of autobiography: the discovery of the self as ironic and peripheral. This, however, does not clinch the argument because much of Duncan's behaviour contradicted such moments of insight. I know from the records that he publicly constructed an ego-centric, omnipotent and unique presence. This self-centred presence generally masks methods of decentering which are also at work. (This is demonstrated by the above quotation which maintains an image of the potency of 'one' struggling against the contention of the 'crew'.) But within many of Duncan's texts, there is a collision, sometimes subtle, of different significations of the self, which means that we must reject a simplified construction of the man as an author whose every action is based on an overriding impulse to dominate its world. Instead, deciphering and acknowledging the complex relationship between language, identity and recurring themes is a significant part of this study.

#### *iv. The Adversarial Subject*

The subject of Duncan's first autobiography flits from pillar to post during the first twenty-five years of his life, restlessly experimenting with different roles and trades. At Cambridge his friends regard him as 'a reactionary', Audenesque figure. (AMAI, 110) After coming down, 'to my relative's dismay' (AMAI, 111), he goes to Yorkshire to work in a mine. The poet/labourer figure reappears most prominently in *The Unburied Dead*, whose two main characters, Scholar and Jan, cannot negotiate their opposing natures – sensuality and non-attachment – in order to act competently together. Similarly, Duncan's autobiographical self veers between being an unlucky victim of poor circumstances and a privileged man of action who takes his inheritance for granted. At Cambridge, 'The essential me, 'coffee, muddle and misery,' could not belong, was not identified'. (AMAI, 99) He presents the paradoxical position of division between wanting to belong as he supports the common cause and one who needs to be separate and unique. This reflects the problematic nature of trying to inscribe any kind of essential self. The poem below is Duncan's plaintive division of the 'form complete' in Whitman's 1958 poem, 'One's-self I Sing':

To my essential self—I sing—  
Not to the I,  
Man of the hat, coat and tie;  
But to the me,  
—coffee, muddle and misery.<sup>20</sup>

Because Duncan the poet sings to himself he (as Lane says), tries to construct 'a personal and exclusive environment' (DL, 77) where the reader recedes. The singing 'I' is separate and implied to be the man of public appearance, 'the hat, coat and tie'. It is ironic that the essential self of inherent qualities can only be reached by the 'I' singing to it. The poet's self-encounter then, is expressed through disguise and appearance confronting the essential self whose 'muddle' is posed as superior because less constructed. However in terms of articulacy, fictive non-essential signification (the hat, coat and tie) does nothing more but express essential absurdity rather than something more consistently authoritative. What the poem does express is the dilemma of different modes of representation. Private and public selves are signified in different but approximated ways in each area of Duncan's life and writing. The early works I've chosen here as examples further demonstrate the difficulties Duncan's has with straightforward self-expression.

In 1931 Duncan decides 'to leave South Africa immediately' when he witnesses 'a boy being horse-whipped to death by his boss'. (AMAI, 55) He is clearly well-meaning when he buys medical supplies for a village though his youthful

<sup>20</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Solitude 1', *The Solitudes* (London, Faber, 1960), p. 13.



idealism is, even then, shown to be flawed because it is his 'Zulu servant' who tells him the news of the outbreak of disease. Appropriately for his upbringing and era, he did not campaign against apartheid, but uneasily departed from the situation. Most other of the young man's efforts, such as his pursuit of beautiful 'Laura' at Cambridge or his bid to stop the Rhondda miners' threat of violent strike-action, are thwarted mainly by the misconceptions of other people. As a pacifist, Duncan possibly believed that means shape ends more than the reverse belief, which warrants war. (Aldous Huxley published *Ends and Means* in 1937, and Duncan mentions having read the book on p. 135 of *Islands*.) He had resolved at the time not to fall 'for easy solutions'. (AMAI, 135) The life story recounts many examples of how his well-meaning intentions fail to achieve their ends, but despite this, there is always an optimistic renewal of the desire to win through. At one point, the subject concludes:

I have gone through life always sublimely confident that wherever I flung my hook an obliging fish would swallow it. (AMAI, 21)

This is based on a recollection of when his mother repeatedly sneaked herrings on to the end of his fishing-line while the boy picked flowers for her. Renewed desire is a theme I explore in more detail in Chapters 4 (section *xi*) and 5 (section *v*). but it can be related here to Klaic's conception of utopia as 'a subverted or suppressed desire, an initial impulse left unfulfilled.' (DK, 3)

As Duncan becomes more independent and marks out his own boundaries, plans and excursions are increasingly carried out in opposition to general opinion or authority. The struggle for the fish becomes more intense and, post-war, more Machiavellian. The inscription of these struggles furthers the prevailing sense that Duncan was self-consciously thumbing his nose at those whom he knew would be provoked by his recording such antics. Playing upon the image of a misunderstood and solitary existence, the events Duncan describes appear to be a series of subjective revenges, made in retribution for humiliation (or neglect) by such authorities as his headmasters or the absent father. Reward or attention originally from his mother is now shifted to the target of alternative audiences as he grasps for recognition. The standard of his ambitions becomes higher and more impossible and their failure is attributed to mis-understandings. This process explains Duncan's continuing literary experimentation and gradual loss of faith in the collective during the late 'forties.

### *v. Man as An Island*

The title of Duncan's first published autobiography is *All Men Are Islands*: a direct reference to and reversal of John Donne's maxim. Duncan's self-conscious inversion of the phrase summarises his by then isolationist philosophy. One should also

remember that More's *Utopia* was an island, separated and supposedly unaffected by current crises – a place where social law and conflicts were resolved – as well as being impenetrable and safe from intruders. To inhabit one's own island in terms of subjectivity and agency is itself a utopian idea. However, if all men are islands then they are bounded, privatised and constrained by place and status into the social boundaries of class, race, agency and subjectivity. In fact, the notion signifies an overlap or necessary interpolation of social failure into what utopia also implies as its opposite: social ideals and resolution.

Duncan's early experiences of social awareness are tied up with the idea of intrinsic isolation. He writes 'I knew it was impossible to look at people without seeing their sorrow' and sees the 'essential pathos' in every person' though looking back he is aware that 'Perhaps I was doing nothing more than project onto them'. (AMAI, 71) The sense that Duncan looks back sceptically on his own pity is retracted by the fact that even when writing *The Mongrel* in the late 'forties he knew a social conscience was doomed due to the difficulty of identifying a 'we' against the essentially personal and individual nature of human consciousness:

– but what's as lonely  
as a star?  
Or a man's mind drifting in the ocean of the night?  
  
... we have not only forgotten  
our destination  
But mislaid ourselves as well – whom we now seek in a sort  
of frantic blindman's buff.<sup>21</sup>

Despite embarking upon single-minded campaigns or sets of principles, Duncan's dualistic approach would always eventually manifest itself within the literature serving as their vehicle. The same occurs with the later autobiographical subject who proclaims its own isolation, with biased perceptions and personalised vision, but is not totally closed off either by its own meaning or by its lifestyle. It continues to inhabit the ambiguous space intrinsic to utopian thinking. It is located on the borders, remaining marginalised, while also rigidly subscribing to certain socialised and widespread cultural beliefs. Because of this location Duncan's subject is also constantly crossing boundaries. His youthful suffering in the search for truth, along with evidence of multiple role-playing, actually maintains a principle of flexibility as the narrative voice emits from a standpoint that is usually directed against the grain, wherever the grain is, but also presumes to speak for others. When he claims *All Men* to be islands he is, paradoxically, speaking in general and on behalf of the whole world (excepting women). Duncan felt marginalised in his own life and was compelled to speak out as a minority

<sup>21</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'The Mongrel', *The Mongrel and Other Poems* (London, Faber, 1950), p. 32-33.

voice. A further irony in his favour is that in doing so, he visualised communities for the nonconformist, such as the pacifist farm. It is ironic because, at the same time, his 'island' concept foregrounds a vision of human existence as bounded and isolated.

The deep-rooted nature of Duncan's individualism is reiterated by his love of claiming land and owning property. His 'acquisitive instincts' (AMAI, 186) means he is always overloaded when returning from abroad. After acquisition of the cottage in Contigac he feels 'ecstasy'. (AMAI, 161) Needing quietitude to write a play he buys West Mill 'there and then' (AMAI, 180), but because he believes in the simple life and that it is 'necessary for me to act out my beliefs', the Duncans consequently lived 'in this cottage without any of the amenities or conveniences'. (AMAI, 181) 'Like a greedy vulture' (AMAI, 191) he waits for shipwrecked goods on the beach while the activity of clearing farmland is carried by an image of Imperialism. Duncan remembers his own past fervour – 'Here was England' (AMAI, 211) – as he views the wilderness, and having bought his hook for the vegetable garden, half-mocks his own aspirations to 'colonise it with surplus autumn broccoli'. (AMAI, 215) The desire to claim or re-claim may have been a reaction to being uprooted at an early age and perhaps to the moment of facing his father's grave, an unmarked pauper's stone.

A subject structured through ownership should seem progressively self-possessed, stable and secure but the autobiographical self Duncan constructs is consistently solitary and unstable. From an early age, Duncan professed his own tragic future as a poet, priest-like in devotion to his calling since, 'It is to bleed when you are not wounded'. (AMAI, 73) For him, writing was a solitary art and suffering and isolation were essential for the creator to maintain sole control of his works and words and remain on his island. Life-writings tend to concentrate on the subject as the origin of meaning and autobiography, in the nineteenth century especially, expressed motives of (island-like) moral superiority or vanity to endorse the self as if it is only through these modes that the 'real' one is rescued.<sup>22</sup> In this way, autobiography itself traditionally represents a utopian form, in that it attempts to have the writing and written 'I' coincide into a controlled and controlling, unified subject. However, Duncan's autobiographical writing reveals the real ironies of utopian representation.

Traditionally, as with *Robinson Crusoe*, the autobiographical subject becomes a coloniser of the mysterious island of life, slowly naming and labelling objects as his own, marking out territory and locating the self in terms of identity in the world. In much autobiographical writing, the standpoint appears to come from one

<sup>22</sup>Laura Marcus has written a comprehensive historical overview of the development of autobiographical narrative: *Auto/Biographical Discourse: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995). See in particular Chapters 1 and 2.

vantage point safely located within personal boundaries, a point of present maturity and calm recollection such as 'the community failed. But I learned from it...'. (AMAI, 257) His early life repeats a compulsive leaving and returning – a reinstating of presence then of absence – as he prodigally returns, ready to reclaim his territory – 'If I go away I am always looking over my shoulder, trying to secure my base'. (AMAI, 32) The females of the family support the household by maintaining their residence there, giving Duncan greater freedom to travel. In 1931 when he was seventeen, Bianca, Duncan's younger sister by a year, accompanied him to a Swiss finishing school. However, they were withdrawn when England abandoned the Gold Standard (his Trustees considered it unpatriotic to invest money in a foreign currency). Bunny was only once more to accompany him with Rose-Marie on a trip to France in 1937. As with his mother Ethel, after that she was never again allowed or displayed the initiative to travel either with him or independently.

Despite its allegedly singular vantage point, autobiography involves a level of introspection, which despite being written from a point of recollection, actually creates division. Division occurs between the conscious and subjective, the inside and outside, public and private. These divisions are most noticeable in autobiographies and diaries which construct the author's identity through an 'other', or accounted to, reader. A less traditional view of life-writing, as applied to Duncan's work, would incorporate a subject which acknowledges the divided self once it is expressed. This reveals that to attempt to write truthfully about the self in a diary is an ironic act because the procedure itself throws doubt upon the writer's pre-discursive existence. Duncan can only prove that he is the true writer of his own words about himself by convincing readers that his textual self coincides with his present-tense writing self. On the final page he states: 'We write our life when we no longer know how to live it. I see I shall have to write another volume'. (AMAI, 280) The statement that writing starts when life ends only draws attention to the disjunction between the two modes of being leaving the reader with one certainty only: that the self is duplicitous. Duncan also enhances disjunction with his crowd of personalities. His autobiography is consequently a meeting point of more than one subject position and a multiplicity of selves.

The sense of performance in Duncan's work comes from his habitation of different standpoints even through recollected narration. The reader of Duncan becomes party to the construction of a conspicuous variety of personalities which substitute for any sense of one coherent individual, through writing which emphasises mimicry, disguise, satirical masks and the role of disciple (all of which are dealt with in the ensuing analysis). Duncan constructs his written self as a subject seeking and discovering authority, but also rejecting it, by using his mobility and a dogged search for impossible Utopias to do so. Much of his authority-seeking self is produced

by describing himself through the ownership of land and by a display of self-sufficiency. But the difficulty of establishing a stable identity through such methods is exemplified by, for example, the author's documentation of his failed communal farm experiment. Duncan's self-sufficiency could not negotiate a community. He tries to impose order and tidiness in the bedrooms and is indignant that others consider them private:

The question of what is private cuts across the whole idea of community. Since I was trying to found a small ordered society I did not recant. (AMAI, 252)

The opposition between the ideal of community and personal ambition presents a duality reflective of how, during war-time, personal identity was expressed in recalcitrant ways. Identity was located in terms of Britishness or 'national' type while Modernist apprehensions of self-hood, developed since the First World War, posited, as Charles Taylor says, 'a decentring of the subject'.<sup>23</sup> War exacerbated the modern pessimistic view of experience developed by, for example, the Frankfurt school and Picasso's and Woolf's art. While specialised through art, modernist notions of fragmentation and inwardness remained relevant to social conditions. War-time certainly induced extreme alienation and the need to re-locate, sometimes at a cost. Duncan learned from Pound and read Freud while he lived unconventionally and refused to fight England's war. At the same time he participated in the construction of an alternative community during a period when community values were being addressed and reinforced by war. The way Duncan performs conventional and unconventional roles is again clear. Inscription of his experience produces an unstable autobiographical narration and elements of this instability spill over into, most interestingly, his dramatic work where the boundary between the imaginary and the real is also crossed: a theme which is continued in Chapter 3.

The next part of this exploration which continues into Chapter 2, is important in its relation to the major themes of this study. These are how Duncan's life events become synthesised into art to authorise (claim self-presence) and communicate his personal morality through aesthetics. Such an investigation also reveals a tendency to inhabit different roles and personalities. This problematises, but also becomes a personalised characteristic, of Duncan's claims to autobiographical veracity. His early diaries are worthy of inspection because of their later contribution to *Islands*. The political writing and first plays are more publicly instructive and distanced texts, in terms of authorial voice. But despite their more clarifiable viewpoints, on a subtler level these texts incorporate the same de-stabilising elements

<sup>23</sup>Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 456.

of disguise and performance. All this serves to demonstrate how Duncan's authorial/self identity is marred by the struggle between idealism and betrayal. With relation to the 'thirties, crossing-over also describes the motion of Duncan's relation to utopian thought, both spatially and discursively.

#### *vi. Down the Holmwood Mine*

My research into the Duncan material at the University of Texas, disclosed the existence of a diary of his life at Holmwood, Yorkshire, from July to September 1936. It is a detailed reminiscence which provides a fuller reconstruction of events than does the autobiography. As one might expect, the diary is more immediate, and conveys the real texture of the experience. No doubt it was kept for Duncan's own record and re-transcription in the future. As well as contributing to the autobiography, the 'raw' events can appear as source-material for the mining play, *The Unburied Dead*.

*Islands* tells of how, after receiving only Third-Class Honours at Cambridge in 1936, Duncan's reforming friends apparently advised him to 'take part in the struggle' anticipating that ' "you'll soon be as popular as Auden" '. (AMAI, 110) The description of Africa demonstrates his developing social awareness but Minet's review points out that 'His response to the stimulus of London in the 'thirties was limited: the Spanish Civil War, for instance, hardly figures in his book'. (PM, 64) This comment betrays the expectations Minet has of the type of memoir a writer of Duncan's era should be writing. Duncan should be credited for feeling 'deeply moved' (AMAI, 111) by the miners march to London. By the time he was twenty-five he had spent time with Gandhi in India and also encountered Pound, Stravinsky, Britten and Eliot. It is clear he is attempting to find a position of authenticity from which to project his status as poet. The historical site which Duncan chose to be involved with and act upon was the political ineffectuality of low-paid workers in the 1930s. The diary Duncan kept is an attempt to synthesise his own complex individuality with the social context he felt he was answerable to as a 'miner'. His sudden interest in the life of the miners put his position as a moneyed gentleman in abeyance. The interest is inconsistent with the self-obsession apparent in the first section of *Islands*. His rather insulated self-hood is problematised by the decision to cross social boundaries and expose himself to a different social stratification.

Duncan's diary writing was secretive and voyeuristic and such a mode of composition produces an anecdotal, caricatured vision of experience. From July, Duncan stayed with the 'Thomsons' near Chesterfield, in 'the ugliest street I have

ever seen'.<sup>24</sup> The caricatured style is retained in *Islands* where he recounts that 'the miners glared at me with their red-rimmed eyes'. (AMAI, 113) The diary form encompasses less an engagement with reality, i.e. the family and workers, than an appropriation of them as source material wherein Duncan's particular vision transforms them into fiction or art.

We may then feel Duncan is self-indulgent in that the whole experience is designed to further his own sense of sensitivity and difference rather than to undertake any significant analysis. Daniel Lane notes that 'the people are expected to be sparky, inventive and colourful in themselves so as to appease Duncan and prevent him from totalising their condition'.<sup>25</sup> However in a later interview, Duncan recalled '— the women all tired, bored, grey; ...that was the beginning of my disillusionment'.<sup>26</sup> Shifts between genuine hope and ineffectuality in the face of such conditions is lucidly recorded here. His diary does contain a utopian analysis of employment based on African mining, but lapses into equally impractical conclusions as the writer realises their impossibility, 'There are too many men alive... . Let us organise life so there is a minimum of labour'. (HD) Because he does not interfere directly though, Duncan is not guilty of anthropological patronage, writing, 'I promise, I know, to myself I've just been dumb and have not tried to influence...'. (HD)

In the 1930s, Aldous Huxley visited a mining area in Durham, as had Bertrand Russell. George Orwell disguised himself for hop-picking and documented industrial Northern working conditions in *The Road To Wigan Pier* (1937). The idealistic mission of such writers to observe and educate can be associated with the decade's growing awareness of working-class issues, and the impulse towards intellectual autodidacticism exemplified by the formation of Pelican Books. Alongside this, there were some appallingly condescending dramatisations of class relations, epitomised by the 1938 film of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, made by Gabriel Pascal (whom, incidentally, Duncan met in 1937). It could be said that observation and commentary served as atonement for privilege and for prejudices instilled in childhood. But despite Duncan's political/reforming commitment to the mining experience, he cannot avoid the disengagement of privilege as his representations of the workers combine sympathy ('Poor swine') with repulsion: 'He looked like a wedge or a weasel'. (HD) Arthur, a member of the family with whom he stays, is more refined as he confesses to having written short stories. But Duncan is prevented

<sup>24</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'The Holmwood Diary', unpub., 1936, no page numbers, HRHRC. Hereafter referred to as *Holmwood* and *HD* in the text.

<sup>25</sup>Lane, op. cit., p. 102. Hereafter referred to as DL.

<sup>26</sup>Wahl, op. cit., No. 20, 1973, p. 77.

from further discussion with Arthur Thomson because his own disguise masks his education.

The disguise forced Duncan to remain as observer rather than social crusader and risk discovery and resentment. From *Holmwood* we learn that his intellectualism still segregates him even though it is covert and suppressed. For example he chooses not to sleep with Maureen, the companion of Arthur's extra-marital girl-friend, with whom he becomes entangled on their walks. Refusing to sexually colonise her, and thus violate his secretly established class-boundaries, goes against the reformer's utopian impulse to tear them down. Instead, Duncan's experience of crossing class boundaries emerges as a idea which is paradoxically utopian because it incorporates the personalised locale of the diary-self, which is based upon defending one's island shores.

Later episodes are recalled with similar aversion in *Islands* and reinforce certain views on class and culture. Differentiating himself through culture, he credits the workers with no appreciation of art. He remembers how the girl Maureen plays the piano, but badly, 'banging out some terrible musical comedy tunes' (AMAI, 23) and has to leave the room. At the same time the writer cannot help but become involved in Arthur's closed social circle and its universal dynamics of emotion and interrelation. He realises 'Muriel's' predatory ambition to take him on a 'walk in the woods', an act which signifies engagement to her family. At the end of July, Duncan records her 'Ma' as saying, ' "Muriel seems nicer when you're prowling about" ', but his next line is, 'Shall have to go soon'. (HD) It can be taken as the kind of serendipity which seems to prevail in Duncan's life (always allied with a lack of protest on his part), when he, the 'gypsy', is arrested for vagrancy the next day and his union-card confiscated by the police. Duncan left for London the same day.

In order to become part of the mass of miners Duncan professed to sympathise with in 1936, he had to repress his individuality, just as those who defined the 'mass' had to repress the individuality of the people who were seen as part of the collective. Hence the disguise, as it was impossible for Duncan to represent *himself*. Duncan's personal feelings of difference may have made his idea of personal selfhood disjunctive with the family structure and social climate surrounding it. That world of family and intellect was necessarily the one in which he had to insert his self at various nodal points. After Cambridge he consciously split this self into the artistic part he tried to possess privately and the part which had to be-in-the-world. Duncan's private inner needs struggle to reach articulation and their effects as action are carried out in an external but diverse social environment. His participation in external events is, therefore, of great significance as it confirms or rejects his personal growth. Duncan records this participation in narratives in which he places himself at the centre where he participates even as an onlooker. His early narratives, despite their



apparent objectivity, were the product of an intense self-assessment, but later justified in terms (especially when openly autobiographical) of closeness to truth.

Considering the diary form as a text, we find that notions of private and public are interestingly juxtaposed. The *Holmwood* diary, which is dated 1936 and never published in its original form, was found amongst a diverse mixture of uncatalogued personal papers. The events, already summarised in published memoirs, become significant in this form because they can be compared with other versions where self-censorship and invention, as well as areas of inhibition and obsession may be detected. These documents, which might have been designated as 'private' as are letters and journals, are now considered part of the 'literature' of autobiography and can be read as texts in themselves. While they may not be as coherently shaped and elaborated as the seamless narrative of an autobiographical text formulated for publication, they also act as a valuable form of self-definition. By contrasting the version in *Islands*, the temporal aspect of autobiographical writing can be interrogated. One discerns the process of re-editing, how the text develops and how primary sources are appropriated. The closer the writer to the experience, we assume, the more likely it is to be true. For example, in *Islands*, Arthur's reported speech coincides with that in *Holmwood* when he nearly sees through Duncan's disguise, 'They ('toffs') smell different, like'. (HD & AMAI, 119) At the same time *Islands* includes an entire paragraph of dialogue that Duncan seems to have recalled from thirty years before but does not appear anywhere in the original journal. Accuracy of recall is less an issue than is the need to designate his 'present' position.

As Marcus concedes, by the late nineteenth century, autobiography had reached its apotheosis as an expression of male, ego-centred consciousness. (LM, 174) It was viewed as a genre peculiar to the literate, and dealt with the specialised or exemplary person, with Rousseau, Goethe and Mill writing life narratives as disciplined statements of genius. Though Duncan's life-narratives fit into the male exemplary, genius form in many ways, a modern re-assessment of 'private' narratives such as diaries and letters, shows more pronouncedly the actual disjunction between the written 'I' and the physical voice. This is despite the diary form being one which, in autobiographical theory, connotes a more democratic mode of expression.

Duncan's delight in disguise implies a wish to exercise the feeling of mendacity that existed within his personality. His multiple-roled self was probably a consequence of how he had learned to move relatively freely from position to position without the overbearing authority of a father-figure. Because of his education Duncan was aware of his class position and also at times enhanced it with the alleged Royal-Bavarian ancestral heritage. Since the claim is both potentially true and untrue it destabilises his class-bound identity with the notion of dis-possession. It also

helps to explain vacillating motivations or behaviour. The way Duncan easily adjusted his personal history was probably abetted by how his grandmother's moral lapse was made into an honourable fable within the family, because of its royal connection. Duncan liked to perpetuate belief in his foreign blood in order to live out the fantasy of mobile identity, 'I like to boast of the fact that in Spain I am mistaken for a Spaniard and in India for an Indian'. (AMAI, 194) He also maligns the way international culture cannot penetrate England's 'island fog'. (AMAI, 196) Chameleon-like, he can judge others whilst abandoning his own consistent identity as source of authority. This is a defence against judgement by others. Duncan's aptitude for pretence was probably encouraged when the Chesterfield workers and employers mistake him for a Maltese tramp.

Duncan could not transform his intellectual identity easily though. The confidential tone used in *Holmwood* about the maintenance of the deception suggests he conceived of an essential self despite his disguise. The text is not without its claims for the 'real'-er being behind the mask, such as, 'I am dead stiff with wearing so many masks' and 'I fought to drop my aitches, etc'. (HD) The self in *Holmwood* describes clever role-playing but despite the confessional mode, its disclosures do not anticipate any potential empowerment through revelation, or even express pleasure in the omnipotence of secrecy. Instead the doubling prevents the writer achieving total transformation and this demonstrates a division, despite the unity (through the 'I'), of the diary-writer and the subject written into the diary. So despite the voice of the 'real' self being heard, the strain of division incites a feeling of fragmentation in the subject: 'I feel I shall burst soon or shake into a thousand shattered pieces'. (HD)

The whole concept of reference is crucial to autobiographical texts because the reader relates events to a real world to which their author, as a character in the text, belongs. The reader must assume that the language refers to acts, statements and events which occur in a verifiable and externally referenced world. When investigating an archive such as Duncan's, it is hard not to read incidental material – such as unpublished memoirs, private journals, record documents and letters – as having closer reference to notions of scientific truth. In *Holmwood*, there is an emphasis on the authority of himself as the literate observer who is more likely to pen a legitimate commentary: 'I can express where they suffer in silence'. (HD)

It is a conventional but convincing view that one gains a sense of immediacy, especially of the writer's own reactions, from a diary. In *Holmwood*, and in much of Duncan's other work, there are references to incidents and emotions which are concurrent to the writing activity, such as 'Too tired to write more' (HD) and in *Islands*, a remark in parenthesis: '(I am writing this at six o' clock in the morning, impatient with a city that has to snore around me)'. (AMAI, 99) Here the spontaneity and temporal

coincidence add to the sense that the author has written his experiences truthfully. But this view is complicated by a closer reading. The impression of direct transmission of experience in *Holmwood* is mediated by its long passages of introspection and rumination. We find an excerpt titled 'Anything Goes' about perceptions of cinema, which link to other pages of psychic exploration, 'It's as if the mind is a camera and involuntarily took snaps which it projects... what is the cause of this?'.<sup>27</sup> (HD) His ranging thoughts attest to the digressions commonly found in Duncan's prose work. Sifting through the archive, we find others of Duncan's journals that are similarly not just limited to everyday domestic details but distinctively include a huge range of data. Some day-to-day records spill over into lists of accounts, poems, notes for articles and sketches. Other workbooks are full of re-transcribed memoirs but also confound classification because they contain letter drafts and short stories.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the reality-reference expected from the style of conventional diaries, the way in which Duncan's writings annexe a variety of textual sites, forces a review of the diary form. His self is structured through written representations which are not conventionally ordered: Duncan's autobiographical self integrates what is spontaneously produced by the writer as text from day to day. Ultimately, his autobiography also allows itself susceptibility to sudden digression, ramblings and impromptu, associative thoughts. Narrative reconstruction of personal experience may then portray the fluctuations of the psyche and the fragmented expression of lived experience. Fragmentation is considered to offer a 'real-er' image of the subject in the same way that modernist stream-of-consciousness writing, as exemplified by Woolf and Joyce, claimed to represent a 'real-er' reality than traditional, novelistic mimesis. In doing this we accept its subjective constitution, which throws definitions of 'complete' and 'real', open to question.

As with a diary, the author of autobiography is expected to be the same as the person who is referred to or designated as the main subject of the text, the paramount strategy being the growth of personality of the character: this external

<sup>27</sup>Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* [1939] (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958), refers to cinematography in the first section of the six semi-autobiographical narratives, 'A Berlin Diary', with the sentence 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking' (p. 7). Their correspondence of thought implies a Modernist concern with the disengaged, mechanist outlook. The single eye of the camera relates to the idea of authorial omniscience as a centre of control while the notion of perception is thrown open to question by its relation to the medium of cinema.

<sup>28</sup>It attests to Duncan's integrative compositional methodology that out of 119 hardcover workbooks in the archive (including journals and autobiographical drafts), 65 contain a diversity of literary and non-literary material, e.g. a single volume will contain a play-draft, an address-list and letter-drafts.

<sup>29</sup>Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul Eakin, trans by Katharine Leary (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 11.

person who, as Lejeune supposes, is 'certified by vital statistics and is verifiable'.<sup>29</sup> As opposed to fiction, to tell the tale of one's experience is to establish some kind of continuity between past and present selves, rather than having to cope with the fact of estrangement. Fiction typically brings the past into the present moment of its telling and so ensures a continuity between selves. That Duncan's sense of continuity regarding his self was uncertain is indicated by his impulse for disguise, as we have seen. Thus self-testimony and the way that much of his poetry is 'I'-centred, shows that the very act of writing preserves this essential expression of connection, for which autobiographical writing has been the primary model.<sup>30</sup> What is especially preserved is the relationship of the self to its historical context: the concept of the interaction between life and times. This study explores the ways in which Duncan's work expresses a desire for connection but also fractures continuity in various ways.

It is interesting that Duncan prefers the autobiographical genre as is proved by his copious hoarding of diaries and letters now stored in the archive. The mode most aptly encounters and inscribes the division between the individual and his social place in time. Not only has the growth of Freudian psychology contributed to current scepticism towards the certainty of the Cartesian ego but philosophers such as Nietzsche and Benveniste have also questioned its validity as part of a systematic field of knowledge.<sup>31</sup> According to Benveniste, to use the 'I' in language is to refer only to that particular instance of discourse.<sup>32</sup> When the first person is used within narrative it refers specifically to the temporal and direct moment of the 'I' being spoken by the bearer (even fictional) who is prioritised over whoever is addressed. There is no other reference. Because at second glance, the present position of the 'I' is also unclear to the reader, one cannot assume the coherence or privileged position or even locate any fixed status of the 'present' author, any more than one can the past 'self' they are remembering. This denotes the problem of subjectivity and questions the unified nature of the ego-centric subject.

However, what happens often in Duncan's writing is a demonstration of the actual problematics of this assumption. In autobiography, fracturing of the written subject occurs from the self-reflexivity displayed in life writing. The 'I' posits a 'you' who is reading but it also reflects back onto the writing, inscribing, remembering 'I'. The 'you' then becomes another version of his/herself. The inscription of the 'I' is a

<sup>30</sup>Lane, op. cit. Lane mentions that the pronoun 'I' is used over 800 times in the 63 Cantos of *Man, The Complete Cantos*.

<sup>31</sup>Freud's doctrine of the ego and its relation to repressed desire designates a subject torn between the conscious and unconscious. Nietzsche believed human reason to be only the result of illusory metaphysical beliefs (such as God's existence) imposed upon a self which has no static identity but is based on the need for self-preservation: the fundamental drive of the will to power. Both reject individual subjectivity as the location of sense.

<sup>32</sup>See Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami, University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 225-226.

mark of how the autobiographical process has the writer address him/herself. As in a diary, the writer is in constant conversation with his/her self.

Duncan creates dialogue in *Holmwood* when he writes 'How can I tell whether I am sane or mad when I get like this? It doesn't matter at all what it is'. (*HD*) *Islands* contains numerous self-referential remarks such as 'I remember that I argued...' (*AMAI*, 149), 'And what the devil do I mean by that?' (*AMAI*, 171) Ideas and thoughts are conceptualised and registered in the text as part of a method of self-interrogation. The voiceless 'other' has the capacity to reply: Duncan writes on and answers himself back. He gives himself the power of speech, the means to go on talking.

Reassurance may come from hearing, as one writes, one's own voice speaking in an autobiographical text but the actual alterity created by the process means the writer and the inscribed self never coincide. Even when summarising his past day's thoughts, emotions and memories in a diary, Duncan writes of a self with a separate past existence from that of the present writer. This past self is illogically subsumed into the 'I' of the present narrator at an attempt at synthesis. The more the writer attempts 'being' at the point of inscription, the more it is impossible. The veracity of a single voice is destabilised by the existence of other voices, such as for example the analytical reformer in *Holmwood*. That voice is part of an 'I' which is relational and thus refutes the writer's assertion of himself as having a consistent authorised voice. The mining diary both names and un-names Duncan as its main subject because it is a subject who is also in disguise as someone else other than the author Ronald Duncan. In seeking a role to enact, he also sees with 'new' eyes, a lifestyle he might not otherwise have witnessed from the inside. Despite fracturing, the autobiographical form also allows a historical context which prevents Duncan from being completely invalidated as subject of his own writing.

## Conclusion

Duncan's overall self-representation in *Holmwood* is a utopian one in that it enacts a desire to escape from fixed identity boundaries and established social differentiation. The subject who can transform himself so easily is potentially able to offer a vision of the renewal of identity that he himself embodies. The diary offers an opportunity to imagine the situation of unification of the individual with the mass. But there is also ambivalence in his enactment of a utopian formula due to the problematic nature of applying utopias to experience. Duncan is not naive in his striving to imagine a productive future but it is only another temporary role for his writing self. The fluidity of his identity highlights fictionalisation and destabilises the effectiveness of his privileged standpoint despite the Orwellian references to social reality. Instead,

both the author and character signified by the name Ronald Duncan, inhabit a position hovering between fact and fiction. Indeterminacy and the difficulty of his position become indicative of the impossibility of effective utopian enactment. This impossibility is precisely the feature that makes it utopian.

The autobiographical form itself can be seen as utopian in that, rather than being simple exposition, it instead exposes the impossibility of communion and self-representation in narrative. The self is only produced as a potentiality and out of its own intangibility. *Holmwood* and the *Delhi Diary* (studied in the next chapter) do not then become more truthful than the published versions in *Islands*, but are equivalent in terms of reference. The amalgamation of these texts reveals how others were used to assemble the first autobiography. Such assemblage no doubt contributes to the different tones, discourses and viewpoints that, in *Islands*, shift from conventionally stable temporal boundaries or static standpoints. This method of assemblage is Duncan's own particular strategy of commemorating self-experience. From the autobiography, one realises how he idealised or mutated his early experiences which were, when recorded in 'private' format, marked with tension and ambivalence. The authorial inscription of identity is shown to be constructed from more than one different authorial role produced from the many different modes of writing and address occurring throughout all these texts and also within each single text.

Analysing events in his youth, we read Duncan's identity as one clustered around crisis-moments and events symbolising his search for the father through authority figures and by means of affiliation with organised political systems. Duncan's compulsion to self-exile and his rejection of conventional authority creates the impression of quite intense internal conflict and contradiction. The record of these events and emotions produces a strong narrative tension between present and past selves, interior and exterior voices, the personal poetic and the publicly political. The reader is able to participate in this dynamic but, because of it, hesitates before assigning belief. This hesitation should be seen as a general motif of reading all autobiography rather than as undermining the genre by multiplying truth-claims.

The next chapter discusses the gradual movement of Duncan's written expression from the enclosed and private diary form to modes of narrative which increased in public resonance as he began to prepare for and move towards publication.

## The Transition from Utopia to Dystopia: Pacifism, War and the Masses

### *Introduction*

Here, as in the last chapter, I will take the opportunity to indicate the background and historical context of Duncan's earliest published and autobiographical writing. This helps to explain the framework of thought against which his evolving political and artistic philosophies can be seen. In the first section I will describe two political documents which pay testament to Duncan's early pacifist activities and his socialist values. These values are not congruous with his later, more right-wing articles such as 'Why Does Breeding Count for Pigs and Not For People?' (c. 1975). His early political pamphlets have a primarily utopian force in that they are addressed to a mass public which, once enlightened by the tenets set out, is supposed to be converted or to desire a better future thus fulfilling the persuasive function of the rhetoric. Despite this utopian purpose, an element of adversity – a prevailing theme of Duncan's writing – begins to complicate his rhetoric and poetic ideas. The *Indian Dream Diary* (discussed in Section ii) shows further imbalances and difficulties behind Duncan's strategy for the avoidance of war and his parallel ideas about spiritual truth.<sup>1</sup> The *Dream* diary is intrinsic to a study of the psychological reality of the subject's experience of time and of being in time. The question of validation, of truth, fiction and authenticity, becomes part of the commentary which itself begins to reveal the author's dystopian cynicism about a disturbing present.

Section iii studies Duncan's first two plays, most specifically, *The Unburied Dead* (1937). His early drama reflects a complex combination of both utopian and dystopian thought. There is an emphasis on human evolution through experiential knowledge while the characters remain bound to the fate of the isolated individual. These plays are an early reflection of Duncan's placement of a particularly paradoxical self into his writing: in the case of his drama, a self who has the last word whilst also trying to speak for the community.

Duncan's first steps in a literary career were not as a poet but within the field of journalism. His first real independent engagement with literature was precipitated

<sup>1</sup>Ronald Duncan, *Dream Diary* (Jan-March 1937), no page numbers. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Dream* or *DD* for page number citations. *HRHRC*

by his editing of *Townsmen* journal, a venture that began with encouragement and direction from Ezra Pound and ran as a quarterly from 1938 until 1945.<sup>2</sup> In section *iv*, I shall demonstrate how *Townsmen* delineates Duncan's artistic sympathies. He was in line with the scepticism which Joyce, Pound, Lewis and Eliot and others of the 'first wave' of modernists epitomised in varying ways. All had expressed scepticism towards modern industrial society and the mass-media. The type of material included in *Townsmen* typifies this attitude. Lane's thesis explores how Duncan's poetic style 'stroved to show its inheritance from Pound and Eliot'. (DL, 68) Overtly, Duncan was cautious about admitting wide-ranging influences upon his own work: 'With shame I confess that I have read fewer than a hundred books in my life'. (AMAI, 65) His work does not invite comparison with post-war writers such as Dylan Thomas or the Movement poets but one can, nevertheless discern abstruse influences; if for example, a reading of the German Expressionist playwrights, can be inferred from Duncan's use of a chorus in the play *The Unburied Dead*.<sup>3</sup> He admits that at Cambridge 'Swift was my model' (AMAI, 69) and this is also an influence that spills over into his early political writing. While it is clear that Duncan was not wholly influenced by the abstraction or sophisticated techniques of the moderns, it remains possible to identify a multiplicity of references that resound within the writing to create his inimitable, highly individual style.

### *i. Duncan as Pamphleteer*

In 1934, despite either general public indifference to European politics or a degree of internationalism on the part of progressives, many British people pledged allegiance to a means of non-violent dispute outlined by the Reverend Dick Sheppard. In October 1954, Sheppard had appealed for peace in a letter published in the national newspapers. Within two days 2,500 postcards endorsing the pledge had been sent back to him. In the following years, international events such as the Abyssinian crisis and the Spanish Civil War meant that pacifist opinion was still a significant force in discussions regarding Britain's vulnerability, its national security and its resistance to war.

The launch of the Peace Pledge movement attracted many artists and literati of the day including Huxley, Eric Gill and Roger Low.<sup>4</sup> Duncan can be linked to

<sup>2</sup>Duncan's first article was a critique of coronation fever, 'Penny Whistle', *Adelphi* 13, No. 8 (1937), *RDF*. His next piece was a review, requested by Eliot, for *New English Weekly* in 1938. (AMAI, 169) During 1939 he continued to review books on India for *NEW*. By 1942 he was writing 'Husbandry Notes' for *The Weekly Review*.

<sup>3</sup>A possible reference being Ernst Toller's *The Machine Wreckers* (1923).

<sup>4</sup>For an extended analysis of the peace movement in the thirties, see the section 'New Pacifism: the Sheppard Peace Movement' in Martin Ceadel's *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945* (Oxford,



figures such as these by the way he also gave pacifism a crucial position in his vision of society: a society that would incorporate alternative human values. The movement for peace in the inter-war period had already discovered a distinctive voice within national politics when Duncan's first political pamphlet, *The Complete Pacifist*, was published.<sup>6</sup> In 1938, just before the Second World War, Duncan wrote *The Rexist Party Manifesto*, purporting to be the dissenting voice of 'a new political organisation'. (AMAI, 198) The leaflet bravely countered Government policy though Duncan understates 'the joke of writing this squib' (AMAI, 199) in order to highlight the gullibility of some people who actually applied for membership of the party. Such publicly rhetorical and performative writing displays an awareness of historical crisis and poverty. This in turn determines the particular modes of self-hood expressed by the texts.

*The Rexist Party Manifesto* was first printed in Devon by Duncan and distributed by Bloomsbury in September of 1938.<sup>7</sup> It was then reprinted in the October issue of *Townsman*, due to popular demand. *Rexist* 'was written in the style of a *Times* leader' (AMAI, 199), and uses an ironic and indirect style reminiscent of Swift's *Modest Proposal* to satirise Government measures to allay unemployment and poverty. Duncan continued to use news and magazine journalism to assert the authority of his opinions. The pieces he wrote in the 1960s and beyond use the author's voice directly to convey increasingly Conservative views.<sup>8</sup> What is consistent is that Duncan's opinions are deployed against the grain of the establishment of the day as he always aligns himself with radical causes of left or right, and with minority views. Political identity became less intrinsic to Duncan's later writing and, overall, a self-publicising identity that is generally dissenting is more crucial to his literary production. Pamphlets were cheap, brief but effective and in producing *Pacifist*, Duncan shows awareness of their potential in the circulation of propaganda. Engagement with public opinion at this stage was one way to gain a wide audience. He admits that by 1938, 'I wanted to shock people' (AMAI, 201) and 'prepare the people for the fact that a new kind of war was in store for them'. (AMAI, 201) It is

Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 173-221. Hereafter MC in the main text. Sheppard's letter appeared in the *News Chronicle*, *Daily Herald*, *Manchester Guardian* (16th Oct. 1934). Duncan's pledge exists in the Peace Pledge Union archives, London. In 1936 Duncan was to receive letters of support for *Pacifist* from Eric Gill and John Middleton Murry. HRHRC

<sup>6</sup>Ronald Duncan, *The Complete Pacifist* (London, Boriswood, 1937). This is the fuller text than the first 1936 version and published a year later. The PPU discounted it due to its development of 'Greggist' theories, which by then had lessened in popularity within the movement's circle of debate. It is hereafter referred to as *CP* and *Pacifist* in the text.

<sup>7</sup>Ronald Duncan 'The Rexist Party Manifesto' (using the pseudonym, 'The Rexist Party'. See *Islands*, p. 198), *Townsman* 1, No. 4 (Oct. 1938), 19 - 23, *RDF*. Hereafter referred to as *Rexist* and *RM* in the text.

<sup>8</sup>For example, Duncan's 'Why This Guilt About Ownership?', *Observer* (1966), np. *RDF*

clear he felt that pacifism was not educating British society and put himself in the role of educator. If his writing, rather than arousing indifference, could enrage, agitate or tap into people's grievances then at least he ensures his definition and functionality as a writer. It is as if he wants the practicality of his words to make people think and that an acknowledgement of his writing is the condition of his existence. However, the autobiography characteristically downplays his zeal with the comment, 'as soon as I had posted the copies I forgot all about it'. (AMAI, 199) His consistency as a reforming character is cut through by such statements.

It is interesting that Duncan's published pamphlets are not personalised like the diaries, but written under the persona of a wholly political being, a philanthropic diplomat or utopian preacher. *Rexist* employs a collective voice with, 'THE REXIST PARTY consider the above legislation as being absolutely necessary unless...'. (RM, 23) Here Duncan moves to a highly public, generalised form of address which assumes a large but uninformed audience: one that may have different or less extreme views than the author but have a potential for conversion or, failing that, shocked objection. The party manifesto is in the form of a list of declamatory statements such as:

THE PRESENT  
SITUATION:

Great Britain is sliding into  
a WAR  
a SLUMP  
or a SECOND INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION (RM, 20)

Here the satire addresses the numbskull Briton but its discourse also presupposes an initiated intelligentsia who will perceive the irony. Underlying such high expectations is the assumption of a general public who will naturally fail to see the humour. The earlier *Pacifist* does not valorise a 'gentle reader' either but seeks to recruit kindred revolutionaries. Another important aspect is that the pamphlets function to convert or affect minds in the real world but as such, also complicate accounts of the speaker's presence. These documents' position on the boundaries of literary genre demands a discussion of their relationship to autobiographical writing.

At this point it is useful to refer to Elizabeth Bruss (1976) who proposes that autobiographical writing takes the form of a speech act in that it is illocutionary and thus constitutes a speaker. The line between fiction and reality is demarcated by her emphasis on truth-value whereby 'the autobiographer purports to believe in what he asserts.'<sup>9</sup> Autobiographical accounts assume vocal authority to the extent that the speaker *in* the text attempts directness and synonymy with the writer *of* the text. The author must hold some *a priori* status or the text would not possess required authority. A first person speaker is (unexpectedly) absent from Duncan's pamphlets

<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 7.

but the texts ask us to be convinced by a speaking voice who refers to current, recognisable social attitudes and situations. There is also powerful emotion behind the satire in *Rexist* that comes from attempts to force upon the reader a cohesive philosophy behind the inversions, ridicule and outrageousness. The bill to decrease surplus workers will:

prevent the workers from loitering or congregating outside places of entertainment...  
which ...have in the past caused considerable embarrassment to ladies and gentlemen,  
(RM, 22)

and:

procure for our nursing homes a supply of healthy adult males for the purposes of blood transfusion. (RM, 22)

The reader is challenged by the excess of the concept and asked to be self-critical as well as critical. The reader must acknowledge their own readiness to accept conventional forms without question and this puts them at a disadvantage before the authoritative speaker. The terse voice of *Pacifist* assumes a position of complete sense and logic and claims the role of one of the elect. This speaker knows all about the insane defence policies which were, or could be, implemented by the opposition who are 'sacrificing huge sums annually on armaments'. The voice assumes opposition to this insanity with statements like 'surely it is not unreasonable to expect...' (CP, 9), but addresses the opposition as if speaking for the human race.

The authorial voice of *Pacifist* appears to conform to that of the egocentric, male autobiographical subject. It is a declamatory monologue despite the main text being made of contrary rejoinders to other precise statements, quoted in upper-case bold type, such as: (a) **'THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WARS'**, or (h) **'VIOLENCE IS THE ULTIMATE ARBITRATOR'**. (CP, 6, 7) The passages of response underneath are in lower-case plain type, emphasising the tone of the disputing voice who reasons quietly, 'It would seem that...' or 'it is more likely that...'. In the next part, which explains the methodology of the complete pacifist (third person), the words are just as reasoning but are more promising and assertive when stating, 'The pacifist must take action in order to fulfill himself'; 'There are some Christians who maintain that...'; 'The workers have power now' and 'as they would make us believe'. (CP, 15, 18, 21) The 'they' and 'us' signify that the subject of the discourse is speaking *on behalf of* previously deluded masses while it claims agency for the authority constructed by the utopian figure of the pacifist.

Furthermore, both discourses pretend to represent singular and direct speech because the language is opinion-based and functions rhetorically, seeking to convince by its opinions:

Does war prune humanity? The essential basis of pruning or weeding is that the bad and useless should be destroyed. (CP, 6)

One can see that projecting an enemy becomes a focus for the emotional force of much of Duncan's polemical writing. By the mid-'thirties he had travelled extensively, learned of his royal blood and his inheritance. Because he had been exposed to unjust apartheid practices and the poverty and grind of the Northern mine-workers, he was not myopically cocooned in middle-class security. He probably also realised that living a charmed life would diminish creative inspiration. Duncan found rebellion and the illicit stimulating and the pursuit of such activities required an adversary or 'enemy'. With Britain at war, society was particularly sensitive to the idea of an enemy, and Duncan in turn was sensitive to cultural forces.

Demonisation of public figures reflected the political divisions of the era and Governmental powers and the media tapped into the public's worst fears to build up antagonism. Both the Russian communist and Oswald Mosely were seen as the enemy of the people and public opinion, up until the Munich Crisis in 1939, veered between both Neville Chamberlain and Hitler. War-mongers in general are the enemy in *Pacifist*, as well as the State, the Church and Government. War is the entity through which 'most of our liberties are taken away', unleashing 'evil and ugliness'. (CP, 8) The pamphlet demonstrates the sweeping terminology of war-forecasting but does not privilege the impending war as its subject. Instead it universalises all national disputes and generalises aggression and exploitation of the oppressed. The speaker appeals for a generally humanistic, practical understanding and urges methods of passive resistance for striking workforces as a peace-time issue. One stipulation of the action plan is 'To attempt to conduct all demonstrations along non-violent lines'. (CP, 15) The author removes the target groups he attacks from a humanistic context and makes their motives appear illogical, thereby overpowering them and gaining self-possession and monovocality in the argument:

Governments are exploiting sentiments of patriotism... (CP, 5)

This system breeds hate... (CP, 11)

It was not for any benevolent reasons that the whole of Germany was not occupied and 'conquered' by the Allies; it was merely that they realised that it would be quite unprofitable to do so. (CP, 8)

It seems inconsistent that the Church, which leaves the question of participating in war to men's consciences, should dogmatise over such things as divorce. (CP, 9)

In 1936 Duncan joined Britain's new Peace Pledge Union. It proved a helpful platform from which to air his views. Being a member did not mean that during this decade he had any assiduous links with a single party or politics (as neither did the PPU), stating, 'I could find no sympathy with the Communist Party and its violence,

or the Socialist Party and its Victorian ideology'. (AMAI, 128) Like many others, he felt that war was not inevitable. Furthermore, after his Chesterfield experience in the summer of 1936, Duncan went on to write *Pacifist* and in the autumn visited the wives of striking miners in the Rhondda Valley. By the end of the year he had planned to see Gandhi in India. During this period his critique and advocacies of reform were extrapolated into an idealistic vision of community living. *Pacifist*, rather than demonstrating faith in the League of Nations, envisaged alternatives and asked for change. Change is based on practical methodologies and the writer clearly believes it will happen: 'It is far more practical to use the right method than to have Utopian ideas of what might be...'. (CP, 13) His tone of earnestness is enhanced by additional examples of workers' resistance and of Gandhi's stupendous achievements in India:

Consider the non-violent stay-in strike at the colliery of Pecs in Hungary,... the Sikh warriors with their swords sheathed by their side, were in the front rank of the Indian non-violent campaigns. (CP, 24)

Citing the different means but equal efficacy of these methods adds conviction to the argument. He writes as if the workers can alter the future:

The workers run the country though the capitalists may rule it. (CP, 24)

a) A workers committee should decide what rent the people can reasonably afford to pay. (CP, 29)

The marginalised, the African oppressed, the miners and the colonised, are all part of the conglomerate Pacifist figure whose aim should be:

To assist minorities and races subjected to Imperialism and exploitation, to gain their freedom. (CP, 15)

Duncan advocates a collective happiness dependent on the rejection of violence. *Pacifist* offers a model for a collective future centred round optimistic statements such as 'The millenium must start now'. (CP, 15) Present trends are probed and vigorously condemned while he anticipates new methods for social reform.

Despite the clarity of its aims, the generalisations within *Pacifist* do not sustain the specifics of the argument. It seems over-optimistic to presume the worker's 'friendly attitude' to a rent officer; that 'public sympathy must not be outraged by any actions calculated to alienate it', and that 'Police action in such a centre would be restricted by public opinion'. (CP, 30) There are signs that Duncan's attitude to mankind is complicated as well as guided by personal idealism. Alongside the idea of the public at large being their own salvation, individual coercion of the mass is recommended. The idea of the 'cell' is presented as a viable system but its training idea expounds discipline for the individual as a foremost concern:

The person who holds the philosophy of complete pacifism must first make his individual state exemplary of the communal state which he wishes to achieve. (CP, 23)

Reform of any nature must first start by way of the individual, who must decide, in the light of his own conscience, upon his responsibility, and then act.' (CP, 31)

It seems a complex step for the individual to act interpersonally as well as achieve uniqueness. Personal responsibility may be rendered ineffective if it is also the case that 'Work will break down barriers between individuals and give them a sense of solidarity'. (CP, 27) This illustrates a dilemma because one must assume that all individuals have a common humanity and can be regulated through discipline, rather than having free will, for their eventual conversion into a mass of pacifists.

The inconsistency between empathy and discipline makes difficult a practical application of the thesis set out in *Pacifist*. Pacifism is first described appealingly as an activity that entails 'the realisation that the survival of mankind must ultimately depend upon love between men'. (CP, 10) The requirement that 'an organiser or leader of the cell should be elected' (CP, 26) establishes the notion of leadership. The necessarily authoritarian nature of this leadership is implied in the 'Pacifist Training' section, by statements such as, 'The cell must not become religiose' (sic. CP, 25) and 'all restlessness leads to disintegration'. (CP, 27)

It is worth noting that Duncan's ideas owed much to Richard Gregg's policy of social training, presented in his 1936 publication, *The Power of Non-Violence*. Social training was a policy at the heart of a debate which catalysed the divisions inherent in the PPU at that time. As in *Pacifist*, Gregg's Chapter 16, 'Group Training and Discipline', advocated public service, discipline and meditation. Duncan cited the book as a primary source in *Pacifist* itself. Many, however, had difficulty with 'Greggist' ideas. Letters from the Labour MP Arthur Ponsonby to Dick Sheppard show the extent to which Duncan's publication was part of a real debate over methods of social organisation.<sup>10</sup> Ceadel believes that 'Far from generating an effective mass movement, Gregg's training methods seemed to produce an élite of mystics'. (MC, 253) From this view one can understand why Duncan also fits Chambers's definition of a utopian as 'one who advocates impracticable reforms'.<sup>11</sup> The definition embodies the sort of ambivalence that is typical of Duncan in that he equates perfection with impossible dreams yet also wishes to negotiate them with the real world in order that they fail. If failure happens it is because the real world is imperfect rather than his method. (There is further discussion of Duncan's application of a utopian methodology to farming on p. 92.) Only when the cooperative farm disbanded in 1942 did Duncan admit that his system was unrealistic. It is likely

<sup>10</sup>See letter, Dick Sheppard to Arthur Ponsonby (2nd Feb., 1937), that admits he had made 'a bloomer' because *Pacifist* was too Greggist. He denies its claims to be a PPU publication, *BOD*. Also Ceadel, op. cit, p. 254.

<sup>11</sup>*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Edinburgh, Chambers), ed., EM. Kirkpatrick, p. 1433.

that the causes of its failure had as their source the inherent incongruities of reasoning found in *Pacifist*.

In June 1937, in contrast to the optimism of *Pacifist*, Duncan published a poem that was circulated in pamphlet form and entitled *Down Tools!* It objected to 'passion for profit-from what?/WAR!'.<sup>12</sup> The criticism of usury in the poem corresponds with Pound's views, views that Duncan probably discussed directly with the poet when they met briefly in Rapallo in March. The rhyme-scheme is simple, the lines brief and cutting:

you don't care  
whether its gas or shrapnel  
that kills Bill, and will  
kick Rose Marie's womb out. (DT, 37)

The ending is emotionally forceful with the implication of individuals known to the poet. By late 1938 with the publication of *Rexist*, emotional force had developed into non-sense and illogicality, now the dominant tools of Duncan's political discourse. He was fighting national pessimism with its own weapons. The critique of the real world in *Rexist* shows that his utopian thinking is now channelled through satire and Swiftian grotesquery though the tone of argument is relevant and powerful. Duncan takes advantage of the current disposition for social demonising and incites a response with contemporary propaganda-speak to enforce his meanings. 'Bill no. 6' advocates catching 'niggers coolies and kaffirs who will be held and imported to this country as the white workers die off'. (RM, 23) By taking impure ideas of violence and obscenity further into a dystopian nightmare, the hope is to mock the 'wrong' type of utopian thinking, envisaged by reformers who propose inhuman measures of control over social groups. The absurdity of the reasoning voice in *Rexist* invokes catharsis and expurgating thoughts in the discerning reader. However, the cathartic, critical and morally instructive function of the pamphlet is not directly indicated, and this diminishes the positively utopian aims of its writer. The manifesto at once negates a sense of the future as well as containing the desire to provoke action and strive for a new regime.

The ways in which Duncan inserts himself into modes of public address is as complex as the methods by which he inserts the self into his autobiography, i.e. by an assertive voice, which is then undermined. Duncan's characteristic mixture of understatement and arrogance is epitomised by the ambivalence of satire. With the cold sadistic quality of his visions he turns himself, as speaker, into the enemy-figure of the reader. The main premise of the *Rexist* Party is that wars and economic slumps 'are caused by the problem of the working class'. (TM, 23) Using irony and inversion,

<sup>12</sup>Ronald Duncan, pamphlet, *Down Tools* (Rochester, Stanhope Press, 1937). RDF

he constructs proposals for legislation to deal with the strain of surplus workers and their over-breeding. These include the suggestion that they be examined then 'done away with as humanely as modern science can suggest'. (RM, 22 ) Ideas such as these had been and were being promulgated non-satirically.

Significantly, *Rexist* dispenses with obtrusive authorship. The notion of intellectual property and ownership of text, by the use of the proper name on the cover, is subverted in *Rexist*. The referent for the author(s) is a pseudonym which inverts the way a text is legitimised by a signature. Satirical literature constructs a voice that does not directly owe allegiance to any authority or dominant ideology. Duncan's satirical voice and use of pseudonym in *Rexist* emphasises Foucault's theory of the author as an ideological construct because the text itself can only assume the validity of the person outside the text.<sup>13</sup> The speaker emphasises the plight of the workers and poverty-stricken who, by being a focus for satire (as with Swift), are acknowledged to have been targeted as scapegoats in reality. The suppositions of extreme prejudice are presented as 'true' and it is shocking to see how plausibly these false or irrational suppositions can be presented:

Also, when breeding is made illegal, the working man will be saved from the trouble of looking for a place of privacy and from the embarrassments attendant upon the act except when performed by men of breeding, poise and enlightenment. (RM, 22)

The speaker, by expressing such objectivity towards the problem of the lower classes, neutralises their humanity, a method akin to the Nazi's view of Jewish people. The apparent logic also tempts credulity and allows the possibility of two 'truths'. The satire asks the reader to perceive first one side of the debate, then the opposing argument, and thus dissolves the single authorial voice as source of meaning.

*Rexist* satirises the language typically used for proposing social solutions when it introduces a 'Breeding Act' to legislate birth-control, a notion that relates to genetic engineering and also fits in to many imagined Utopias.<sup>14</sup> The pamphlet thus refers to the growing application of systematic thinking to blueprints for future social planning. Systems devised by The Society for Cultural Relations (1924) – whose members included Shaw, Forster, H.G. Wells and Havelock Ellis – were based on Soviet and Fascist models of state control and National Planning. In 1931 the Eugenics Society was formed around new plans for hygiene and health. It supported the idea of social organisation based on economic reward. Huxley was a member of

<sup>13</sup>Michel Foucault, 'What is An Author?' in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (NY, Longman, 1988), pp. 231-259.

<sup>14</sup>The policy of involuntary birth control was supported by the 'utopian' writer, H. G. Wells, as was the policy of extermination of 'coloured' races outlined in his *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress on Human Life and Thought* (London, Chapman and Hall, 1901).



this society as was Shaw. Significantly, both societies were committed to family planning by legalising voluntary sterilisation and sterilisation of the unfit, while in 1933, the Nazis began it as a compulsory practice.

It is evident that during the pre-war years Duncan was part of a forceful voice of dissent that was generated into the public realm by artists and the intelligensia. Another pacifist, Arthur Wragg, drew attention to the absurdity and potential extremity of current attitudes in his book *Thy Kingdom Come* (1939). Along with his own cartoons it printed newscuttings of cartoons and satirical slogans, for example, 'The only defence is in offence which means that you have to kill more women and children than the enemy' (a quote from Lord Baldwin) and:

If we provide money and mental hospitals the chances are that we shall get more mental cases, and if we provide more and more money for unemployment we shall get more unemployed.<sup>15</sup>

The danger with Duncan's satire is that his sword of irony assumes intelligent readers who would not have to align themselves with the oppressed and while they might gain some insights, at worst they would merely find it funny, as did the *News Review* which exposed it.<sup>16</sup> On one level, *Rexist* assumes the reader will comprehend the speaker's demands for improvement, expressed through the didactic ego of the satirist and his quasi-religious desire for something better. However, dramatisation of the voice into a fascist buffoon is a tactic that undermines any sense of an authentic subject. Duncan's anonymity delays self-identity and thus he, as author, does not inhabit a stable standpoint. Instead instability occurs because the discourse generates different dramatic personae or meanings through which authority speaks. The level of satire fragments the narration into different levels and a direct voice of protest or disgust is distanced and controlled. Consequently, the speaker's authority is dispersed by delay and disguise. These techniques are used to supplant indirectly the abstract powers targeted in the writing.

It is important to note that such dispersal is a characteristic of Duncan's writing. Each time he aims to uphold a singular identity in his texts, he sets himself up to fail to match up to it by constructing excessively ambitious claims or a utopian vision for the identity. The failure of the vision is inevitable due to how he aligns himself with an élite spokesperson when defending the weak and underprivileged. In *Rexist* the failure comes from a complex process of doublement. Duncan assumes the

<sup>15</sup>Newscutting in Arthur Wragg's *Thy Kingdom Come* (London, Selwyn and Blount, 1939), p. 31.

<sup>16</sup>The satire's seriousness was diluted by its press exposure in a humorous review by anon., 'Abolish The Worker', *News Review* (September 8th, 1938), np. *RDE*. But the review also extended its interest because it mentioned 'Lord Gifford' as the (fictional) Executive Member of the committee. Consequently the fifth Baron Gifford, who existed as a real member of the aristocracy, wrote a letter of complaint to *Townsmen*, which was published with the re-print.

superiority of his own critical objective. His satire constructs the voice of a party which expects to be accepted unquestioningly. By using the indirect medium of satire he is also, paradoxically, detaching himself from the views it inscribes. The detachment signifies, as in Klaic's previous conclusion, growing pessimism and 'the withering away of utopia, its gradual abandonment or reversal'. (DK, 3)

Both pamphlets signify the way that society creates a 'mass' in order not to deal with it person by person. The image of the mass occurs in *Pacifist* as it mentions 'the workers' or 'vast illiterate population' (CP, 22) of the Russians. More cuttingly *Rexist's* sweeping statements produce a discourse of political persuasion that assumes its opinions are only available to the perceptive individual. This individual is superior to the *topos* of the mass. There is no revolutionary potential conferred onto a mass who would allow itself to be descriptively de-humanised with terms like 'herded together', as 'surplus', 'no use', and 'habitually breeding'. These images reflect Nietzsche's view of the tyranny of the masses.

Ambivalence towards the mass in *Rexist* reveals Duncan's struggle in negotiating the freedom of the individual with concern for groups such as the poor or oppressed. Class prejudice – which he would have been instilled with but also resisted – enters his social writing as a dual awareness and therefore as a subject for debate. Duncan's complex origins and his exile at school are likely to have fed the discourses of his proposals more than any kind of *Übermensch* aspirations. What is known of Duncan's personal origins provides clues to a possible, deeper sub-text for his utopian ideas. For example, the utopian idea of a peaceful world provides Duncan with a possible means to prevent the sort of senseless conditions which had caused the death of his father during the First World War.

The enigmas that surround the voices in the early pamphlets are also inscribed in *Islands*. Duncan hints therein, using his characteristically dour tone of reminiscence, that he was merely projecting his personal sensitivity onto social concerns. His politics are described in terms of an activity his friends have coerced him into, as, 'I found myself addressed as 'comrade' ' (AMAI, 110). He remembers himself as 'a typical 1930s figure' (AMAI, 128) but to confer typicality on himself gives the impression that these pursuits were superficial. Chronological time is vague and events that did not directly affect Duncan at the time are referred to only briefly, for example, 'In those days there were over two million unemployed. It was a period in which everybody was busy reforming everything but themselves'. (AMAI, 110) It is as if Duncan is deliberately playing down his involvement as a form of mock-modesty but it also de-values the cause. Playing-down perpetuates an image of the narrator as misunderstood and therefore cynical. There is also some aggrandisement here as the autobiographical voice takes for granted that the reader will understand

that his reactions are naturally motivated' by events of the time and his natural philanthropy:

Every day the dole-queues lengthened and the armaments piled up. War seemed inevitable. I joined the Peace Pledge Union and wrote a pamphlet for it. (AMAI, 128)

Alongside the past selves – both malleable and aloof – is constructed another youthful self who is 'deeply moved' by the miners who 'shuffled into Whitehall like an army of undernourished ghosts'. (AMAI, 111) Duncan also writes that, by 1937, he sees 'sorrow everywhere' and, with 'despair at what I saw', his newly-discovered heightened consciousness now instills in him the need 'to scourge mediocrity'. (AMAI, 69) It is fair to say, however, that Duncan does not claim any false sincerity as the retrospective narrator probably no longer believes in the same values and does not wish falsely to resuscitate the same enthusiasm for a politics, which he knows now to have failed.

## ii. *The Search For Gandhi: The Dream Diary*

Duncan's meeting with Gandhi in 1937 is described in more than one narrative, and was obviously a momentous event for Duncan. The experience greatly expanded his geographical horizons and served as a descriptive resource and exercise in diplomacy as well as becoming an arena for his emerging philosophy. Though the visit appears to be well-covered in *Islands*, the order of events leading up to it is confused by conflicting dates and vague chronology; this problematises our reception of the autobiographical record. Duncan had evidently forgotten the original sequence by the time he wrote his autobiography and appears to confuse biographical detail. *Islands* states correctly, that he embarked on his voyage for India along with the composers Benjamin Britten and Henry Boys, both of whom he had met through his friend Nigel Spottiswoode (who had been working at the PPU). Spottiswoode had also worked at the GPO Film Unit at Blackheath as a film-cutter where Britten and Auden had collaborated on the film *Night Mail* (1936). This proximity supports Ceadel's view of a group of 'young idealists' of 'a surprisingly homogenous type'. (MC, 230-1) He associates Duncan with this generation of 'libertarian progressives' who possessed 'radical political impulses'. (MC, 230-1) Though the post-Auden generation came at a 'transitional stage between the non-conformist conscience and the beatniks' (MC, 232) such classification is a good example of how Duncan signifies within historical analysis. He may be perceived as a figure who is characteristic of his time while his form of dissent, during this particular period, is beyond mere prescription.

After covering the mining experience, the life-story moves on to his contact with Britten. The narrator of *Islands* says they meet first at the *Mainly Musicians Club* at Oxford Circus in 1936. Shortly after their meeting Duncan remembers that they planned and wrote a cantata for a Memorial Concert at the Queens Hall for Dick Sheppard. Sheppard actually died in October of 1937, *after* Duncan had been to India. An anniversary concert at Queen's Hall took place a year later but did not include work by Duncan or Britten.<sup>17</sup> A march, rather than a cantata, was published as a libretto and vocal score by the PPU in *August* 1937 and therefore could not have functioned as Sheppard's memorial piece.<sup>18</sup> Also, in a later memoir of Britten, Duncan writes that their 'introduction' took place at 'Ben's flat in the Finchley Road'.<sup>19</sup> This is an example of the frequent discrepancies found in Duncan's autobiographies. Specifically, he appears to believe that the piece he first wrote with Britten was commissioned. Humphrey Carpenter follows Duncan's vague autobiographising and says that their meeting occurred through work on a 'Pacifist March' for 'a Peace Pledge Union concert'.<sup>20</sup> An investigation of different sources can expose the erroneous nature of autobiographical truth and reveal how recorded memories destabilise each other.

It is ironic that Duncan's narratives are of such a spurious quality when much of his life was given over to pursuits which signified a search for some kind of absolute truth. In January 1937, Duncan reached Wardha, in India, after a trek of several thousand miles. He undertook the journey in order to keep the appointment that the Mahatma had allegedly scribbled on a cable sent three weeks before. Gandhi's response was prompted by Duncan having sent him a copy of *Pacifist* (as he had also done with Ezra Pound). He was first to see the Mahatma walking towards him as he was driven on a bullock cart through arid scrubland to visit the Ashram near Segwan.

The travel-diary Duncan kept during his visit to India from January to March 1937 was also discovered in Texas.<sup>21</sup> It portrays a conscious effort at self-narration and

<sup>17</sup> There *was* a tribute 'meeting' for the late leader at the Albert Hall, 4th December 1937. (See programme, Dick Sheppard File, PPU). The first anniversary or 'memorial' concert held on 31st October, 1938 at the Queen's Hall, had no contribution by Duncan either. For this information I am indebted to the help of William Hetherington, Honorary Archivist of the PPU HQ.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Duncan and Benjamin Britten, 'Pacifist March' (London, Boosey & Hawkes, 1937).

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Duncan, *Working With Britten* (Bideford, Rebel Press, 1981), p.20. See *Letters from a Life: the Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, ed. Donald Mitchell, 2 vols (London, Faber, 1991), I, p. 472, where Britten's states in his diary entry of 27th January, 1937, that he has completed the score of the March.

<sup>20</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London, Faber & Faber, 1992), pp. 90-91.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Duncan, *Dream Diary* [unpub.], 1937, RDF. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Dream* or *DD* for page number citations.

therefore provides us with another overtly autobiographical narrative which displays some erudition as well as the erosion of his general idealism. By addressing the text to Bunny, his sister, Duncan obviously wanted to justify and preserve his experience by sharing its significance with another who reminds him of his mundane existence and maintains his humility, 'Oh Bunny, you have as much God in you as Gandhi has'. (DD) The text veers interestingly between two types of memorial discourse: a practical thinking-through memory, and solipsistic recollection deliberating on how consciousness and experience have developed over time. Typical are long passages which chronologise recent events over two or three days and then break off: 'Now off to see a temple'. (DD) *Islands* recalls the visit by connecting to a very different past self who 'had no truths in my pocket'. (AMAI, 135) It also uses parts of *Dream* as a direct reference for the memoir, for example, Gandhi's comments about preferring a tin bowl to eat from are directly transcribed from the present of the diary record. The diary signifies the act of writing-down in the moment of doing or moving with comments such as 'Glad to be out of that scrub desert', (DD) but while it preserves the moment, as a record or account, it can never inhabit the real present it describes.

The potential of losing the experience is prophetically acknowledged by Duncan in *Dream*, 'It's easier enough to describe what was, or suggest what should be, but it's hard to say what is – of course a real present never is'. (DD) This thought must have disturbed Duncan, as many of the passages of digression in the diary display an anxiety about defining a constant self when experiencing the transformative, distorting effect of time and changing perception. This effect on the location of self is described in a poem written on the train to Calcutta:

I am the visitor...  
Remember, anywhere, wherever  
I am sitting watching, forever, forever  
Anywhere forever  
never nowhere... (DD)

*Dream* is fundamental to a study of the psychological reality of the subject's experience of time and being in time. The question of validation, of truth or fiction and authenticity becomes part of the commentary. It is also present in *Islands*, but is more generally structured through irony or the critical distance of retrospective scepticism such as, 'I was most ill-prepared for the religious discipline and austerity of Gandhi's ashram... . It was a useful but painful lesson'. (AMAI, 145) By 1937, Duncan had read the *Baghavad Gita* and possessed copies of Gandhi's *Self Restraint and Self Indulgence* and *Women and Social Injustice*. He can be seen to be caught between the asceticism he saw practised at the Ashram and his own yearning for aesthetic and sensuous fulfilment. The young writer constantly argues for this point, even with himself:

I know senses often give cause for pain but don't chuck everything overboard 'cos you can't always have what you want... . Won't bother write any more about this. (DD)

But his next lines are, with reference to Gandhi's advisor, Pyrelal, 'How dare he enjoy Hopkins? What about consistency?' (DD) Duncan wants to associate sensuality with aesthetic enjoyment in order to define it as equally morally improving. He cannot therefore tolerate the way Pyrelal delights both in art and austerity. This equation was to re-emerge most coherently as a major theme of *Tomb*.

By the time the autobiography was written in the 'sixties, Duncan had obviously idealised the experience and appropriated it for his self-promotion as a Gandhi expert. The event is subjected to cultural nostalgia, anecdotal value and affiliation, such as in the introduction to *Gandhi: Selected Writings*. Here the previous version in *Islands* is used almost in duplicate but with an extended tribute to the leader superimposed over a picture of spiritual darkness when 'In such a time Mahatma Gandhi was an oasis of meditation in our vast and garrulous vacuity'.<sup>22</sup> His youthful feelings appear more idealistic in contrast to the cynicism expressed in the later piece: 'the air was thick with so-called progressive thought which approved of nothing in the past, but for all that claimed to be omniscient with regard to the future.'<sup>23</sup> *Dream* expresses an interesting inversion of the mixture of idealism and realism. It is clear that, at the time, Gandhi did not furnish Duncan with the tranquility of an 'oasis of meditation'.

*Dream* contains passages of calm practical detail which give way to instances of hysterical expression such as, 'See! I Am God. Nijinsky was quite right. Who says he's mad. I make thunder'. (DD) These kind of written outbursts meet the conditions of the speech acts Bruss expects to act as self-revelation more fully than do the autobiographies which feature a more constructed tone of self-reflection. The self of the private diary is distinct from the role of the published, autobiographical Duncan.

In *Dream*, the narrative is more expressive and introspective than in the mining diary. The diary articulates the gap found between Duncan's expectations of an exotic culture saturated by the philanthropy of Gandhi's philosophy and the reality of the caste system together with the *Gita's* elitist sanctification of discipline. *Dream* encounters the problem of seeing the sub-continent under Western eyes more profoundly than *Islands*:

I tell you it hurts being here... . 'Did you enjoy India?' Yes I had a fine time. Rule Britannia! Defender of the faith. Ronald Duncan Esq. Esquire, gentleman of means, Ronald Duncan 6 Pall Mall., BA., Gentleman of means, seeing sights. (DD)

<sup>22</sup>*Gandhi: Selected Writings*, selected and introduced by Ronald Duncan (NY, Harper Colophon, 1971), p. 31.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

Here is a characteristically Western autobiographical discourse, dependant upon notions of centred, coherent individualism that is being tested as Duncan records his experiences. His grounds for identity, based on title and qualification, are presented as meaningless and non-referential in this context.

The text of *Dream* is not regulated by the speech-acts of the subject because the subject is not unified but in conflict. One sees clearly Duncan's struggle to assert the author-'I' by constructing a world-view centred upon the self from which all ideas and views project. But the search for enlightenment takes many turns. Gandhi's disciples sacrificed the individual self in exchange for a restrained, detached will-power, but self-control and will are also part of Western consciousness though not as a means of transcendence. The subject is the object of debate as to how it sees itself in the world. Passages such as, 'I am the water in the well. I am the axle of the wheel, the hoof of the bullock. I am but cannot feel I am in me...' (DD), illustrate this debate. The writing is testimony to how Duncan's destiny, in terms of his philosophy and way of life, hangs in the balance at this time. As the subject in this discourse is seen to be in process of becoming, then the 'I' that speaks is necessarily incomplete. The comment, 'I don't think I mind whether my desires are satisfied what is important is to experience desire' (DD) shows Duncan acknowledging desire as utopian.

The recording of these experiences posits a subject who is learning about doubt and faith, both about being involved in the world and attempting transcendence. Gandhi's Hindu philosophy negotiated the two positions but Duncan could not manage it. The internal visions and thoughts he goes through are often part-joyful and liberating but frustrating at the same time, as in this example. It concludes with a sense of paradox or futility regarding the attainment of objective vision:

—all in , whole out. Perfect reality attained when 'in' and 'out' identical: This is easy:  
a) Utopia (Kingdom of Heaven)  
b) Drugged (so I believe)  
c) When mind projects and what is subjective becomes whole of objectivity. My mind the universe is.  
Must be complete identification. If it becomes permanent – I suppose it's incurable madness... . (DD)

Duncan seemed greedy for heightened experiences but was unprepared for a life of spiritual discipline because it was too self-effacing: 'Damned if I can be "devotional" to Gandhi like millions here. It's † again'. (DD) For Duncan, a pre-war Westerner, Gandhi the pacifist was a symbol of Utopian and cultural sainthood but the reality of meeting the Mahatma did not live up to his ideal and Duncan soon felt that Gandhi had failed his expectations stating 'I've learnt no facts from G'. (DD) He also feels he has failed in some way, 'I've raped India... I haven't looked for 1/10th of wot hit me in eyeball'. (DD) At one poignant moment, the writer looks closely at

Gandhi's face and notes, 'It's the face of a very clever man, cunning man, proud egoist – there is no humility in it. But perhaps I'm wrong and just prejudiced'. (DD) His impulsive comment negates Gandhi's previous signification as goodness in *Pacifist*. Negation was necessary because Duncan was to make the decision to stay on his own 'island' rather than inhabit anyone else's. It is ironic that, to do this, he was to remain dependant on his grandfather's Trust money, a fund that was more likely to offer him security, comfort and the means to make his mark in the world. At this point personal goals and needs came to be at odds with a commitment to public social concerns.

Duncan's experience of India and Gandhi functioned as a turning point where- in a distinctly Western narcissism or individualism erupted into his psyche with full force. Here he was on the edge of a point of extreme difference, on the boundary between East and West, God (Spiritual) and humanity (physical), the pure and the defiled (sexual). He was offered the appropriate facilities and environment to cleanse and purify himself but this would have involved the sacrifice of his ego. It is not Duncan's experience of rejection but his suffering the risk of disintegration and the tension between self and social reform which drives the narrative in the diary: 'They say 'practice chastity and senses die' thus you achieve freedom! Death'. (DD) We hear of the on-going discussion on contraception, sex and sensuality that prompts him to exclaim 'Balls to vow of chastity'. (DD) What Duncan hears only reaffirms his preoccupation with sex as a life-generating drive, antithetical to death. His main concern is the conflict between theory and experience and the effort to theorise that conflict.

Here it is clear how Duncan writes himself both within and beyond the limits of external reality or 'real life'. Presented as a public man on a mission in India – a spokesperson, representative or diplomat – he is preoccupied with new conceptualisations for social improvement: 'As a leaf has a function to perform for the tree so have we'. (DD) Ideally this would bridge the gap between the personal and collective, the mind and the world, through being a participant.

The private memoir records the personal anxieties and dramas taking place within Duncan's subjectivity. He prepares himself for public commentary, whilst also speaking to himself, preserving the clandestine nature of journal discourse as a record of the life within. The inner self cannot be expressed as part of a whole, undistruptive of the boundaries of both the inner and outer selves, as hoped for in his utopian 'perfect reality' of 'in and out identical'. Despite this aim, there is always conflict and exchange in Duncan's self-representation because even the introspective parts are not submerged because written in text. It is clear that, as writer, he is self-conscious of his role because he expresses frustration at the inadequacy of words to express experiences he wants to comprehend but are un-graspable. Of the poverty in one village he says 'I shan't attempt to tell here' and 'I cannot write about it here'. (DD)



It is fair to conclude that Duncan's self-conscious writing is narcissistic in that it guarantees intersubjectivity by positioning the self in relation to an 'other'. The 'I' either reflects upon its lowly other who 'dribbles', or it privileges itself in relation to the addressee, his sister Bunny, who reflects the 'I's identity back to himself as her brother. Narcissism occurs when the 'I' inscribes itself as the authority and keeper/speaker of the symbolic order. At the same time, as in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the necessary orientation towards an other (one's reflection) is a deception.<sup>24</sup> The univocality of 'I'-centred thoughts is broken down by the discontinuity of the discourse. *Dream* provides an apt example of how the autobiographical image of a unified self as speaker is actually based on an uneasy awareness of its extant divisions.

Subjective exploration, expressionist visions and flashbacks all occur in Duncan's life-writing. The 'truth' of the moment of conceptualisation, the randomness of associative recall, are all areas in which the writer indulges himself. We notice moments of insight, analysis and revelation in *Dream*, wherein a floundering subjectivity attempts to discover itself in moments of reflection. He then emerges from moments of retreat and moves back to interaction with his surroundings, if only as observer. Such endless manoeuvring avoids stasis and the problem of defining oneself. The personal pronoun 'I', which refers to the author/writer/characters in the diary, signifies not one but many alter egos whose distance from the author, ironically or not, vary considerably. The dialogue of the writing and written selves in debate with each other does acknowledge the mixed motives and anomalies which occur within these selves and unmask its biases. Duncan tries to establish his own identity but fails, and instead, touchingly displays his own flexibility and susceptibility to emotional processes, historical forces and social attachments.

### *iii. Duncan's Dramas of Birth and Death*

In his book on attitudes to mass culture, the historian John Carey has traced the growing ideological divisions in early twentieth-century England, stating:

A gulf was opening, on one side of which the intellectual saw the vulgar, trivial working millions, wallowing in newsprint, and on the other side himself and his companions, functionless and ignored, reading Virginia Woolf and the *Criterion* – T.S. Eliot's cultural periodical, the circulation of which was limited, even in its best days, to some 800 subscribers.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>See Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London, Tavistock, 1977), pp. 1-7.

<sup>25</sup>Carey, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

Though this gulf was hardly new, we see the beginning of Duncan's struggle with it in poetic terms in the plays *Birth* and *The Unburied Dead*. These were his first dramatic works, written respectively in 1937 and 1938. In these, the condition of ignorance and suffering is only resolved through individual enlightenment by way of poetic discourse, not by reasonably practical solutions that work for a whole community. In all this writing, however, there is a consciousness of the impossibility of resolving the tension between agency and utopian idealism. Also what is highlighted in all these is the irony of attempting to inscribe the self through modes of introspection and solipsism: modes articulated by writing with self-centredness or authority. The irony comes because the attempts only ratify a decentred textual subject who is tries to establish authority but instead finds it necessary to inhabit different forms of disguise.

Duncan's first play *Birth* was written and performed in 1937.<sup>26</sup> *Islands* mentions that 'At this time I wrote my first play... . It was not a very good play. I am glad that it can't be found' (AMAI, 162) thus playing down the status of his first creative work. Because 'I never bothered to take a copy' (AMAI, 162), the work can never be compared to Auden's dramatic-poem 'Spain', with which it was performed. A fact that refutes the impression of Duncan's carelessness is that there *is* a typescript copy of the play in the archive. The piece was composed when he returned from France after visiting Pound in Rapallo on his way back from Bombay. Duncan briefly stayed in London and there met Rose-Marie Hansom, a music scholar at the Royal Academy, with whom his friend Nigel Spottiswoode was in love. The introduction of Rose-Marie as a character who acts to give birth to and define his sexuality can be seen as both romantic and traditionally sexist. Their meeting at this time suggests it is from a context of desire and its consummation that the writing of the play comes.

From discovery of the play-script, it is possible to examine Duncan's attitude to procreation and relationships at this stage in his life and work, as these are the major themes of both plays. It is likely he embarked upon *Birth* around the time he and Rose-Marie first had sexual intercourse and, if this is so, then the issues of marriage, economic grounds for reproduction and the question of contraception raised in this play tie in with his personal self-development. It is especially significant that he had recently discussed restraint and contraception with Gandhi.<sup>27</sup> Duncan

<sup>26</sup>Ronald Duncan, *Birth* (unpub.) 1937, RDF. Hereafter referred to in the text as *B*.

<sup>27</sup>Rose-Marie's memory of this period, inscribed in her unpublished 'autobiography', is that their relationship was consummated in London (before they eloped to Devon in July of that year), RDF. *Birth* appears to have been written some time in May, after Duncan met his future wife, but before the first trip to Devon with Nigel which was apparently chaste. See *Islands*, pp. 19-20.

began *The Unburied Dead* in the summer of 1937 a few months after *Birth*.<sup>28</sup> Based on his recent experience, he simply decides 'to start writing a play about coalminers'. (AMAI, 168) The piece was a vehicle for the writer's experiments with poetic diction as 'I was still messing about with all sorts of musical notations with the possibilities of avoiding conventional metaphor'. (AMAI, 168) *Dead* is longer, more highly structured and less colloquial in its discourse than *Birth*. It was published by the Fortune Press, along with two other early plays in *The Dull Ass's Hoof*, some time after 1939.

The plot of *Birth* concerns a contemporary urban working-class family. The living room is 'small, ugly and cluttered' and Connie, the daughter, is described as having 'been in 'service' '. (B, 1) Jack, her lover, speaks 'with a slight Yorkshire accent'. Connie's father is 'a plumber by trade' and Mrs. Philips 'does dressmaking in the home'. At the opening of the play, Connie enters alone, and with attenuated action 'looks at herself in the mirror'. (B, 1) The scene recalls the naturalism of set and gesture used in Lawrence's *A Collier's Friday Night* (1909, Act I, Scene 1) whose similarities suggest an influence.<sup>29</sup> The themes of love, poverty and morality revolve around the family's reaction to the daughter becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Duncan never again centralised this theme to such an extent. The event is at first presented through inference as Connie, alone in Scene 2 under a spotlight, is 'meant to be asleep' but runs about entreating 'No, don't take it from me, Mother'. (B, 5) The dream atmosphere adds to the enigmatic presentation of the birth as both shocking and a delightful, sacred occurrence. She continues:

See! How soft and light it lies mother,  
on me... . Mother! In me... now!  
Oh! never can life mean more, (B, 5)

This is the central scene of three. The heads of the mother and father are shown to speak intermittently, under spotlights, ten feet above the stage. The uncanny scene reflects the alleviation of convention as the family harmonise. The mother celebrates the experience and thus transforms her role as disapproving mother with unconventionally sensuous language:

Tease me  
with your lip-tipped cherry joy mulberry contentment...  
Lent to you from me and after you to who?  
Your in-me-now pleasure  
Smooths out prune of my middleagedness. (B, 6)

<sup>28</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'The Unburied Dead' in *The Dull Ass's Hoof* (London, The Fortune Press, n.d.) [c. 1939]. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Dead* or *UD*.

<sup>29</sup>Aside from Duncan commenting upon Leavis's liking for Lawrence in *Islands*, p. 90, there is a brief reference to him in *Townsmen* I, no. 3, which disparages an advertisement for *The Phoenix* and states that 'Lawrence is here offered as a panacea'. (p. 3)

Mr. Philips is made unconventional by his new tone of mild assent, 'Nothing to fuss about... . Me and yer mother 'ad done the same,/that's why I married her, cos of the shame -'. (B, 6) Connie's news is presented as a repeat of a similar shameful situation but it is this rather than natural enlightened acceptance that justifies her parents' non-intervention. A vestige of social realism still haunts the idealistic ambience of this scene. The opposition infers for the audience the artist's alchemic powers as Duncan imposes sublimity onto the ordinary. As art transfigures the banal with aesthetics, beauty relates to social morality and makes the act in question harmonious and good.

In the final scene, mundane reality is resumed 'the next morning', at breakfast. But Connie, singing *Ave Maria*, is obviously still immersed in the dream, her idealism now incompatible with the practical grimness of the family:

Mrs P: But what you've got to sing about, I'd like to know.

Connie: Plenty. I'm going to have a baby. I *can* hear... 'the double heart beat heard again' ...just as you said... . (B, 9)

The dream has presented an alternative and worked to free her everyday inhibitions. Connie therefore forgets that her parents are actually ignorant of her pregnancy and will not comprehend the positive potentiality of the concept of birth. The mother responds with anger – 'Brazen bitch!' – to the news. Before the inevitable interrogation from Mr. P: 'Have you gone and disgraced your mother and me?' (B, 11), Connie can only whisper his dream reaction, 'Nothing to fuss about'. (B, 10) He soon disclaims his former utterance by muttering it derisively as he leaves to track down her fiancé, Jack: '...the damned fool ... 'nothing to fuss about'. (*Goes to door*)'. (B, 11) At this juncture, repetition of the phrase draws attention to its function as a naive platitude, which enhances the disparities between the characters' perceptions.

Lastly, Connie has to face Jack's rejection:

Want a kid! You knew as well as anyone that there's no room in the world for any more... no food for it - for us either.

People like us ain't supposed to breed... you fool! (B, 13)

Jack then exits, to find 'something to get rid of it'. (B, 13) Connie is left, dancing hysterically and shouting, 'Wash it away/as the woman next door did./We can wash it away/as the woman next door/did...'. (B, 13) The dream appears irrational to the rest of the family and the girl cracks under the pressure of their economic logic. Her break-down implies that only the poetic-minded truly suffer, the rest being crude beings with no finer feelings, for example, Mrs P. declares 'No use reciting poetry! That sort of rubbish won't 'elp you'. (B, 10)

In order to narrow the gap between high and low-brow interests, Duncan makes the conflict of human needs a universal theme, illustrated through specific social problems. Childbirth is made problematic by convention and by the family's poverty. The theme illustrates how the family function as an example of wider, politicised issues of social welfare and economics. We can infer that Duncan felt a need to report the individual misery that broad statements on the masses, found in surveys and pamphlets, had glossed over. But while this play functions as a criticism of social conditions, it does so by stereotyping the repressive views of the unenlightened family. Nevertheless, aspects such as the dissolution of naturalistic set and the conflict produced from this, are evidence of Duncan's attempts to use defamiliarising effects in order to present a challenging interpretation of contemporary life.

The 'naturalistic' dialogue in *Birth* draws upon working-class dialect to present an ideology incorporating pride, endurance and appearance. It is obvious to Mr P. that Connie has been sacked for showing 'No respect!' (B, 2) Hearing of her quarrel with Jack, he excuses his anger saying, 'I know wot it is to be out of work. You're out of temper with yourself for living'. (B, 2) Connie's mother suddenly notices she is wearing 'them lovely pyjamas I've done for the Vicar's daughter... artful hussie... you'll dirty them'. (B, 2) The style and substance of the language offer an image of the family as self-denigrating on one level while on another it emulates qualities of honour and decency. Duncan's mother's life 'was not so easy' (AMAI, 11) after his father's death when they shared a house in Clapham and it is possibly such circumstances which fed his art with divided attitudes of disparagement and sympathy for the poverty-stricken. The difference between dearth and plenty is a problem Duncan encountered in Holmwood where he was forced to debate the economic forces that restrict future security and choice. An alternative vision and another side to poverty is depicted in the dream scene. The scene presents a contrast to dearth in the way its characters now speak in considered verse, abundant with fertile imagery:

Connie: Jack, I made it mean to me:  
made our full-charged love liberate  
the spark that now fires through me, (B, 8)

and:

Now, nothing is wasted  
all surges to one flower,  
breaks way to a bud. (B, 8)

The conviction of the language is maintained as it remains quite plain but at the same time is lightened by subtle rhythms and alliteration. However, because of the contrast between style and set, this scene is associated with a romantic pastoral ideal that acts as antithesis to the same characters' specific economic circumstances and taboos.

Duncan was present at a miners' march in early 1936 and what he observed there, along with the ensuing Holmwood experience and visit to the Rhondda Valley mine later that year, was probably the basis for his account of mining life in *Dead*. Jan is described as a 'mad beggar' whom they can 'tell by his gypsy skin' (UD, 10), whereas Scholar, who might appear to encapsulate Duncan's views most directly at this time, is actually based on another real character he meets at Chesterfield and who is described in *Holmwood* as 'the local popular bad lad'. (HD) He admits that 'The play is very derivative of course from my experiences in the mine'<sup>30</sup> and, indeed, both characters represent different attributes which Duncan himself has already embodied: the scholarly refinement of individual sensitivity and courage as well as the anonymity and cunning of the drifter who plays devil's advocate to Scholar.<sup>31</sup> In addition to detailing his mining life, Duncan's diary included much on the subject of the dynamics between Maureen, Arthur and his girl and their general sexual etiquette. It becomes a major distraction to the mining work and promises release as well as entrapment. *Dead* also treats the subject with considerable depth and reflects the continuing appeal for Duncan of sexuality over politics.

There are further points of derivation. Remembering the Rhondda strike Duncan tells how he 'smuggled a letter down to the strike leader' (AMAI, 129) to avert the men from smashing the machinery. The women in *Dead* 'smuggle a note' to the miners at 'pit bottom' in a thermos. (UD, 50) On page 61, 'Out of the valley of dust - ' is heard. It is the song Duncan had written for the miners' march earlier that year. Young Scholar's actions are modelled on Duncan's personal experience in Rhondda. The character in the play pleads for passive resistance from the striking miners (though in a Derbyshire accent), 'Nowt ever come out of tough neck stuff except more coppers and less public sympathy'. (UD, 52) Despite these parallels and unlike Duncan's encounter, Scholar goes to the bottom of the pit and when he collapses from hunger, the colliers are disheartened, stating tersely, 'To hell with sitting and singing and singing and sitting... . We can't eat news' and, 'might be a dream but we've all had the dream'. (UD, 62, 64) Duncan takes personal experience further and applies to the fiction a rather gloomy conclusion that does not fulfil any socialist project.

The critic Heuter notes that 'Gandhi's influence can be traced throughout the play'.<sup>32</sup> This may be true, as Scholar asks Jan in his delirium, 'isn't this action

<sup>30</sup>Wahl, op. cit., No. 20, 1973, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup>Jan was also the name of the fictional rural character whose critical commentary on various issues was the essence of Duncan's 'Jan's Journal' pieces serialised in the *Evening Standard* from 1946 onwards. See literary accounts. HRHRC

<sup>32</sup>Max Walter Heuter, *Ronald Duncan: the Metaphysical Content of his Plays* (London, Rebel Press), 1969, p. 23.

without desire?’ (UD, 66) and decides his desire ‘is for them only..., Street, Club and Union’. (UD, 70) But the miners’ own doubts and Jan’s accusation of Scholar permitting the ‘sensuality of self-denial’ reflects the perplexity already shown towards Gandhian ideas in *Dream* and anticipates their essential conflict in *This Way To the Tomb*. Ultimately, Scholar breaks the strike, realising he cannot live embodying the values of non-attachment. He cannot ‘dream dead’. (UD, 73) The decision to follow his passion for the girl, Leafy, has given him a fuller identity as Jan says: ‘Now you’re all you,/No doubt,/difference between the in and the out’. (UD, 76) But for the miners there is no change, only a return, ‘Back to being the numerals’. (UD, 74) Approaching the end of the play, the colliers ‘exit’ and Scholar is left to describe his new-found sensual apprehension of life using highly poetic images of nature, fertility and the female body:

Andranine! Andranine!  
Sweet-pea  
petal ecstasy from her.  
Lip, nipple, knee,

and:

I can touch. tell. tell,  
lark-lifting miracle. (UD, 75)

One senses Duncan’s difficulty here. Though not radical, change is discussed as a plausible option. The potential success of the strike does not appear unrealistic in relation to the given social circumstances. In spite of this, individual yearning and the pastoral, again, expressed as a utopia of emotional rebirth (‘I can touch’), takes precedence over any collective social victory.

Like Connie in *Birth*, Scholar’s utopian emotions depict him as rather naive. The play ends with him and Jan sharing a dream-like dialogue that simplifies working life and the family – represented by Mrs Houghton’s entrance – into rusticity and vagueness:

BOTH: fertility  
vitality  
falling back into decay

[Enter MRS HOUGHTON.  
from father to daughter,  
from daughter to son... . (UD, 76)

Scholar’s mother now functions as an idealised alter-ego of herself as does the dream character of Mrs P. in *Birth*. Family lineage is associated with simplicity and the pastoral, elements that are redeeming for Scholar, who is now leaning towards a rather idyllic vision of rusticity. Jan offers him a utopian wholeness of character at the close, ‘So, here’s my identity./Tuck it in to your ecstasy’. (UD, 76) Even though both

voices converge, unification is only intimated because the voices speak in an unfinished and rambling discourse of desire. Desire is expressed because the words convey possibility and the impulse to transform ('til whole heard again'):

SCHOLAR: 'A phrase will  
penetrate, precipitate,  
JAN: weave.  
SCHOLAR: for no known reason  
'til whole heard again  
JAN: and often after  
SCHOLAR: no freer than then  
It's only only  
faster  
faster for  
there is no finish of  
(*Fade out.*  
CURTAIN. (UD, 77)

Desire is therefore expressed, but it has no effect on the action and is merely compensatory and fleeting, 'no freer than then'. (UD, 77) But, for Duncan, to experience desire is supposedly enough to satisfy one's senses. As in *Birth*, class-type is associated with the universal pastoral qualities and this is redeeming but in the process, the working classes are abstracted from specific social context, and practical solutions relinquished by the close.

Having expressed distaste towards religious asceticism as well as towards Marxism, in *Birth* and *Dead*, Duncan develops the positive theme of personal agency against community helplessness and does not follow a party line.<sup>33</sup> These plays both describe accounts of suffering which begin to detach from personal circumstances and refer to abstract ideas of nature and sensuality. The detachment detracts from the political force of the drama. The opening scene of *Dead* depicts the tragedy of Scholar's father's death after a shaft accident. But by the play's end, the miners' association with death is extended, as the faceless chorus chant:

Back. Back to clocked in postponement of  
serial dreams, schemes and the Sunday  
papers.  
to drag our lugubrious bodies through the day's  
delirium.  
Tell us, talk to us,  
Tell us what to do. (UD, 74)

*Scholar* cannot take responsibility for the mass of 'bodies' and answers with Swiftian harshness: 'Breed/ and buy a butchery!/ and sell your progeny as pork. Begin!' (UD, 74) This is a dramatisation of the frustration Duncan expressed in *Holmwood* regarding his continuing inability to see the point of such suffering, 'There are too

<sup>33</sup>Duncan writes of Marx's *Das Kapital*, that 'the false simplifications on every page used to make me throw the book at the wall'. (AMAI, 134)



many men alive and none of them know how to live. If one of them had any conscience he would refuse to work in a pit'. (HD) The drama has changed its theme from the miners' predicament to the destiny of Scholar's individual soul and his desire to worship the eternal fecundity of the earth. Refuge in the universal may have been the only way that Duncan could link his own existence with 'the mass' and speak for them with empathy.

There are comparable features to both *Birth* and *Dead*, in Auden and Isherwood's *Ascent of F6*.<sup>34</sup> Though Duncan was in India until March of 1937, the production of *Ascent* went on until May, while the text had been published in September, a year earlier. By 1937, Duncan already knew Britten, who had composed the music for *Ascent*. Such correspondences indicate a common ground of influence. *Dead* uses a chorus and characters that break into rhetorical poetic commentary to call up sad or satirical images of contemporary society, for example:

WOMEN: In a long line  
down to the mine  
women of woe  
walk to and fro. (UD, 48)

*Ascent* interpolates similarly unrealistic techniques – a CHORUS and MR and MRS A. – who recount the deficiencies of suburban life:

MRS A: Can we never have fun? Can we never have any  
And not count every single penny? (AF6, 80)

In some scenes the couple are elevated and illuminated, as are MR. and MRS. P in *Birth*, which also features (like the trial in *Ascent*) a dream sequence. What is common to the plays is that they all aim, through style, theme and action to connect private self-discovery with social criticism. Therein, individual consciousness tries to reconcile itself with a social awareness. To note the similarities opens Duncan up to the same accusation that Glenda Leeming makes of Auden and Isherwood: that they 'did not and perhaps could not put on stage the problems of working people who were poorer than the office clerk level'.<sup>35</sup> Leeming describes Mr and Mrs A's speech as 'calculated banality' while the playwrights fail to convince with 'parodying clichés'. (GL, 147) Duncan instils images of natural fertility into his dramatic language to avoid the association of working life with banality. *Birth*'s Connie is endowed with pure passion and poetry. However the song-like repetition of the words 'wash it away' (B, 13) links life with death and brings to the drama the potential act

<sup>34</sup>W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6* (London, Faber & Faber, 1936). Hereafter referred to as *Ascent*. As well as being comparable to *Ascent*, *Birth* is also similar to Ronald Gow and Walter Greenwood's 1935 play *Love On The Dole*, adapted from Greenwood's novel, which focused on depressed family conditions.

<sup>35</sup>Glenda Leeming, *Poetic Drama* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989), p. 150. Hereafter referred to as GL in the text.

of abortion. The title of *Unburied Dead* refers to the life *in* death existence of the mine-workers and in both plays the action and poetry imply the deathly condition of the poor. In the first scene of *Dead*, six miners attend Mr H's deathbed. 'Masked', they '[*approach in circle*]'. (UD, 15) Appearing as 'Ghosts', their divided speech confirms that:

We are what. A few lonely men only--  
                   know we are:  
 dead. (UD, 16)

Duncan's characters verge upon caricature in sections of the plays because their poeticised dialect emphasises a particular perception of their class-type more than of their character per se. Duncan used sprung rhythm for 'heightening idiomatic speech', occasionally 'using punctuation to accentuate certain metrical pauses for the actor'<sup>36</sup> which appear for example in Jan's lines: 'and bed. pyre of/what's in life labelled. ecstasy./and in death. oblivion'. (UD, 45) Eliot used similar rhythms in *Gerontion*. When Leafy's speeches in *Dead*, interpolate embellished language, they jar against the socially nuanced context of the play:

And as close as sheep's  
 lips march cropping  
 the fond atmosphere  
 hugs us, fugs us. (UD, 20)

In fact, much of the speech in the play is scattered with heavy alliteration, onomatopoeia and phraseology that seems too baroque for the speakers:

4TH COLLIER: Sorrow's the grain we saps get sucked up  
                                   along,  
                                   Grief's merely the knot we grow out of or  
                                   go out on,  
                                   buried in warped wood... . (UD, 63)

Jan's speech shifts between prosaic Derbyshire dialect such as 'Bet he'd 'a glad of 'em an hour afore,/fore roof fell in and flattened him' (UD,11) and, 'The harvest so divided, the dividend assured,/-- philanthropic distribution/to imaginary gulls'.<sup>37</sup> (UD, 30) Leafy is also given lines that are, in contrast, simple and effective:

Look! Here comes your mother up the hill  
 full of moan, ready to pour on over you. (UD, 25)

So are certain lines spoken by Mrs. H, where the alliteration is less dense and has more vigour:

<sup>36</sup>Wahl, op. cit., No. 20, 1973, pp. 54 & 51.

<sup>37</sup>Duncan's lampoon *Pimp, Skunk and Profiteer*, written in April 1939, hones the stereotype down to the caricature with more refined a desire to apprehend the person who represents the mass or trade, as closely as possible. The characters include a *Conservative, Labour, Banker* and *Drunkard*.

I can see him now  
plain as pike:  
stomping in,  
sitting down  
swearing for slippers staring at him. (UD, 44)

These latter passages appear less contrived as they report the characters' concerns more directly. Conversely, 'philanthropic distribution' is overly genteel and abstracted, detracting from the conviction in Jan's voice and the audience's reasonable expectations of identification with his role.

Jan and Scholar are given more voice though they act against individuation by supporting mass action for most of *Dead*. Scholar, who at first believes 'you can become both martyr and/married' (UD, 70) decides eventually that he cannot follow Jan's promotion of selfless action as well and decides to escape to a stimulating life. But life for the individual means death to his participation in community life. The community's representatives, the family or miners, are stereotyped to contrast with the dissenter's agency and difference. As with the miners, the roles of father and mother in *Birth*, are largely prescribed. These elements inevitably work against individuation of the social being. Because of their contrasting elements of form and language, neither play shows a full commitment to realism.

A sense of Duncan's diminishing social commitment also comes from how he makes reasoning for persistent strike action futile. Action is overridden by Scholar's sentiment. To 'observe impartially with no attachment' (UD, 68), as Jan says, merely employs a logic which is not adequate to Duncan's image of reality because it mistakenly assumes that humans are not contradictory. Even though the logic of the commonality is overridden, Scholar himself institutes a synthesis when Jan offers 'here's my identity'. (UD, 75) Duncan aims for a utopian interweaving and balance of emotion and intellect, passion and reason. This is illustrated through Scholar's and by Jan's combined commentary at the end of the last scene where sentences are shared and overlap:

SCHOLAR: A phrase will  
penetrate, precipitate,  
JAN: weave.  
SCHOLAR: for no known reason. (UD, 77)

However, the utopian idea of personal victory is actually dispelled because while both Scholar and Jan embody aspects of a holistic personality, it is not a practical embodiment because their aims are too different to function realistically. Instead they merge at 'the point when desire and the desirable exist'. (UD, 77)

Duncan presents characters that are given hope but it is through merging which does not lead to resolution. Instead irresolution is emphasised in the unfinished last

sentence 'there is no finish of/[*Fade out*']. (UD, 77) What is interesting is that this irresolution reflects the dialogue and exchange of a creative and critical consciousness seen to be at work through the various characters. We can envisage the characters as possible articulations of Duncan himself because he had partially experienced contrasting environments through disguise. The experience obviously helped him to stretch the boundaries of the miners' world in the drama, but only through poetry, which describes a sexually-liberated utopia – an utopia that is not realised in concrete action in either play. The language of dreams, poetry and fantasy prevails over logic, voicing more easily the frustrations and desires of the characters, but in the context of the action they appear to be an escape route and a refuge for those who lack conviction.

Though irresolute, it is fair to classify Duncan's writing as utopian because it embodies the dualism or double edged-sword of utopian thought. The dream in *Birth* signifies how things should or could have happened and because it is visualised dramatically the scenario is not ruled out but remains as a utopian possibility. The dream action is shown to be less socially realistic but it happens in a parallel universe of which Connie is also an inhabitant. Contemporary, practical history is not acceptable to her. On the down side, in order to give the author a voice, the characters are sacrificed in terms of their credibility. Jan tells Scholar in the last scene 'Safe to wake up, now your last mask, meaningless' (UD, 74) but on the brink of Scholar's emergence from a masked existence, his identity becomes that of a babbling earth-worshipper, who is only able to speak in verse. As both voices merge into incoherence, the writing positions itself on a boundary point. The point is one of possibility and impossibility. It is also the point of a utopian expression that is always full of antagonism and difficulty. Difficulty arises because utopian thought is able to incorporate both dissatisfaction and hope.

Utopian thought is constituted in Duncan's plays by scenes which move through fantasy to the point of desire. Levitas' study of utopia through ideas and writing identifies desire as crucial to its shifting role. To envisage alternative values depends on the conceiver having desire. Therefore alternative values may also present the 'merely possible rather than inevitable'.<sup>38</sup> They may display elements of implausibility 'without any necessary move forward into action' and have less sense of a literal goal.<sup>39</sup> Duncan dramatises desire by the characters' yearnings and striving for alternatives but the striving also addresses the debate and contradictions sur-

<sup>38</sup>Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Herts, Philip Allan, 1990), p. 197.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 196.

rounding realistic socioeconomic triumph. So Duncan's expression remains utopian but is similar to Klaic's identification of a 'new paradigm' (DK, 69) of utopianism. Modernists such as Huxley and Orwell distinguished the new paradigm by a manner of writing wherein 'whatever utopian energy or hope remains it is by and large expressed in a cautious manner or dystopian form'. (DK, 68)

The same caution is apparent in Duncan's fictions which no longer have the totalitarian modelling of *Pacifist*. *Rexist* also addressed contradiction by satirising the horror and ruinous motifs of popular utopian ambition. In Duncan's earliest work, the swift transition from idealism to diminishing social commitment is evident. He is clearly most in transition in the plays. For example, Scholar, though a scholar, is not drawn as superior or as a natural aristocrat who is antithetical to the worker. Total superiority was adverse to the promptings of Duncan's sympathetic imagination which characteristically attempted to fuse and integrate. *Dead* posits amalgams as alternatives; whilst his own presence in the dramatic texts, as the shadowy Jan, is elusively shape-shifting and transforms into other creatures.

The interaction between Scholar and Jan conveys a holistic existence wherein each portion of the human's divided psyche acknowledges the incongruity of its other. *This Way To The Tomb* (1946) was to present a more obviously Freudian view of the irrational body threatened by a turmoil of unconscious and destructive drives and impulses. Eventually Scholar drops out to a location beyond the confines of the text. He is caught at the point of the imposition of choice: reform or sexual fulfilment. In Klaic's words, both dramas describe 'a condition that appears on the ruins of misfired utopian schemes, [which] nevertheless implies utopia as a subverted or suppressed desire, an initial impulse left unfulfilled'. (DK, 3)

*Birth* perceives the female body as a utopian location of pure sensuality. There is a misfiring because the utopian scheme of birth cannot be negotiated within the reality of the subject which is delineated and structured by social institutions and can only 'wash it away'. Nevertheless, the temporal format of the play is experimental and the dream sequence represents a universal, undefiled utopian time. Connie embodies inner indulgence and desire. Her body signifies a wordless ecstasy, defiant of logic and which, through its celebration in the dream, presents a scene of dissent. Her defiance works in contrast to the élitist sentiments inherent in Duncan's portrayal of Connie's family in other scenes. Duncan is impelled to subject these sentiments, by implication, to criticism. The irony of some judgements is obvious, for example, in Jack's 'People like us ain't supposed to breed'. (B, 13) Duncan disowns a singular viewpoint and at the same time makes the drama the site where he locates his own personality and its internal conflicts.

At this time, Duncan followed his natural curiosity, moving between different forms of expression: from political pamphlets to poetry, diary and drama. The exploration of ideal modes of living connects to his own experience in which he experimented with and explored different lifestyles. All his explorations entail instruction by a father-figure or guru. Events during this part of Duncan's life seem to fit into a pattern of despair and redemption which is also pervasive in the writing from this time. The search for a niche or haven of truth repeatedly reaches a point of doubt or disillusion. But the search is ongoing and doubt is redeemed by each following project Duncan embarked upon.

#### *iv. The Townsman Manifesto*

In July 1937, Ronald and Rose-Marie eloped and settled at an old bungalow at Welcombe in North Devon. Nearby was the ramshackle farm, Mead, in which Ronald and Bunny had just invested a part of their inheritance. Duncan also had his eye on West Mill, nestled in the Welcombe Mouth with its own beach and cove. This was a place where Lytton Strachey had found solitude before them and it was a haven for the writers Gerald and Gamel Brenan who holidayed there. Nearby were the Partridges as well as Henry Williamson. What was to be the Duncan's family home for forty years lay within an already established literary environment. Their eventual self-sufficient installation at West Mill cottage – with no electricity, bathroom or other amenities – is described partially and anecdotally in Part 3 of *Islands*, but the landscape and surroundings are more significantly foregrounded in the fourth and fifth sections: 'A Sandwich for the Wind' and 'Flotsam and Jetsam'. The fourth documents the planning and subsequent establishment of Duncan's utopian-style community farm and its premature failure.

This narrative begins as Duncan chases his horse through the brambles of the valley at Welcombe. The narrator constructs a picture of rural wilderness but against it sets memories of his more sombre preoccupations of the time. There follows a lengthy and doom-laden reaction to the declaration of war, in which the contemporary impact is evoked by use of the present tense: 'Vox Populi now says that England is prepared. The oracle announces, the horizon darkens'. (AMAI, 209) Duncan goes on to express an antagonism to the status quo that is characteristic of the inter-war generation. Unable to resist retrospective summary he leaps forward to:

all of us were affected by a vague political restlessness ...though we had allegiances they were to trends of thought rather than to territories... All were equally incapable of singing the national anthem. And for the word democracy we had derision. (AMAI, 210)

It is surprising that the above section should appear almost unchanged as late as the 1944 introduction to Duncan's popular treatise on self-sufficiency, *The Journal of a Husbandman*. Even at this stage, he displays characteristic cynicism, in this case towards English nationalism. These pessimistic sentiments insert Duncan into an English milieu which examined the language of politics and culture with much abstract intellectualising but was, unsurprisingly, lost for any words to vouch for that culture.

Ceadel elucidates the historical reasons for the displacement suffered by this generation, in particular:

Duncan, Spottiswoode and Spreckley had all lost their fathers during infancy – in the latter two cases, in the great war – and rebelled against the values of their conservative, patriotic upbringing.... Taken as a whole, the younger generation of Thirties pacifists represented within the British tradition of dissent a transitional stage between the nonconformist conscience and the beatniks. (MC, pp. 231-232)

The experience of historical transition contributed to the way Duncan's writing and lifestyle inhabited a position between utopian and dystopian expression in this period.

In terms of lifestyle, by early 1939 and during the build up to the Second World War, Duncan was joined at Gooseham Hall in the Welcombe Valley by other objectors, writers, artists and individualists (one was Nigel Spottiswoode). Their endeavour to establish self-sufficiency in rural, war-time England was recorded not only by Duncan in the published *Journal*, but also in an anonymous diary now stored at The University of Texas.<sup>40</sup> Rose-Marie and Bianca's diaries from these years recall the everyday dynamics of their lives: the community at the periphery. For Bianca, Ronald figures more sparsely than Rose-Marie, Mole or the Brenans, for example: 'R is working at Gooseham a lot'.<sup>41</sup> (31 Jul. 1939) Rose-Marie, also outside the core of male Gooseham workers, provides an interesting commentary which sounds like a combination of her husband's reports, mutual discussion and her own observations and opinions:

At the moment the people are without one single military force, and after all, in one's own experience - believing in something is such a help. They are at 6 and 7 and dissatisfied (sic) as a result, (RMD, 31 Jan. 1940)

also:

Went up to get fags in the evening, I helped R water the garden. 9 o'clock news, précis of Churchill's speech in the H. of C. 30,000 men killed. It really is dreadful. New announcer, sounds as tho' Joseph has been given the boot. Owing to the rumours that are circulating the locality it looks as though R may be put in jail. (RMD, 4 Jun. 1940)

<sup>40</sup> Anon., *The Annals of Gooseham* (unpub.), 1939. I presume the author was Richard March as it is not in Duncan's hand and other members are mentioned in the third person. The diary was a surprise discovery within a folder of unitemised material. HRHRC

<sup>41</sup> See Bianca Duncan's and Rose Marie Duncan's diaries, 1938 - 1944 (uncat.). RDF

Thematically, this extract moves from trivial matters to reportage of international events. War-time events are pulled back to the rather myopic and gossipy region of Rose-Marie's domestic sphere ('dreadful') while the narrative continues with an attempt to assign to local events the portentousness equated with war ('Owing to the rumours...').

The above documents form a co-extant multiple testimony about the social structuring, dynamics and encoding of war-time consciousness, as well as life in a rural community. Though Duncan started the journal *Townsmen*, wrote two more short plays and some poetry during this period, the emphasis was on practical work. He remembers that 'we were sick of ideas which produced tepid flat pamphlets bulging with abstractions and suppositions'. (AMAI, 211) Founding a community may have been a final attempt to invest his faith in socialist practices even though doubts were already apparent in *Dead* and *Rexist*. The narrator of the autobiography displays a discouraging view of all past endeavours but dualism and doubt is also written in to the present of those endeavours. Thus it is unclear whether disillusionment with idealistic politics, which appears to have set in after India, was something that Duncan, by establishing the community in 1939, was consciously fighting to overcome.

A characteristic lack of clarity about the project arises because we see the writer's utopian desire to rejuvenate culture – to state or visualise how things *should* be – transferred in his writing, from confronting areas needing reform, to reform within the individual who will gain awareness of him/herself. Individual reform uses artistic means as the medium for enlightenment. All this is inscribed in *Townsmen* in a format Duncan obviously enjoyed: the manifesto. Duncan originated the idea for the magazine as early as 1936 when he talked to Britten about it, and it was first produced at the Devon farm in the years just before the start of the war. The first number was brought out in January 1938 and printed in London. It would run quarterly editions until 1945 during which time, under pressure from censorship and the impact of Duncan's own shifting priorities, it was transformed into a periodical on agriculture and economics, re-named *Scythe*. Duncan, with many others among the British population had already decided not to participate in the defence of the realm and the journal can be seen partly as a forum for other artists who were in protest and out of convention. The first issue included an artistic manifesto, work by e. e. cummings, Ezra Pound, the Japanese Vou Club poets, Olga Rudge, and Duncan himself, as well as reproductions of paintings by William Johnstone.

Surprisingly, elements from the magazine's first editorial, which was a manifesto on the nature of art, have resonance with the narratives about the community farm. Elements of the editorial are related to a sense of cultural



primitivism which is in some ways reflected in Duncan's utopian urge to create an island-like, 'self'-sufficient community, in which 'self' might develop in new and oppositional ways. With the onset of war, it is understandable that the discourse of art appeared increasingly elitist, with publications such as Clive Bell's *Civilisation*, Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and The Reading Public*, and *Scrutiny's* policy (though by now in decline) of cultivating a superior sensibility. Literature and art now appeared in a different light and were of course historically subject to the decrease of printing and publishing facilities. Artists, in the context of the threat of wartime destruction, would have seemed increasingly redundant amid the drive for 'function' and the war effort. Indeed, by 1940, 'Rose Marie and my sister now had to print the magazine on a Gestetner machine at West Mill'. (AMAI, 205)

There is clear anxiety about the redundancy of intellectuals as well as antagonism toward mass effort in Duncan's first editorial, a manifesto for 'valid' work. The standards for art are stated clearly: that it should not have mass appeal or it would become part of the mass and their (therefore false,) morality:

THE INDIVIDUAL is in so far as his experiences are personal. Ready-made literary standards, mass-produced moral values and best-selling political parties imply and make for a static, fixed, dead automaton.<sup>42</sup>

The editorial corresponds with some of T. S. Eliot's views and also harks back to Wyndham Lewis's philosophies and the kind of social comments seen in *Blast* where the formation of the individual takes precedence over societal grouping:

We are against the glorification of the 'people' as we are against snobbery.

The 'poor' are detestable animals!

Blast presents an art of Individuals.<sup>43</sup>

Duncan's criteria are formed out of nostalgia for an earlier, more active phase of Modernity:

TRADITION is valuable in reference to the present. Valid creative work can add to tradition. (TM, 1)

It is clear that Duncan was greatly influenced by Ezra Pound at this stage, having discussed the journal with him at his home in Rapallo in 1937, gathering introductions to other artists, such as Léger and Cocteau, whom he hoped would contribute to *Townsmen*. He made a second visit, joined by Rose Marie, in the early part of

<sup>42</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Editorial', *Townsmen*, I, 1 (January 1938), p.1, RDF. Hereafter referred to as *Editorial* and TM.

<sup>43</sup>Unsigned, but undoubtedly by Wyndham Lewis, 'Long Live the Vortex!', *Blast* No. 1 (June 1914), ed., Wyndham Lewis, np. RDF

1938. From letters from this period (as early as 1937), it is obvious that Pound had envisioned the magazine as a vehicle for his own revival:

Dr/Dunc/

Started looking for 'M. Pom=Pom'; which I think wd. be better verse contribution from me for FIRST issue, ( as giving the NOTE/)  
than the rather sprawly stuff I have sent, I mean keep these poems til later issues...

//

For yr reserve of E.P. verse.

[ A POEM']

...There are several stingers, also A.A. or the American Alphabet.  
might be printed by you as a retrospect, of what E.P. wrote at the time and no one THEN dared print.<sup>44</sup>

He goes on to offer suggestions about its format and cover design. It is a sign of Duncan's sustained optimism and drive that he was bravely unconcerned about the eminence of the mentor-figures he approached with his ideas. The young man evidently discussed *Townsmen* with his old Cambridge tutor. F. R. Leavis acknowledges Pound's influence with accurate caution in a letter to Duncan from 1938:

I thought the enterprise a desperate one. You simply have to have a sizeable body-guard of stout, and reliable people... I see how you were driven to get back *faute de mieux*, on Pound and his B [illeg.]. But the trouble about Pound (& his Co.) is that he's not merely not what you want; he hasn't even a sales - appeal of any kind now I'm afraid. He has been at his tricks too long and the 1920s are over.<sup>45</sup>

Leavis's instinctive reaction was accurate. The magazine always had minimal circulation. Duncan remembers 'Our subscription list was almost the same length as our list of contributors'. (AMAI, 205) By affiliating himself with an earlier generation of writers and artists, such as Pound and the Vorticists, Duncan became nostalgically concerned with revitalising past which the 1940s inevitably moved away from. The editor paid tribute to Lewis in a piece in the first edition titled 'BLAST! and About and About' which calls *Scrutiny* and *Criterion* 'constipated' (TM, 26) and demands the reprinting of Lewis's work. His final statement is 'BLAST was an orgasm: to-day conspicuous by lack of'. (TM, 27) Though Duncan met Eliot in 1937 Pound took on the role of the father or guru at this stage, supplanting Leavis whom Duncan had also turned to for support. However, by its second number, *Townsmen* featured an advertisement for *The Criterion* and the third included Eliot's 'Five Points on Dramatic Writing'. Having stated his objectives in a journal which depended on renowned contributors as well as new writers Duncan possibly realised he could not afford to split his literary affiliations.

<sup>44</sup>Letter, Ezra Pound to Duncan (July, 1937). HRHRC

<sup>45</sup>Letter, F.R. Leavis to Duncan (1 Sept.1938). RDF

*Townsmen* can be read in concurrence with its context of production: the community farm. To do so raises the issue of how Duncan transmuted art into life and vice versa. What emerges is a notable parallel between Duncan's position of authority as *Townsmen* editor and the autocratic role he adopted over those working at Gooseham. The community farm with its motley crew of objectors and exiles endured until 1942 when it dispersed. Asked if the 'acute personal differences that sometimes develop, can be surmounted?' (in a short interview in the *Peace News* in 1946), Duncan replied 'Only by the removal of tongues or the order of silence'.<sup>46</sup> At this point Duncan was evidently still perceived as a spokesperson for pacifist ideology but by this time, his waning interest in community was connected to an increased focus on the concept of the individual. An advocacy of individual agency is presented in the manifesto and the author appropriates it to triumph over the actual contradiction between his creation of a community and self-extrication from that community. The *Editorial* upholds a regard for 'personal evaluation', a 'hierarchy of values' and disdains 'mass-produced moral values'. (*TM*, 1) Duncan applied these principles to his social reality:

Finch asked me what I would do if, by vote, the community wished to sell a tractor and I wished to sell a horse. I replied that the horse would be sold. (*AMAI*, 253)

The demand that Duncan's personal methodology be upheld on the farm only functioned to dissolve any democratic processes and ultimately disturbed the spirit of collectivity. Writing on the experience years later, Duncan was still of the opinion that autocratic systems operated best for agrarian work: 'But in a farm, efficiency is largely a matter of quick decisions, often against advice, and anything like democracy is entirely inadequate'. (*AMAI*, 253) There is an interface between his notion of the solitary, independent consciousness required for the creative process and the increasing need to sustain a centralised presence within the community project. The interface reveals some irony in that Duncan's self-centralisation ultimately led to his place on the periphery of the original project and its network of relationships. Being placed on a periphery is an instance of how Duncan articulates his self-image as one riddled with irony.

By the end of the war, *Townsmen* had become *Scythe* and its contributors were agriculturalists and economists. Low distribution and high costs contributed to *Townsmen's* dissolution as a coherent forum for radical art. Duncan was now alone on his island-farm. Even his good friend Nigel, the last objector, had left to join the RAF. Despite this, the reader of these events is provided with an interesting example

<sup>46</sup>Ronald Duncan interviewed, 'Ronald Duncan on Community' in *CBCO Bulletin* (August, 1946), p. 51. *PPU*

of how Duncan's attempt to be central inevitably results in his displacement. The attempt reflects the over-complexity and ambivalence which underlies his artistic manifesto. 'Editorial' cites the individual as being as of prime import in the production of art. The human-being is a reader not a worker, and one whose independence brings general wakefulness rather than philanthropy:

VALID WORK CAN produce in the reader a state of particular awareness which may stimulate a general wakefulness to his environment... capable of producing an independent consciousness. In short a unified consciousness, an individual. Mankind can stand little impact with reality; but the individual only IS when he contacts reality. (TM, 1)

This implies that the recognition of 'ultimate reality' in art is only given to those of superior sensibility who are able to overcome the inherent paradox involved in contacting reality and becoming an individual, yet already being individual enough to recognise his own 'is'-ness at the point of contact. The radical tone of 'Editorial' lies in establishing individuality by contacting reality yet if the only 'function' is to 'present valid work', and the definition of validity is merely a state of 'particular awareness', it seems that the tenets for *knowing* 'validity' are far too subjectivised and distant from the consensus demanded by a manifesto. As with others, Duncan had begun to feel the strain of the 'collective'. Art for him was now a transcendental medium, aspirational and escapist in its function.

The escapist strain is evident by 1939 in the way that Duncan's pacifism had changed from the intolerance of minority exploitation shown in *Pacifist* to become generally oppositional. In one *Townsmen* article he wrote approvingly of the way dictators used oratory in speeches, proposing that 'Hitler's answers to Mr. Roosevelt were an excursion in wit' and, 'Mussolini undoubtedly has an individual bite'.<sup>47</sup> *Townsmen* also included anti-Jewish views by Pound, who wrote 'Christianity is verminous with semitic infections'.<sup>48</sup> In 'Oratory and Censorship', Duncan mocks the stylistic errors of censorship, and draws attention to the practice of stifling radical views. By printing Pound's views, he initiates free speech. The fact that it tips over into the opposite of the magnanimity of *Pacifist* is indicative of the vacillating impulses inhabiting Duncan's personality. He was able to project qualities of rusticity and practical earthiness but traits of aristocratic lordliness mixed with his egalitarian motives. His idealistic project suffered from this contradiction.

<sup>47</sup>Ronald Duncan 'Oratory and Censorship', *Townsmen*, II, no. 7 (August, 1939), p. 13.

<sup>48</sup>Ezra Pound, 'Statues of Gods', *Townsmen* (August, 1939), p. 14.

## Conclusion

In the field of 1930s politics, it is difficult to identify Duncan with any clear-cut party line. Though he is sympathetic to pacifist and anti-Imperialist views during this time, his conclusions about the working classes and mass public eventually verged on cynical resignation. Even the title of the idealistic *Dead* conforms to the stock high-brow modernist view of the mass. The mine-workers are vitally unfulfilled and soulless implying that working-class life is a form of suicide or un-alive existence.<sup>49</sup> *Birth* presents more positively an anxiety about losing one's identity amongst the 'herd'. Unlike others, and probably because it was personally rooted, Duncan's anxiety never developed into any proposition for genocidal solutions; indeed, he satirised this view in the mode of Swift's *Modest Proposal* in the *Rexist Manifesto*.

We see that each of these works is constructed as a means of working through or representing conditions of personal suffering. All these texts are autobiographical displacements which structure the disciple/follower, saved/saviour myth and use the 'mass' to objectify his own sense of betrayal. Duncan's attempts to identify himself with the workers and dispossessed during his youth cannot be separated from his own sense of being an outsider of an unusual kind: he is a member of the middle class, with an unacknowledged royal bloodline on one side and very ordinary origins on the other. Paradoxically, he was never able to reconcile his own sense of difference with a true identification with the mass of workers whom he wished to redeem and it is this, intentionally or not, that depicts Duncan as an outsider with rather patronising views.

Duncan's pamphlets initially had a social function but he soon sought refuge in more personal writing albeit aimed at public consumption. The type of private, associative musings found in the diaries are moved into poetic drama. By the end of the 'thirties, Duncan wished to believe that art and culture would bestow taste on the masses. This hope distorted his philanthropic belief in the artist as social worker (one writing for the people), a position he had attempted to articulate in the plays. To do this he had had to create narratives which exposed the degradation of the masses and consequently his attitude became dystopian. The transition towards disillusioned, dystopian thought is clear in the dialectic of the dramas. This dialectic is particularly

<sup>49</sup>Duncan was to mobilise the phrases 'the unburied dead' and 'not all the dead are buried' into a maxim scattered through most of his subsequent texts. Aside from the Ibsen play 'When We Dead Awaken' (1899), its recurrence may be linked to the fact that Duncan would have read his father's notation of a short quotation by Oscar Wilde from a letter to Robert Ross from prison, November, 1896: 'Horrible are the dead when they rise from their tombs, the living who come out from tombs are more horrible still'. The quote occurs at the beginning of Duncan's father's play-draft entitled 'Too Late'. The 'manuscript of an unfinished play' (AMAI, 5) was one of the documents left by his father and passed on to Duncan during his visit to Frankfurt, Africa, in 1931.

prominent because the plays are structured as parables. They also incorporate a utopian vision as in the dreams envisaged by Connie and Scholar. However, while the dreams are ultimately unrealistic, the plays' endings leave little open to change and do not directly predict catastrophe.

Duncan's early plays are utopian in that such characters as Jan and Scholar embody aspects of Duncan's dream of a world without toil. Because the characters cannot pierce the limited walls of their class boundaries, formal boundaries remain and prevent ideas or characters from crossing over the lines set down by the rigid and depressing pattern of human existence, with a consequent move to dystopian pessimism.

This chapter has examined how components of Duncan's self-hood are inserted into various narrative contexts. This draws attention to the application of personal experience to art. There are many examples of this application in Duncan's early work and its getting in the way of his wish to speak objectively for the collective or for a social purpose. The early texts show the subject constantly caught in the act of self-conscious portraiture. In the diaries and letters there is the same desire to cohere. Self-consciousness is detectable everywhere and reveals how much Duncan's life is injected into his writing. The selves found within these texts: the philanthropist, the poet, the philosopher, the disciple, the banker, the miner and the farmer assign a double image of a community-member and island dweller. It is at the points of spontaneous conflict, either internally – as in the *Delhi Diary*, or with other 'enemies' – where what one may call a 'true' self, is most apparent.

### 3

## Acts of God: Drama of Struggle and Transcendence

### Part 1. Duncan's Poetic Drama Theory

#### *Introduction*

This chapter concentrates on plays by Duncan that were written and performed over the period 1943 to 1952. Despite this periodisation, Duncan's work features motifs and principles that appeared consistently throughout his writing career. For example, the motif of Christ characterised as an ordinary man appears in the 1950 play *Saint Spiv* and is only slightly modified in the television opera *The Rebel*, produced fourteen years later. The lack of conspicuous development was to place Duncan in many ways against major literary trends of the twentieth century. His parabolic, poetic style increasingly alienated him from developing cultural movements in the early 1950s, but because religious themes and the use of verse were central to Duncan's post-war plays, they earned him a place in the 1940s verse-drama revival.

As is evident from early archival manuscripts, Duncan was not only a poet, but had always shown an interest in drama (he wrote over forty-two full-length plays). My study from this point on develops the critical representation of Duncan mainly as a dramatic writer, because his plays convey with more force and coherence, the *Zeitgeist* of England after the Second World War. *Tomb* was a great success with post-war audiences. Even his less commercially successful plays such as *Stratton* considered topics which preoccupied modern theatre, such as the division of identity, aspects of performance itself and the individual's connection to society.

This chapter takes an overview of the cultural phenomenon of the verse-drama movement against which Duncan's early successes, *This Way To The Tomb* (1946), *Stratton* (1949) and, more peripherally, *Our Lady's Tumbler* (1951), might be placed.<sup>1</sup> By his use of archaic sets, poetic language and legend, Duncan is commonly placed alongside dramatists such as Nicholson, Ridler, MacNeice and Fry. It is also clear that he kept himself aware of Eliot's literary career during the 1940s

<sup>1</sup>Hereafter these texts will be referred to as *Tomb* (TWTTT), *Tumbler* (OLT) and *Stratton* (S).

and thus his role is explored with special comparison to Eliot's work within the field. Whilst not attached to particular movements such as Imagism or Vorticism, by the mid-'40s Duncan showed more ideological similarity with Eliot as a dramatist than Pound as a poet, though he venerated both their styles.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of 'transcendence' is important because Duncan's plays transcend naturalism with elements of the supernatural and address universal themes which are investigated through his poetic and dramatic theories on language, music, form and on the function of the poet in the theatre. Correlating his theoretical vision to the fact that the plays also existed 'commercially' invites a further analysis of how they interact with other narratives in the archive. In Part 2, interaction is shown by discovering evidence of certain intertextual relationships. Evidence from autobiographical records highlights Duncan's need both to make money and to have mentors operating as 'approvers' of his work. The pressures of the 'real' (not merely publication) time of writing can be traced through dating letters from patrons and is also detected in anecdotal stories of the artwork's initiating circumstances and inspiration. Here again the life can be seen to affect the work.

The religious theme is overt in *Tomb* and *Tumbler*, whose action is orientated towards a transcendental 'Other' (God) and wherein, virtue and vice are defined in relation to pride and humility. The plays disclose Duncan's efforts to write about recognisable 'types' who are redeemed by overcoming contemporary superficiality and by discovering their eternal soulfulness. Antony declares in his final Canzone, 'Nor can you say the soul's inseparable/From the body and is to it harmony to the lyre'. (TWTTT, 97) However, what emerges from the spoken verse and in the course of the action, is an unconventional and basically irredeemable character. St. Antony, the Tumbler and Stratton express the dilemma of integrating the spiritual and the physical human impulse. They suffer and struggle with desire, their boundedness to history and a sense of incompleteness and, as a result, traditional dramatic conventions are exploded.

Thus, while the plays have Christian themes of redemption they are analogous to contemporary life. The Christian ideal of transcending sins such as temptation and pride is unattained and disillusion with what prevents transcendence – modern democracy and its indifference – is also articulated. Duncan is able to manipulate the discourse of religion in order to express tension particularly manifest in society in the immediate post-war period. Voices within the discourse speak of

<sup>2</sup>I will go on explain the correspondences with theories presented in Eliot's essays in *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth, Penguin and Faber, 1953), *Selected Essays* (London, Faber, 1949), *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*, (London, Faber, 1933) and *Notes Towards A Definition of Culture* (London, Faber, 1948).



psychological and existential anxiety and troubled national identity. Consequently, during this period, Duncan engaged most fully with Britain's *Zeitgeist* and achieved his greatest popularity as a dramatist.

At this time, Duncan's poetic skill was employed most forcefully through drama and therein he was able to incorporate a more complex and interesting multi-layering of textual voices, reinforcing the impression of a chameleon-like writer. The audience discerns his awareness and adaptation of popular cultural codes while he continued to criticise them through different voices, some more personalised than others.

The poetry in Duncan's drama highlights antithesis and subjects in conflict as much as in other literary forms. However, stage-writing and autobiographical prose are genres which are conventionally mimetic. Mimesis comes into play in theatre because it presents embodied separated characters and their bounded movement in space. In a life-story mimesis of the external world as a referent is expected of the narrator. It is difficult for a playwright to artistically justify or make comprehensible the disembodiment of a character or to un-bind its engagements with space, conventional visual signifiers or speech-inflections. So is it, equally, for an autobiographer or writer of biography to undo conventional techniques of validation and authentic identity. If these conventions are challenged it disperses omniscience and un-makes the subject. These effects occur alongside conventional constructions in Duncan's art and instead of limiting the boundaries of its world, present a more intriguing view of his subjectivity and his art.

### *i. The 1940s*

Archival records show that by 1944 Duncan was writing the dramatic masque about St. Antony. His autobiography dates its conception as early as 1941 during a visit to Hurstbourne, the house and parkland owned by Lord Portsmouth in Hampshire.<sup>3</sup> Rose-Marie's 1941 diary does not mention the masque's composition or his visit. One may assume, however, that he worked on the enterprise while war was raging and after the community farm had dispersed. These factors probably contributed to Duncan's characterisation of Antony as an isolated and forsaken man. *Tomb* is one of Duncan's many texts dominated by themes of guilt, judgement and hypocrisy. Though he did not participate in combat he was now a landowner who had control over his own territory, a factor that preserved his status as a bourgeois individual both during war-time and post-war shortages.

<sup>3</sup>See Ronald Duncan, 'Introduction', *Collected Plays* (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), p. vii. Other early citations are found in drafts referring to 1944, inserted in a 1941 cover of *Townsman* with reference to the 'Anti-Masque' dated 1945. A 1944 letter from E. Blunden (5th Sept.) mentions Portsmouth. *HRHRC*

*How to Make Enemies*, covers the years 1941 to 1958. It begins in war-time with a narrator who is still characterised as in conflict. Looking back he re-iterates, 'Each of us is not one person but several people'. (HTME, 115) Intense conflict is a common trait of Duncan's dramatic characters of the '40s and early '50s who extend the ideas of the earlier plays, *Unburied Dead* and *Birth*, by playing out the rift between the sensual and the spiritual. Antony's nature is depicted in terms of its different facets and partialities. Inferring personal conflict, Duncan states in *Enemies* that (in 1941), 'It was largely to keep Briony amused that I went back to writing' (HTME, 19) and 'I did not want to be a poet but I knew that for me the only way out of the prison of my self was through poetry'. (HTME, 26). He constructs an image of himself as reluctant genius which enhances the sense that his position as writer is paradoxical. He both relinquishes and takes responsibility for his creativity and this complicates the idea of his authority.

The theme of spirituality spans *Tomb* and *Stratton*. It appears in poems such as 'Christ, Is This Thy Cross, Tossed?' (1944) and 'Ascension' (1947). Its recurrence hints that the '40s were a time of spiritual evaluation and introspection for Duncan while such evaluation also led to a sense of self-defeat. He writes poetry that articulates a search for faith with lines such as, 'It was not that I raised myself to Him/But that He reached down for me'. (CP, 89) But it is counterbalanced by poems like 'Air Raid' (1944), 'Strophe and Anti-Strophe at Waterloo' (1944), 'The Mongrel' (1944) – which states 'doubt is all my faith' and 'I will deny my eyes' (CP, 76) – and 'Epitaph to An Unknown Passenger' (1948). These all contain cynical and secularised views of mortality, death and war. Even though Duncan wrote about the perception of mystery and search for 'union' (or *religio*<sup>4</sup>) as connection, knowledge or enlightenment, at the same time a disengagement with conventional religious discourse is part of this. No clear alternatives are offered – only an equivalent indulgence in despair and nihilism.

*Enemies* tells of how the success of *Lucretia* and *Tomb* in 1946, increased the consciousness of himself as a public figure. During these years Duncan formulated his own doctrines about art and his work involved a greater contemplation of the role of the poet and personal morality than of social political campaigns. Duncan's thinking on convention, morals, God and the integrated personality takes a different course from the early 1950s; and, in the mid-'50s he was to move towards a more

<sup>4</sup>See *Enemies*, p. 386. The notion of being religious by feeling 'connection' arises when Duncan describes man's ability to contemplate his own being in the world as opposed to his everyday, habitual or unconscious, socio-politically defined existence. He thus describes as religious any articulation of this wonderment or awareness, poetry being an example, 'If religious meant, 'to connect' how could any poet not be religious?' (HTME, 156) Because 'connect'-ing also signifies 'the individual fumbling towards some attitude to the universe' (HTME, 386) then 'religious' becomes a vague umbrella term for any type of reasoning.

obviously personalised structure of fantasy centred on infidelity and romantic betrayal.

## *ii. Duncan's Poetic/Dramatic Theory*

Duncan's philosophy of the nature of poetry and, more generally, of the process of creative writing, is expounded in critical essays, articles and autobiographical writing at all stages of his life. What is significant is that his views have crystallised by the early '50s, as any commentary after that merely repeats or emphasises what he had inscribed most succinctly in previous years.<sup>5</sup> His ideas on 'Literacy', appearing in an article in 1948, were unchanged by the time they were reproduced for revision notes for his daughter Briony in the early 1960s. His essay on *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) contained ideas that were repeated in three more essays on opera. These in turn comprised material that was to be re-printed in slightly edited form well into the mid-'50s.<sup>6</sup> His commentary on the worthiness of the poetry of Pound and Eliot against the 'subjective hosannahs' of other *vers libre* poets was still being offered for publication in memoir form in 1981.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, he cannot be said to adhere to a specific poetic movement or religious creed, unlike Eliot's particular grounding in Anglo-Catholicism which established more consistency of ideology and approach.

By the early '50s, Duncan had had enough practical experience to write extensively and with conviction of his dream about a particular sort of exclusive theatre. He incorporated theory and criticism in essays such as 'Poetry and The Contemporary Theatre' (1952) and 'Write with Both Hands' (1953). The brief success of poetic drama made the movement recognisable as a contemporary cultural force and allowed Duncan, from within this framework, to make definitive statements about the philosophy of poetry, the poet's proper role in society and life in general. A focus on these aspects will show how conventionally Duncan proposed ideas on form, literary tradition and disciplined technique. They were all to be used to lyrically express mankind's timeless problems. Such conventions foreground Duncan's own style and position as a poet within a wider literary tradition of 'great' writers. Contemporary history and its issues are less significant within Duncan's philosophy as he

<sup>5</sup>See Ronald Duncan, 'What is Poetry?', draft (1966), *RDF*. See also 'Introduction' to the *Collected Plays* (1971), which reproduces views first explicated in articles of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

<sup>6</sup>See Ronald Duncan, 'Libretti: Some Technical Aspects', 'Adolescent Opera' and 'An Answer to Auden', all published in *Opera* magazine during 1951.

<sup>7</sup>Excerpts from 'The Poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot' draft (1949) are reused in Duncan's essay on Pound: 'A Poet's Poet' [wr. 1950] and re-appear in a version for his Austrian lecture tour in 1973. He used the same anecdotes and opinions in the 'Memoir' versions (of both Pound and Eliot) of 1961 and 1981. *RDF*

espouses universal symbolism and derides the ephemeral taste of a contemporary 'mass' audience. However, he wrote in order to convert an audience to his views, and part of that mass were the spectators who flocked to see his first West End play.

### *iii. Post-War Verse Drama*

Like Eliot, Duncan continued to write drama in verse after the war and should therefore be aligned with those writing within that convention. During the late '40s and early '50s Duncan was often grouped with Fry for interviews or reviews of plays and publications.<sup>8</sup> Duncan links himself to Fry in order to both construct and destroy the credibility of their alignment, for instance when a revue was proposed for 1947, 'Accordingly, Martin Browne asked Eliot, Fry and myself to lunch with him at the Etoile'. (HTME, 171) Duncan stated rather unkindly in retrospect that by the early '50s, 'the success of Fry's *The Lady's Not For Burning* put the clock back'. (HTME, 385)

In terms of style, the verse drama revival after the Second World War is so disparate it can only be viewed against the wider backdrop of conventions for staging reality (as theatre does by its process of defining itself for and against realistic, prosaic modes). In recent history, the precursors of naturalism would include Zola, Ibsen, Shaw and Rattigan; whilst against this, since the beginning of the century, experimental techniques had taken different lines of development. Leeming identifies poetic theatre as emerging from these – more specifically, the religious church festival and mystery play and the more expressionist political social drama of Auden and Isherwood.<sup>9</sup>

Religious topics appear in many of Duncan's plays, such as, *Ora Pro Nobis*, *St. Peter*, *The Urchin*, *Seven Deadly Virtues*, *The Cardinal*, *The Rebel*, *Sloshed*, *Judas*, *The Janitor* and *The Rabbit Race*. The topics range from the discovery of Christ's spirit within ordinary figures to a debate on definitions of vice. The material was usually developed in idealistic romantic styles and enhanced by poetic language and music. This is most obvious in *Tomb*, *Tumbler* and *Abelard and Heloise* which all contain sung parts. There is recurring interest in figures such as Christ, saints and Judas and the theme of spirituality or the soul, but the crux is, as Wilson points out,

<sup>8</sup>See Phil J. Fisher, 'Christopher Fry and Some Others' (Sept., 1951) and 'a discussion' with both Fry and Duncan in 'Translation or Adaptation', *Drama* no. 45 (Summer, 1957), pp. 53-54, RDF. Personal files show that, between 1949 and 1952, Fry sent best wishes for Duncan's plays and thanks for sending published playtexts, HRHRC. Also Duncan's appointment diaries from 1951 and 1952 note his lunch meetings with Fry. RDF

<sup>9</sup>See Glenda Leeming, *Poetic Drama* (London, Macmillan, 1989), p. 138. 1928 saw the formation of the Religious Drama Society with George Bell as president. In 1930, Browne became director in charge of the semi-professional Chichester Diocesan Players. The Group Theatre founded by Rupert Doone, put on Auden's *The Dance of Death* in 1933.

that 'Duncan understands religion but he is not fundamentally religious'. (*Tribute*, 82) In his memoirs, Duncan names the Passion as 'the most perfect drama' (*HTME*, 344) but admits 'although I had written *This Way To The Tomb* it was more from unbelief than from belief'. (*HTME*, 345) This leads to speculation that, at the time, the melodrama of religion and passion was a vehicle for Duncan's more personal, sceptical views.

Duncan did not however completely self-contrive the role of serious religious playwright. He established a sincere friendship with E. Martin Browne, an important figure in religious drama who supported Duncan by producing *Tomb*. Ashley Dukes corroborates this in a letter of 12th June 1950. He states that Browne 'has been invaluable to dramatists especially to Eliot and yourself, in this creative way'.<sup>10</sup>

In his speech introducing the 1945 season of poetic drama at the Mercury Theatre, Browne proclaimed, 'There has been too long a divorce between the poet and the playwright'.<sup>11</sup> He harks back to the glory of the Elizabethan age when most playwrights were also poets. Duncan often echoed these views. The idea of poetry being spoken on the stage is significant as it shows that Duncan also valued language in performance, whereby speech is open to inflection and temporal processes. Despite poetry as a medium being equated on a simplistic level with the voice of its author, its difference in the theatre is that it is filtered indirectly through different characters. Notwithstanding this, Duncan thought poetry should be as 'lucid' as prose and a tool for communication:

Verse is the essence. It is thought at its most lucid, integrated with the rhythm of experience. To ask what place verse has in the theatre is to ask what place thought and emotion have in it.<sup>12</sup>

In a 1952 essay he tries to convince his readers of the purity of the poetic-dramatic tradition because of its strict form and use of heroic myths and legends. He creates a rather old-fashioned, Yeatsian view of an exclusive art that is '*not* about common men'.<sup>13</sup> His art is for 'consciousness' sake and opposes ephemeral, socially committed arts and 'formless' stream-of-consciousness poetry. The latter he associated, in an essay on Pound, with 'maudlin confessions and subjective hosannahs'.<sup>14</sup> Two years later he concluded that, 'The gap between verse and theatre is parallel with the whole

<sup>10</sup> Ashley Dukes to Duncan (12th June, 1950). *RDF*

<sup>11</sup> E. Martin Browne, *Two in One* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 155. He records his involvement with Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* in the '20s, Yeats's *Resurrection* (1931), and e.e. cummings's *Santa Claus* (1946).

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Duncan, draft, 'Realism in The Theatre', p. 24, *RDF*. The article appeared in *Theatre Today* (No.1, 1946). Hereafter referred to as *RT*.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Duncan, draft, 'Poetry and The Contemporary Theatre' (1952), p. 4. *RDF*

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Duncan, 'The Poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot' [wr. 1949-50], p. 10. *RDF*

disintegration of culture'.<sup>15</sup> This refers to what he saw as the degrading commercial limitations imposed on post-war drama, but reveals his aim for his own theatre to somehow purify culture.

The post-war commercial theatre scene certainly seemed to be imposing limits on drama. During the First World War the actor-manager system was ousted by Harley Granville-Barker's theatre and short tour repertory with its ensemble acting. With long runs of farces and musicals between the wars, repertory waned. Post-war, highly commercial managements such as Prince Littler and Tennent's found it easier to put on productions than independent managements, because they controlled chains of theatres.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, the use of poetic dialogue presupposed a less commercial theatre. Williams, on the verse drama convention, speaks of 'spirit' and particular poetic vision. A profound level of expression happens when the spirit 'is arrested before it ends in the desert of exact likeness to reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind'.<sup>17</sup> To Duncan it was ordinary life or this 'commonplace' perception of reality that was *in*-authentic. In 1946 he wrote, 'The glib chatter of our cocktail party authors is also a restriction of reality'. (RT, 24) Here his aspiration is to avoid 'glibness' and instead express the inarticulate and, in his terms, 'the crystallisation of the eternal problems of humanity'. (RT, 24) Eliot also aimed for the audience to be aware of 'something better than ordinary conversation'. (SP, 69) For Duncan the expression of eternal problems was more authentic than subjects found in 'cocktail party' dramas (he probably implies Rattigan's and Coward's plays). Genuine 'emotional realism' was attainable even through the non-naturalistic conventions of opera staging. In fact, the scene becomes more credible than our own, unreal reality as, 'Life only arouses our interest when it reminds us of art. There is nothing so boring as actuality'.<sup>18</sup> His means of expression of eternal problems and inarticulate states was formal poetic language. His ambition was to transcend everyday subject-matter in his drama and express 'spirit'. But again his work reveals the utopian nature of this ambition because much of the writing embodies a confrontation between linguistic clarity and abstraction.

<sup>15</sup>Duncan, op. cit., 1952, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup>For at least a decade after the war, theatre was monopolised by Binkie Beaumont at 'Tennents' (incorporating HM Tennent Ltd. and Tennent Productions), who provided plays catering to popular taste for commercial viability. By 1942, Prince Littler, chairman of co-owning Tennent shares, controlled Stoll Theatres Corporation in London and the provinces. In 1943 the group gained six West End theatres including the Lyric and Apollo. In 1945 it claimed the Moss Empires chain (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle and Leeds). In 1947, it bought the Palladium, Prince of Wales, Holborn Empire and five Provincial Theatres.

<sup>17</sup>Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London, Hogarth, 1987), p. 175.

<sup>18</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'An Answer to Auden', *Opera* (November, 1951), pp. 630-632 (p. 631).

#### iv. Poetry, Language and Beyond-Language

Writers of poetic drama since the '30s had utilised various influences such as cabaret, jazz, music hall, Noh, Brecht, Shakespeare and Greek drama and Duncan was no exception. Duncan met Brecht in Berlin in 1946 and saw *Der Hofmeister*, a play that 'impressed me immensely. I had liked the non-realistic sets'. (HTME, 106) These elements connect him with the more wholly expressionistic poetic dramatists as well as with Eliot's dramatic approach.<sup>19</sup>

Eliot saw poetry as having 'dramatic value' (SP, 71) for the theatre because it is 'the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all'. (SP, 70) At the same time, poetry must not be indecipherable. The poet must 'use the speech which he finds about him' (SP, 59) while musical rhythm will also 'bring to birth the idea and the image'. (SP, 67) In 'Poetry and Drama' he concluded that dramatic poetry should have an unconscious effect but its effects are that the world is suddenly 'illuminated and transfigured'. (SP, 79) From such explications of technique it can be gathered that the poetry in drama aspires to make audiences see different levels of being and thought in the characters. Duncan proposed that:

It is the function of the theatre not merely to express what a character would say in a given situation, but what he might say given a poet's power of articulation.<sup>20</sup>

Many critics voiced their approval of poetry in the theatre. Williamson offers a view of verse drama as revolutionary because of, for example, the way that Fry's

wit coruscates like stars reflected in water: we have not seen such a galaxy of words, such a constellation of apt metaphor, since the time of the Elizabethans,

while Duncan 'reveals an intellect and grasp of language that grip the imagination'.<sup>21</sup>

Denis Donoghoe sees poetry as integral to the pleasing unity of the drama:

The poetry of poetic drama is not necessarily or solely a verbal construct; it inheres in the structure of the play as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

The statement echoes Cocteau's distinction between poetry 'of' the theatre and poetry 'in' the theatre.

Other critics were quick to question the efficacy of its language. Ivor Brown on Fry's *The Dark is Light Enough* complained that he 'is so unsimple with words

<sup>19</sup>Examples are Auden and Isherwood's *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *The Ascent of F6* (both 1936), *On The Frontier* (1938) and also plays by Spender who was influenced by Berlin Cabaret. These variously used popular song, references to radio, television and aspects of slapstick.

<sup>20</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Write With Both Hands', *Drama* 31 (Winter, 1953), p. 19 (pp. 17-20). Hereafter referred to as WWBH.

<sup>21</sup>Audrey Williamson, *Theatre of Two Decades* (London, Rockcliff, 1951), p. 144.

<sup>22</sup>Denis Donoghoe, *The Third Voice: Modern British And American Verse Drama* (London, Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 6. Hereafter referred to as DD.

that he can never be really complex about things or people'.<sup>23</sup> Baxter's 1946 review of Eliot's *Family Reunion* declares 'Eliot the playwright is the victim of Eliot the poet' and of his descriptions, 'this kind of thing can be overdone'.<sup>24</sup> Complex language was seen to hinder comprehension of the play's story. Donoghoe also admits that despite its inherent dramatic effect the form also shows 'the first strains of anxiety about inarticulate states and the inadequacy of language to express them'. (DD, 82) His view oversimplifies the main constituent of poetic drama as inherent (non-verbal) unity, because if the drama also conveys anxiety about inarticulacy then its unity is problematised.

Duncan stated that:

The problem in the theatre is to find an idiom which can express the various levels at which we live simultaneously. (WWBH, 18)

A shift to a different, higher, state of perception is required to see an occasion in a more intense dramatic light. In Act IV of *Stratton*, the actors are directed to play the following lines 'with a certain stylised remoteness' (S, 120) like the chorus in Eliot's *Family Reunion*. It indicates that the audience should be aware of the characters detaching from themselves. Stratton directly responds to Cory's fiancée, Katherine, with, 'Is it? Not at my time of life Katherine'. (S, 120) By the end of his stanza he has drifted off into a rhetorical meditation on mortality, musing 'What more does any man discover than that his time is finite...'. (S, 120) At his pause, his wife Maria finishes his previous line, '...Yet infinite in agony'. (S, 120) Their formal vocabulary helps universalise and aggrandise the meaning of the situation for the audience and signals the transition to a different reality.

Duncan relies on the authenticating effect of older speech forms as Maria says, 'Now all's said, all's spoken'. (S, 85) Here the rhetoric of classic Shakespearean soliloquy reverberates:

STRATTON: What am I doing? I am remembering a tune I have never heard...  
I stare; you smile--  
But who is staring and who is smiled at?  
Which of these two men is me? (S, 40)

But it is with skill that Duncan has Stratton's self-questioning reach a stage of poignant absurdity:

STRATTON: (*He returns to mirror*)  
What am I doing?  
I am staring at myself  
I am talking to myself.  
Am I uncertain of myself? (S, 41)

<sup>23</sup>Ivor Brown, *Theatre: 1954-5* (London, Max Reidhardt, 1955), p. 136.

<sup>24</sup>Beverly Baxter, 'Review' [2nd Nov., 1946], in *First Nights and Noises Off* (London, Hutchinson & Co., 1949), p. 229.



In Duncan's plays, a sudden contrast in speaking styles is a technique that occurs usually after a breakdown in communication and when a character is in some kind of dilemma. They become a registering consciousness of some world beyond the material. In Act III, Stratton and his wife Maria, share dialogue that interchanges passages of introspection and soliloquy. The characters' voices lose their distinctiveness and become a medium for the human psyche. Stratton, after telling his wife it is 'Six o' clock' then says to himself, 'I in this duress, confess to the torturer who is deaf and my/conscience which is blind' and then shifts to 'man' in general declaring 'Thus is a man confined'. (S, 90) His utterance moves, without external prompt or interaction, from the everyday to a deep insight into the ultimate mystery of things. Like Duncan, Eliot uses a similarly shifting register of discourse when he has his 'psychiatrist', Reilly, matter-of-factly press an automatic button to summon his nurse-secretary and then shift into the mode of a mystic when he tells Celia to 'Go in peace my daughter'. (CP, 128) The doctor then casually phones Julia from his desk. Both writers utilize language to signal a transition of consciousness. Primarily, poetic language is used to communicate a sense of wonder and religious significance and such use binds Duncan's theatre to that of Fry and Eliot.

Fry, interviewed in 1950, relates poetry to spirituality, stating that 'Poetry - is the language in which man explores his own amazement. It is the language in which he says heaven and earth in one word'.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Duncan defined poetry as 'language at its most intense' and 'the quickest way of expressing the inarticulate'.<sup>26</sup> This again hints at the idea of transcendence, of articulating the un-sayable.

Duncan conveys a perception of wonder in the anti-masque of *Tomb*, where each modern-day character perceives in the depths of the cave a half-impression, half-image of something that is indistinct and beyond ordinary comprehension. Father Opine feels a sense of familiarity:

I felt I had knelt here before;  
And now this tomb reflects  
Secrets beyond the image. (TWTTT, 95)

But despite his perception of something, the 'secrets' are 'beyond' conceptualisation. Duncan refuses to clarify beyond the mysterious for the audience because the characters' unformed vision at the end of the play is important. Unavoidably, non-resolution comes from his very determination to present the 'proper subjects of drama' as 'those problems to which there are no possible solutions'. (HTME, 385) The problems are, 'the dilemma of being, the frailty of our nature, yet the strength

<sup>25</sup>Christopher Fry, interview, *Listener* (23rd Feb., 1950), np. RDF

<sup>26</sup>Duncan, op. cit., 1966, p. 5.

of our vision'. (*HTME*, 385) Consequently the drama that conveys these themes is non-resolved and demonstrates both the inability and ability to convey thoughts through words.

Antony, sitting on his rock, speaks proficient poetry. His Eliotian ruminations are elegant, while effectively marked by mystification:

No Marcus, I shall eat no more  
I will stay alone here by the water... .  
Oh my sons, how can I tell you  
What I have known forever  
And yet not known before;  
Known in my heart and in my bone  
As an indissoluble uncertainty:  
Age makes us slow witted, and this is an advantage. (*TWTTT*, 22)

In *Tumbler*, the idea of indistinction also prevails with the disembodied voice singing the aria, 'I tried to grasp it in words, I failed', (*OLT*, 33) which conveys the difficulty of expressing the mystical, visionary experience of God.

Dramatic presentation of a range of different perceptions only emphasises the difficulty of their coincidence and consequently, of human communication. Like Eliot's *Cocktail Party*, *Stratton* focused on psychological states and the central couple's subjectivity:

STRATTON: (*To himself*) Why doesn't she say something?

MARIA: (*To herself*) What is he thinking? (*S*, 88)

The idea of the echo only reflecting sound back to itself is recurrent. Maria laments that there is:

Never a word heard  
In this house but an echo  
Reverberating through the empty corridors, (*S*, 89).

and Stratton reflects (to himself), that man:

chucks the pebbles of his spirit  
Into this pitiless pit  
Where echo is the answer. (*S*, 94)

The fear filling his heart is 'Empty as echo' while the self 'Anticipates its exequies in an inarticulate soliloquy'. (*S*, 95) Their inability to speak communicatively (accentuated by the abstruse vocabulary) signifies spiritual sterility.

Duncan uses irony to make a similar point in *Tumbler* which opens with Sebastian the scribe 'trying to finish a poem/Which I've been trying to write/With a broom in one hand'. (*OLT*, 16) His composition of elaborate Canzone does not win the favour of the Virgin's statue. Instead the process of composition is mocked as, despite the formal arrangement of poetry within the whole play, Marcellus announces, 'How could poetry succeed when it is lamed with words?' (*OLT*, 46)

But there are difficulties with proposing alternatives to apparently simple or straightforwardly formal modes of communication. These are evident in the way that Duncan, in 1953, compares the language of poetic drama with the use in opera of different forms such as recitative and aria, which integrate and counterpoint our 'several levels of consciousness', stylistically. (WWBH, 19) Duncan relies on a conception of reality as it is represented on the operatic stage, an imaginary space where integration and counterpoint are perhaps more easily reconciled in practice. He wishes to transpose the same requirements onto poetic drama, a theatre that was not conspicuously comparable to opera.

Eliot was also aware of the problems of saying Heaven and earth in one word, but in like manner, associated verse drama with music as a medium. He stated in 'Poetry and Drama' that the 'unattainable ideal towards which poetic drama should strive' should be the subjective state and the range of sensibility emulated by music as a medium.<sup>27</sup> In such states we touch 'the border of those feelings which only music can express'. (SP, 85) 'The Music of Poetry' emphasises his conviction:

We still have a good way to go in the invention of a verse medium for the theatre... . But when we reach a point at which the poetic idiom can be stabilised then a period of musical elaboration can follow, I think that a poet can gain much from the study of music. (SP, 66)

Duncan certainly accounted for and incorporated music into his play-worlds. His first theoretical articles were about the place of music in his work. In 1946 he wrote about the experience of working with Britten in 'How The Rape of Lucretia Became an Opera'.<sup>28</sup> During that year he corresponded frequently with Eliot regarding Faber's wish to publish the libretto. The accomplishment of writing for Britten, by then seen as a composer of emergent genius, must have fuelled Duncan's impulse to incorporate not only the lyric form but also other musical elements into his theatre. Duncan's poetry was almost without exception indebted to lyrical form and his drama embraced this type of poetry (for example the canzone in *Tomb*), as well as utilising musical interludes: solos and choir in *Tomb* and incidental music in *Stratton*. *Tumbler* makes use of hymns, oratorio and aria.

Indeed, melodrama originally utilised a synthesis of drama and music and it is particularly noticeable that in the decade following *Lucretia*, Duncan's theatrical work retained many aspects of this style, indicating that opera and poetic drama had similar attributes. Margaret Mertz identifies *Lucretia* as an example of the emergence

<sup>27</sup>Eliot, op. cit., 1953. Hereafter referred to as SP.

<sup>28</sup>The draft appears in a workbook dated '1946'. Duncan's 'Realism in the Theatre' was published the same year.

of chamber opera, whilst also being a libretto 'which takes seriously its responsibilities to the well established tradition of verse-drama'.<sup>29</sup>

Though it perhaps over-complexified Duncan's approach to realism, opera also made him aware of having to simplify language to be easily heard when not read. In his article on *Lucretia* he talks of highly dramatic language not being fitting for music because the metaphor is too complex and the sense too obscure. Clarity is required for words to be heard when sung. In 1941 Duncan, following Eliot's dictums and the Leavisite view, stated that England since Cromwell had lost its verbal clarity to the 'obfuscation of all values and all honesty' and 'verse to be sung is something vastly worth reviving'.<sup>30</sup>

In 1942, Eliot, using the example of Shakespeare as a dramatic poet, had endorsed the usefulness of musical rhythm and structure in contemporary verse, but stated they should be applied 'without losing touch with colloquial speech altogether'. (SP, 64) Duncan's aims for drama are similarly conditional. After *Tomb*, he states, 'I wanted to try to write a modern play', but one 'about issues that were permanent to the human dilemma and not dependent on frivolous topicality'. (HTME, 156) On using contemporary idioms, Duncan, looking back in his autobiography aligns himself only with Eliot against Fry, defending his use of more casual, everyday language in *Stratton*, 'Eliot and I had tried to make verse in the theatre a pliable vehicle of our contemporary feeling'. (HTME, 384) He believes they 'set ourselves the task of writing modern plays in which the verse was simple, un-rhetorical and lucid'. (HTME, 384)

*Stratton* has a more informal, less lyrical verse pattern than *Tomb* and contains more conversational prose, avoiding traditional Jacobean iambics. Apparently Duncan disguised the verse to get the play produced: 'Kitty typed the play out again and resubmitted it to managements who had previously rejected it'. (HTME, 200) Marsden's lines with their simple rhyme and metaphor are very naturalised:

MARSDEN: Gone. I suppose it got the worst of ten thousand tons.  
The water just piled up against its own foundations  
Then swept the whole place away  
As if it were a bundle of driftwood, (S, 67)

whereas *Stratton*'s frequent verbal elaboration could only have appeared antiquated in contrast:

For, once we let honesty light up the cess pit of our souls,  
It seems to extinguish the little candle burning there,  
As ruthlessly as a nurse darkens a nursery.  
No, nothing is wrong with me--but honesty. (S, 79)

<sup>29</sup>Margaret Mertz, *History, Criticism and the Sources of Benjamin Britten's Opera 'The Rape of Lucretia'* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1990), p.5.

<sup>30</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Words and Music', *Townsman* (1941), p. 9.

The communication of the idea is problematic because honesty, as an abstract notion, both 'lights up' and does its opposite, extinguishes another source of light, a particular object: the candle. An unexpectedly sinister image of care is offered by picturing the nurse as 'ruthless'. Lastly, honesty is over-negated by its direct association with wrong-ness. The signification of honesty and its consequences is subject to contradiction, double and opposing signification and ironic negation: to make a point about its double edgedness, the concept is treated heavy-handedly.

Dennis Welland notes that *Stratton* was:

too heavily indebted to the *Family Reunion*. The religious Freudianism lacks clarity of consummation, the symbolism is self-conscious and the characters lack conviction because the verse is not strong enough to bridge the transition from the naturalistic plane to the psychological.<sup>31</sup>

This was despite the contemporary set of *Stratton* offering something more familiar to make up for its difficult theme of moral hypocrisy. He stated in 1946 that 'Language which impedes and slows up the movement of a play must be thrown overboard' (RT, 24) and after the success of *Tomb* and the popularity of *The Eagle Has Two Heads* in New York, by 1947, Duncan had reached a pivotal moment: 'I felt I had proved that poetry could be commercial'. (HTME, 154) He remembers his annoyance at being pigeonholed, 'it nauseated me to be called a religious poet'. (HTME, 156) To him 'in the commercial theatre it amounted to the sentence of death'. (HTME, 193) He concluded that verse drama could incorporate 'modern' references, assumptions and conventions. *Stratton* included the trivial social exchanges of drawing room etiquette. Act IV begins 'Will you have one lump or two?' (S, 119).

Duncan stated that verse is 'as capable of shutting the door as it is of murdering one's aunt'. (RT, 24) Eliot concurred that, ideally, verse should be able to say anything and the poetic dramatist should 'accustom our audiences to verse to the point at which they shall cease to be conscious of it'. (PD, 70) But if poetry can say everything that can be said so easily then of course it stops being 'poetry'. It becomes continuous with non-poetic language and loses its identity as 'poetry'. But for Eliot, it is sustained even when the dramatic situation 'reaches such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance because then it is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all'. (PD, 76) Nevertheless, he admits in 'Poetry and Drama' (1950) that *Murder In The Cathedral* 'has not solved any general problem' (PD, 76) and he feels more successful in his later plays in that we now:

hear verse from people dressed like ourselves, living in houses and apartments like ours, and using telephones and motorcars and radio sets. (PD, 79)

<sup>31</sup>Dennis Welland, 'Some Post-War Experiments in Poetic Drama' in *Experimental Drama*, ed. by William Armstrong (London, G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1963), p. 50.

This more directly links the theatrical world with the one the audience lives in and leaves to go back to. It is doubtful whether *Stratton* achieves Duncan's aims for clarity and concision even though in 1949, he set himself to disguise the poetry therein so 'language had the density of poetry without being decorative verse'. (*HTME*, 156) Eliot had also decided in the *Cocktail Party* to 'conceal the origins' of its Greek theme (*SP*, 83) in order to depict 'our own world'. (*SP*, 79) Duncan had the same intention of using a wholly contemporary set and wanted to integrate 'the elements of a thriller' with 'the structure of a miracle play'. (*HTME*, 56) This proposal seems to contradict his next emotive and one-sided statement, 'damn and blast the average man, confound non-entities and lowest common denominators'. (*HTME*, 157)

Poetic authority in *Stratton* is complicated by an interplay of ideas that contradict each other. Duncan's commitment to tradition stretched to the use of symbols and stylisation, but he used an incongruous mix of conventional and unconventional symbolism to draw attention to his themes and ideas. The traditional idea of time as an hourglass which runs out 'to the last grain' appears in *Tomb*. (*TWTTT*, 49) The idea of beauty being illusory is constructed when the attractive 'woman removes her mask showing the face of an old crone'. (*TWTTT*, 49) At the beginning of *Stratton*, Maria appears at first 'lame and hideously old' but then 'becomes radiantly beautiful' when she sees and is seen by her husband. (*S*, 11) These denote Eliot's objective correlative where the verse or visual equivalent used on the stage aims to unmistakably objectify and articulate emotions and experiences, for example of time or being deluded, to the audience who observes and listens.<sup>32</sup>

St. Antony's tomb, the Virgin's statue in *Tumbler* and the mirror and portrait representing *Stratton*'s psyche are straightforward representations of 'truth' or revelation. The non-naturalistic effect of symbolism is enhanced by the personification of vices in *Tomb* and the dreamed prosecution scene in *Stratton*. In *Tumbler*, the roles of saint, poet and acrobat/clown are similar in status. Highlighting the similarities produces comedy. The poet and clown are both presented as equivalent in their artistry when Andrew's knowledge of acoustics illustrates the analogy between the cathedral and circus tent. Less simply, elements of performance in religious practice and thus the whole notion of display are highlighted. The use of an actual cathedral nave for *Tumbler*'s production, shrewdly illustrates Duncan's playful appropriation of the imposed set used for the world of the play.<sup>33</sup> The definition of the reality of place thus becomes tenuous and the idea of its sanctity is questioned.

<sup>32</sup>Eliot, 'Hamlet' [1919], op. cit., 1949. Here he explicates the idea of 'impersonality'.

<sup>33</sup>*Tumbler* was commissioned by Salisbury and District Society of Arts as part of the celebrations for the Festival of Britain. It was performed in Salisbury cathedral in June 1951, with decor by Beaton. The original reference for the play was (anon.) *Del Tumbeor Nostre Dame*, a 12th century French text taken from an article by Wilhelm Foerster, *Romania* (Paris, Librairie A Frank), 1873.

Fox, however, sees the symbolism in *Stratton* as being 'coiled too tightly'.<sup>34</sup> The river for example signifies what is untamed and instinctive as its lock bursts. It brings upheaval to the family estate but it also signifies the turgid continuity of ancestry as 'All our tradition lies in that slime'. (S, 82) The symbolism therefore shifts. The difficulty of its signification is reiterated in Antony Quayle's response to the play: 'I find the symbolism too laboured and - again because the writing is so excellent - unnecessary', and he goes on to point out that the principal theme of the judge and the judged is blurred by the other theme – father-son jealousy – because it is so strong 'that it gets out of hand' and he suggests Duncan 'might try to disentangle the two'.<sup>35</sup>

The poetry in *Tomb* intensifies the natural imagery, which builds an impression of both fecundity and decay. The starlings, which comfort Antony's eyes, are associated with violence and 'flung/under the wind'. (TWTTT, 46). The character, 'Sight', tries to illustrate God's grace to Antony, with the example of a 'a hot-blooded mare'. The horse's strength is negatively compressed by describing 'the white panic of her eyes' as 'the furious engine stamps the earth'. (TWTTT, 46) In *Stratton*, the river, wind and night are made relentless and blinding, the water is 'bleeding', its banks 'falling in'. (S, 73) Strands of beauty and violence are associated, as is spirituality with nature in a traditionally romantic (shades of the Lawrentian) vision of transferring human sensuousness to the essential, un-tamed power of nature. Humans and nature are chaotic but can be humble in their imperfection. At the same time, nature is not fallen but an antithesis to negative social repression and formal perfection.

Against the naturalistic setting of *Stratton*, the characters' realism is overshadowed by the language such as when they are directed to speak suddenly '*with a certain stylised remoteness*' (S, 120) in order to contextualise the formal poetry. The pauses are inclined to interrupt rather than intensify the dramatic situation. The effect of differentiated styles is more forceful in *Tomb* with its use of both liturgy and revue. The idea of different language being appropriate to different states and events is used most effectively by the characters in *Tomb* and perhaps least so in *Stratton*.

*Stratton* does quicken in pace when the characters exchange views in debate, addressing each other on the theme of their own family ties. *Stratton* implores his daughter-in-law:

STRATTON: Then why don't you go?

KATHERINE: Because I love him  
And in you...

<sup>34</sup> Charles Fox, transcript of talk for Italian Third Programme (Autumn, 1952), p.5.

<sup>35</sup> Quayle to Duncan (11th Oct., 1948). RDF

STRATTON: Yes? Yes?

KATHERINE: ...I catch a glimpse of him...

STRATTON: No! It's I you see in him.  
I am the model: he the copy! (S, 110)

The characters also ruminate at length, expounding spiritual matters in a manner comparable to a play like *Family Reunion*.

In contrast *Tumbler* consists mainly of prosaic conversation between the lay brothers of a monastery. Only the priest, quite aptly, explicates at length the conceptual intricacies of the miracle to which the action builds. But prose is effectively used for comic relief compared to the ecclesiastical tone of the Anthems and Latin chanting. Brother Andrew (the tumbler) confuses his definitions when instructing Sebastian in acoustics:

YOU WANT TO SPEAK LIKE THIS  
Or half the sound gets lost in the roof of the marquee...

BROTHER SEBASTIAN: ...cathedral. (OLT, 164)

While the decorum of the set of *Stratton* demanded a close relationship to modern speech, its poetry also aimed to contain sprawling feelings. Standing in his front room, Stratton declares:

It is as though our blind thoughts wove  
Upon the loom of night  
Frail patterns. (S, 143)

'The loom of night' is not typical everyday speech, neither is the structure of the phrase. But, against the naturalistic set, the shifts between prose, poetic exchange and long interior monologues, often within the space of one page of script, pose more of a challenge to verisimilitude, as Eliot (writing on 'Poetry and Drama') was aware:

a mixture of prose and verse in the same play is generally to be avoided, each transit makes the auditor aware, with a jolt, of the medium. (SP, 69)

Duncan was convinced of the clarity of his own poetic expression but had to negotiate clarity with the defamiliarisation and heightened tone required for the effectiveness of poetic language. Remembering the musical aspect of Giraudoux's play, *La Folle de Chaillot*, he declares that 'it (music) can give the most bathetic platitude the intensity of a revelation or a new commandment'.<sup>36</sup> Music expresses 'intensity' and Duncan wanted to intensify language in the same way. He effects intensity with Antony's 'An old crone cutting the heads off a pail of fish/Stand on the feet that were my mistresses', (TWTTT, 28) and with Stratton's 'fear creeps out/And fat grief flaunts its wings'. (S, 95)

<sup>36</sup>Ronald Duncan, draft, 'Adolescent Opera', 1951, p. 6. Hereafter referred to as AO.



The phrasing conveys a vision of inner consciousness. Eliot wrote in a similar style in *Murder* with intense, expressionistic verse: 'I have smelt corruption in the dish/A hellish sweet scent in the wood-path while the ground heaved'.<sup>37</sup> The vision is within the speaker rather than manifest in the world. Often, natural phenomena occur in the speech as a sole reflection of the pessimistic mood of the characters:

MARCUS. Thursday, the sun is cold with indifference. (*TWTTT*, 31)

ANTONY. Not even the nettles lolling up against the wall  
Have strength to fall. (*TWTTT*, 33)

Duncan's attempts to communicate mankind's eternal problems dramatically are more about the problems of constituting 'man' as a being who has the ability to communicate. Also, his aim to use poetic language to express something as abstract as spirit is problematic because the idea of spirit entails a measure of positive vision or resolution. Duncan, like Eliot, creates analogies with music in isolation. Marcellus calls music 'the spire of the human spirit'. (*OLT*, 40) Antony echoes this in the Masque saying, 'You poets are strange; you know more than you learn. Music is a short cut. It is a way I cannot follow but it reveals the destination'. (*OLT*, 25) Duncan's own practical incorporation of music adds it on to or allies it with other mediums to render a less naturalistic presentation and lead the ear to a beyond-language state.

Often a character's articulation of a beyond-language state creates an expressionistic apprehension. This tempers the idea of the given state of the external world and gives an impression of the chaos and incoherence of experience. An example is when the tumbler repeats the lines 'And the tireder and smaller' so often during his story's interspersal with interjections and leaping about that the language loses its narrative flow:

he sank smaller and smaller...  
(*He overbalances*)

... he got smaller and smaller...  
That was meant for a full pirouette

... And the tireder and smaller the little man got  
... No use, I can't do it! I can't do it! (*OLT*, 51)

In Stratton's line 'Ay me now Eimi: I am the I of all these Eyes' (*S*, 150), there is tension between its sense and the patterning of the 'I' vowel sounds. The words convey the emotional peak of Stratton's entrapment in self-reflection. Their incantatory effect is, at the same time, produced from language that glories in language itself. Such utterances provide a vestige of Duncan's earlier experiments with language while they also affirm the inadequacy of language to communicate simply.

<sup>37</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Murder In the Cathedral* (London, Faber, 1968), p. 65.

If the lucid expression of inner emotion is not too subjective and hyperbole is rejected, the dramatic language flows and shifts more easily. The speech is more credible and coherent when a character is naturally following a train of thought using economical diction and looser syntax. An example is when Antony tries to talk about his reasons for fasting in lines which include past-tense reminiscence:

And I said: 'Don't worry mother, I am God, I am God'  
 ...Then I grew up to the endless worries of a small estate,  
     Forgetting my certainties in making ends meet.  
 And then up the slow ascent of the corkscrew stair  
 Which leads nowhere,  
 ...You see Marcus, as old men we face death  
 ...For living is an endless chain of interlocking actions,  
 Distractions disguised as important actions.  
 I will do this, when I have done that.  
 I will do that, when I have done this.  
 And so on and so on and so on. (TWTTT, 22)

The address to 'Marcus' justifies and softens the tone of overly self-conscious exposition that dominates much of the dialogue and the simple repetition and rhythm of his phrasing, 'I will do this' is an effective reinforcement of the previous statement.

A number of *Tomb*'s longer stretches of canzone or structured verse use mixed and extended metaphors such as 'fear's tight halter/And desire's short tether'. (TWTTT, 49) Stratton describes the day as coming 'to gnaw the shoulders of the night'. (S, 89) Brother Sebastian speaks of man's fears concealed and sleeping, like a lake beneath the mind until 'its surface broken,/By the thirsty foal of night'. (OLT, 42)

The placing of the noun into a verb without the 'like'-ness of simile, 'forces' the attribute into an adjective or adverb, so rather than saying 'My fierce desire/Stalks her movements like a tiger' Duncan prefers 'my fierce desire tigers her movements'. (AMAI, 120) The effect is laboured when spread throughout Antony's long meditation, which begins 'The blind mouth of the earth sucks a dry udder'. (TWTTT, 26) Also, on occasions alliteration is overdone such as when Stratton talks of man: 'And is his soul lamed, maimed as he's made mad/By memory – or a mist'. (S, 90) Subtle use of Hopkins-like internal rhymes sharpens this technique and *Tumbler* demonstrates more confident use of direct simile which is simple yet dramatic. Andrew describes 'Some acrobat – as agile and awkward as a rheumatic crab'. (OLT, 184) The glory of music is effectively presented as 'a frail cathedral of sound,/ A monument of a moment'. (OLT, 177)

Fox hails Duncan as 'The first English poet to exploit the Canzone form for dramatic purposes'.<sup>38</sup> *Tomb* also interpolated different styles of diction and verse, from open, freely exchanged prose lines:

<sup>38</sup>Fox, op. cit., p. 5. He states that Duncan studied Guido Cavalcanti intensively at this time. The 13th century poet was the main precursor of the complex Italian verse pattern, the Canzone, with its tight internal rhyme scheme.

BERNARD: You lead the way Marcus.  
 JULIAN: Is it far?  
 MARCUS: No, just up by the waterfall. Listen!  
 BERNARD: I can't hear anything, (TWTTT, 16)

to the neutralising couplet of closure at the end of the meditation 'It is Winter':

ANTONY: May this ocean of night wash over me  
 A wave of sleep to comfort and silence me, (TWTTT, 29)

to the irritable stanzas of Philippa Form:

Of course I know.  
 They pulled this stunt in Tokio  
 last week, when I was there  
 examining some cult of Buddha  
 A local faked a miracle,  
 but my camera caught him at it. (TWTTT, 89)

Antony's pervasive anguished refrains in the Masque are replaced by satirical verse and the language of mass-media in the anti-masque. The act is framed by 'The Announcer's' declamations:

Ladies and gentlemen. Let me introduce  
 Father Opine, our radio doctor,  
 Eminent divine and commentator. (*music alla marcia 1*) (TWTTT, 61)

The masque contains more archaic, elegiac language and the melodramatic rhythms of Romantic expression verge on cliché:

ANTONY: Oh God, why did you wake opaque nothingness  
 To restlessness?  
 And take a handful of dust, and make  
 Me only to leave me  
 Alone, cursed with the flesh and damned with the bone. (TWTTT, 17)

But cliché is mainly avoided because the drama is set in a distant period where alien forms of speech, increased formality and unusual images are acceptable. Also, the assonance and alliteration in the first two lines integrate the words with the emotion (the despairing repeat of 'me') in this passage.

The anti-masque utilises jazz and Americanisms to express discrimination between a variety of attitudes and philosophies. The GIRL sings, 'I've got an autogiro/And a television set' (TWTTT, 69) and the WOMAN, 'My phone is not so phallic/to get children of its own'. (TWTTT, 70) The Astral Group dance and the droning sound of their mesmeric chant subtly satirises religious liturgy, in particular the Indian prayer meeting, as well as what Duncan envisaged to be the 'spiritual strip-tease' processes of the Oxford Group:<sup>39</sup>

Before cause is effect  
 cause is the centre

<sup>39</sup>Ronald Duncan interviewed, [Part II], quoted in Wahl, op. cit., No. 19, 1973, p. 191.

We believe in cause  
In known phenomena  
And natural laws. (TWTTT, 75)

Even within the Masque, there is wit as well as heavy analyses. Antony asks the whereabouts of Lechery's supposed 'pain':

Lechery: On my leg here. Higher. Higher.  
Antony: Oh! Away with you!' (TWTTT, 44)

One sees the clash between high and popular cultural forms. The latter in the anti-masque counteracts the rhetorical extravagance of the masque's meditations and hymns. Through the voices of the characters, *Tomb* acts out and embodies the conflict of opposing cultural forms. The masque raises the question of the understanding of history and time by, with the anti-masque, positioning it against the degeneration of ancestry into a media circus. The message is critically effective because, alongside the disjunctive forms and complexity of the play's issues on the immortality of the soul, the body of Antony is the binding denominator. He reappears as corporeal but remains elusive and therefore effectively reinforces points both about the value and futility of humanity which otherwise the depth and shifts of Duncan's language might labour or obscure.

The discourses of high church and legal system are sabotaged by foregrounding their collision with contemporary speech. The juxtaposition and disjunction of an era of faith against one of scepticism is also depicted in *St. Spiv*. In the healer 'Orace's office, in Act II, (*The table bears an enormous cash register; it is flanked by lighted candles*).<sup>40</sup> Discursive heterogeneity becomes central because of this. Philippa Form terminates the television filming with 'We've seen enough of nothing. Come on let's go and eat'. (*Goes to microphone...*) 'Is that mike dead? Well kill it!' (TWTTT, 81) Then we hear the Chorus proclaim 'As this saint does not appear/It's plain that none of us need fear that time/When he who also dies should rise again'. (TWTTT, 81)

Heterogeneity leads us to question the idea of a coherent authority behind the texts. *Tomb*, particularly, is run through with scepticism and contradiction, conceivably containing elements of pastiche that mock their own genre. Pessimism regarding his characters' communication and vision complicates the view of Duncan as a straightforwardly religious dramatist in the sense of him being a communicator of faith. Antony's vision of God's creation is not of its order but of it as combative and difficult:

<sup>40</sup>Ronald Duncan, *St. Spiv* (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), p. 134. Hereafter referred to as SS.

The pruned trunks stand ugly  
sometimes they appear  
To shake as a fist; Thine  
Hand Divine?  
Raised in wrath? (TWTTT, 33)

As in *Stratton*, the inevitable weathering of the external natural world is linked to the powerful nature of God as alternative (and opposed) to the mundane civility of modern life. The setting for Antony's meditations is 'just a rock in the sun and austerity'. (*TWTTT*, 13) The imagery paints a picture of an unpredictable and comfortless world where God's relentless will makes faith necessary. Duncan's challenging approach, in Welland's view:

gave the post-war audience a welcome chance of hearing the human voice raised, not in heavenly rhetoric, but in meditation and in expansive, exploratory speech.<sup>41</sup>

But the plays also present the idea of the inadequacy of language to communicate simply. Thus it is more likely that a sense of the spiritual is manifested through the speakers' subjectivity and constitution of doubt, rather than by a sense of perfection, clarity or 'amazement'.

A positive reflection of Duncan's overall elusiveness is Speight's assertion that:

Ronald Duncan has experimented boldly both in verse and prose, for he remains the indomitable pioneer, immune from all fashionable nostrums; independent; and in the last analysis, impossible to classify. (*Tribute*, 55)

In Welland's view, poetic drama has the potential to enlarge the theatrical possibilities for language. It is fair to say that Duncan's plays' support for rhetorical, non-realistic language therefore helped to pave the way for Osborne's and Pinter's plays, at least insofar as these writers' rhythmic sophistication and set-piece speeches are concerned. Instead of failure at poetic refinement in dramatic speech, Duncan's expressive, subjective use of metaphor and his sense of the absurd easily make him part of this enlargement.

### *v. The Restraint of Form*

For some years I have felt that verse should be written, again within a rigid form.<sup>42</sup>

I despised poetry that was not controlled and conscious. (*HTME*, 26)

Duncan concludes that the greater the control, the greater the effectiveness or potency of meaning. Personal experience validates the idea, which is conceived in the garden at West Mill when he increased water pressure by ‘putting my thumb over the

<sup>41</sup>Welland, *op. cit.*, in Armstrong, ed., p. 41.

<sup>42</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'How The Rape of Lucretia Became An Opera', *Shakespeare Quarterly* No. 1 (Summer, 1946), pp. 95-100, (p. 95). Hereafter referred to as *HRLBO*.

opening of the hose' and in doing so, 'I could produce a fountain' instead of 'an inept dribble'. (*HTME*, 27) For drama also, 'theatre must impose limits on its form'. (*RT*, 24) The Mercury Theatre must have suited Duncan's liking for limitation. It had a split stage and its proscenium arch was only nine feet high with no flying space above so every inch had to be used to full effect. In the above essay he evokes the image of a pea in a balloon as the ideal for his art: to make the work of art the balloon should be put inside the pea. But this type of conflation is impossible, and it is evident that the subject of Duncan's autobiographies similarly foregrounds the desire to resolve impossible positions. His experience of working under duress and against the grain, that is with imposed limits, actually transcribes into an impossible quest for high ideals and for perfection.

*Enemies* delineates a person for whom restraint and risk are both important. He becomes aware of desire for his attractive secretary. On their sexual tensions becoming an issue, he remembers 'restraint emphasised them', but with restraint, 'My temper worsened'. (*HTME*, 293) He then gives in to expressing desire without restriction. Duncan's actual experience of consistent control is depicted then as unsuccessful and merely temporary, and not creating happiness. The reader cannot then make sense of or sustain his defence of accusations of being a philanderer, that is, 'I was not'. (*HTME*, 294) Through denial, he isolates himself from acceptable social behaviour. His wife is portrayed as encouraging his continuing lapses, as is the secretary, whilst he conveniently 'cannot remember how we got to bed'. (*HTME*, 298) In this way the narrative constantly repositions the subject's proximity to 'rules' of restraint or received definitions. The shifting both attaches and detaches the subject's personal responsibility from a system of general laws. The idea is more comprehensible in theory, as Duncan proposes a state of contradiction and tension that is supposed to sustain itself within the conventions and stylistic variables of art, endlessly hung in the balance of its own difference.

Ideally, from the restraint of form comes texture, 'where woof runs against the warp'.<sup>43</sup> For instance, this could be where the rhythm of the line runs against the verse structure and rhyme scheme and not with it, creating a disjunctive, counter-point technique. The set form of the canzone in *Tomb* and *Tumbler* is introduced with schemed rhyming but contains a run of idiomatic speech:

The cut back vines  
     Show no signs  
         of life, leaf. Even the olives have felt the grief  
         of the cold mistral  
 The pruned trunks stand ugly. (*TWTTT*, 46)

<sup>43</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Libretti: Some Technical Aspects', *Opera*, (Nov., 1951), p. 2.

The sharp couplet rhymes are less obtrusive with the overlap of prosodic phrasing. 'Mistral' will not rhyme again until eight lines later while 'ugly' has its partner rhyme in 'valley' eight lines before. Though some elements of the play hark back to older traditions, their inherent tension is part of the presentation of incongruity along with that of the historical with the more recent or 'modern'. The use of the historical masque form in *Tomb* is Duncan's homage to Jonson and the Jacobean period, highly formalised after its earlier origins in localised pastoral entertainment and the use of masks in processions or 'disguisings'. The 'anti-masque's' modern set makes its satirical function more prominent and the two-pronged form in itself was a fitting context for Duncan's mode of satire. The use of older forms as incongruous also denotes his participation in the modernistic impulse to make things 'new'.<sup>44</sup>

Duncan's draft essay on Pound describes how language in art is improved when spontaneous emotion or irrational desire is curtailed. Here he endorses the use of 'controlled expression' and 'ironic understatement' without 'tragic rhetoric'.<sup>45</sup> It indicates that he believes clarity and rationalisation more acceptable than muddled subjectivity. But his preoccupation with subjectivity, human psychology and inner vision demands an epistemological discourse that is difficult to contain within tight form and understatement. A corresponding formulation is outlined in the introduction to *Rochester's Lyrics* which enthuses about verse charged with the immediacy of emotion and experience while 'at the same time' it possesses 'a detachment which engages an objective intelligence towards that experience'.<sup>46</sup> This again recalls Eliot's notion of impersonal language where the poet speaks beyond the immediacy of his/her own presence, detaching personal experience from the subjective bond.

Duncan believed personal experience alone is necessary to justify the event inscribed but in doing so it is harder to transmute into the universal and objective. Instead, his work produces overspill and tension and text comprising co-existing, opposing elements. His drama offers constant counter-pointing of the actual (personality grounded in everyday experience) with the ideal (anti-realism/un-naturalism), the tragic with the comic and ironic and the partial with the full. The 'counterpoint' effect is also produced from the way that personal angst is only partially sublimated by the religious theme. Counterpointing is, in fact, integral to Duncan's theory of theatre wherein he pronounced that 'The essence of drama is conflict'. (RT, 24)

<sup>44</sup>Duncan praised Pound for this impulse, notably accomplished in *Maunderley* and the *Canto LXXXI*, stating 'All great literature is derivative. Pound made it new again', in op. cit. [1949-50], p. 2. RDF

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., [1949-50], p. 10.

<sup>46</sup>Ronald Duncan, draft 'Introduction', *Rochester's Lyrics and Satires* [1948], p. 24. RDF

## *vi. Religion and Redemption*

Duncan's writing included idealisations and traditional anti-modern ideas that were a natural corollary of his theoretical adherence to discipline and restraint. His own rural isolation – this was what had cocooned him from the war – was now received as a source and image of consolation for the pervasive austerity of blitzed Britain. Having shielded himself from active combat, by the mid-'40s, Duncan appeared more disillusioned and his life was increasingly rustic, 'The cottage was little more than a chaos of wreck wood, barrels and lumps of tallow surrounding a grand piano'. (HTME, 34)

An image of isolation bolsters the idea of Duncan's preoccupation with sin and evil. This preoccupation in the plays, however, relates to psychoanalytical and behaviourist models of identity that are less traditionalist than one might expect. By 1946, Duncan remembers a growing obsession with psychology and behaviour, particularly 'how much we are part of the pattern of continuity that holds us' (HTME, 116) and of 'the extent we are of ourselves apart from those traits and influences we have inherited'. (HTME, 117) Suddenly 'this fused with my search for absolute evil' and realising 'my unconscious mind had seen behind the camouflage' [of convention], he announces to his own surprise, 'All men hate their sons'. (HTME, 118) He began writing *Stratton*, or, *From Father to Son* in 1947. Its conception from a preoccupation with evil is an example of how Duncan provides commentaries on the personal circumstances and events that are sources for the philosophies that underpin his writing.

His first affair – with 'Petra' – coincided with Rose-Marie's illness with tuberculosis in 1945 and intensified in 1946. It is possible that Duncan equated life-threatening diseases with his own father's death from influenza and, at this point, tried to detach himself from another potential bereavement by transferring his emotions onto another woman. It is likely that the transference of emotion resulted in feelings of guilt even though regret for infidelity is never directly transmitted in the text of *Enemies*. Instead, he confesses, 'I suppose I was a born bigamist. Monogamy was invented by women. If a man doesn't find two women who attract him, he's unlikely to find one'. (HTME, 146) Duncan looks to the universalising languages of psychoanalysis and religious morality to explain guilt and suffering. They explain how he suffers, and how as a poet he has to suffer: it is the way he can experience humanity's pain.

While they are all plays that incorporate Christian philosophy, unlike Eliot, Duncan's evaluation of religion was not orthodox. Christianised references to divine and tragic destiny are emphasised in *Lucretia*, *Tomb*, *Tumbler* and *Stratton* (as well



as *Urchin* and *St. Spiv*). However, the religious theme of *Lucretia* occurs because 'Christianity shocks a modern audience in the same way that biology embarrassed our grandmothers'. (HRLBO, 99)

Eliot obviously felt defensive about his use of older frameworks. He claimed in 'Poetry and Drama' that:

A poet who appears to be wholly out of touch with his age may still have something very important to say to it. (SP, 92)

Elsom notes that Eliot and Duncan both sought 'the universal statement in the temporary phenomena' by their aim for poetic drama to encapsulate both contemporary and timeless aspects.<sup>47</sup> Eliot used a historical framework for *Murder* and transposed ancient Greek myth into *The Cocktail Party*. Duncan was less reverent towards his source material. Research for *Lucretia* did not involve reading Shakespeare, but Livy and Obey's *History of Rome* and *Le Viol de Lucrece* (1931). Pleasure in the practice of usurping existing material for art (also denoted by his extensive adaptation of foreign drama) is presented in *Enemies* as akin to the pursuit of beachcombing. For *Tomb*, he is inspired by fragments of images, 'But these images were there like bits of timber or tallow I'd picked up on the beach'. (HTME, 20)

Although some poetic dramatists tied ancient themes to ordinary life with naturalistic dialogue and modern social nuances, Elsom notes that their attempts at synthesis were not without 'a sense of strain'. (JE, 64) The sense of strain in Duncan's plays arises from the way Duncan 'self-dramatised belief' rather than achieving a synthesis of topical issues and faith. While the narrator figures speak from a Christianised acceptance of the necessary re-enactment of things, Reid is doubtful about Duncan's sincerity regarding religious issues:

Christ fascinated him; as with Graham Greene, he found material there – for drama. And what one uses one does not respect. *The Mongrel* could have been written only by someone who self-dramatised belief and its rejection. (AV, 13)

In *Lucretia*, the opera is not resolved by an active Christian dénouement. Rather, it oscillates between despair at the eternal tragedy of a legend that laments man's state in a deterministic universe, and the sermonising Christian commandment for faith in moral resolution. What is of contemporary significance thus needs questioning. James Joyce's use of myth in his structuring of *Ulysses* mirrors the psychology of common life and suggests the existence of similar lifestyles and knowledge existing in the far distant past. In *Lucretia*, Duncan used a chorus at the start, middle and end of the opera, to comment from 'outside time' or neutralise history to signal universal relevance and frame the action. As Collatinus's forgiveness intensifies Lucretia's

<sup>47</sup>John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 65.

remorse, she stabs herself. But it is indeterminate how the violation is to be interpreted, either as actual violence or symbolic rape. It could be the tyranny of Etruscan conquerors upon the Roman citizens, original sin raping the purity of spirit, or *any* violation. The chorus conveys a Christian perspective to the tragic action:

CHORUS: We'll view these human passions  
Through eyes which once have wept with Christ's own tears,<sup>48</sup>

but such lines emphasise the distancing and differentiation of a Christian view. Instead anachronism draws attention to differing interpretations of sacrifice.

Contrasting verdicts of despair and faith are articulated. At the end of Act II, the chorus sings on the brevity of love and inevitability of death, despairing 'Is this it all? It is all!' But next, in the Epilogue, the same chorus now rejoin with reference to the Saviour 'It is not all... He is all!' (RL, 63) Mertz accurately perceives this as disjunction as the narrators transcend 'a strictly external perspective in their multiple roles'. (MM, 7) The doubling of myth, if anything, neutralises history, whilst anachronism produces meanings that are dynamic and ambiguous.

The play *Stratton* dramatises the rejection of belief. The hero's dramatic behaviour is prompted by a sudden withdrawal of belief in conventional ethics after pondering his friend Courteney's words. Courteney is a vicar but has lost his faith, 'in the same manner as a man misplaces/An old tobacco pouch'. (S, 33) The action presents conflict between a controlling, dominating father, Stratton, and his son, Cory. The only assertion of independence by Cory – his marriage – is subverted by the intervention of his father who seduces Cory's fiancée, Katharine.<sup>49</sup> The action utilizes psychoanalytic language to explain the symbolism of dramatic action. When Stratton asks how the doctors have diagnosed Maria's blindness, she answers, 'They say I cannot see/Because I am afraid to look'. (S, 93) Stratton says to Courteney 'You sound very depressed'. (S, 29) In Act I Scene 2, the prisoner in the courtroom is, we are told, suffering from 'simple amnesia'. (S, 54) Blindness and vision relates to belief and its rejection, and at the core of such issues, reality and illusion. Stratton asks his friend 'You mean that self-deception can be such/That reality appears illusion?' (S, 31) He remembers his dream (enacted at the start of the first scene) of strangling his wife and asks himself 'Was that me? Is that my real nature behind the mask?' (S, 41)

*Stratton* contains the motif of man playing out a prescribed role and the notions of both self-control and external forces are addressed. Courteney first enlightens Stratton on morality being a device by society to secure compliance with irrational demands and selfish ends, 'The rest is all self-nourishment'. (S, 37) Stratton

<sup>48</sup>Duncan, op. cit., 1953, p. 51. Hereafter referred to as RL.

<sup>49</sup>A similar theme arises in Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman* (1949).

becomes the audience's reference for man following his desires, as he becomes more beast-like and less in control throughout the play.

The theory that our unconscious is responsible for our conscious thoughts and desires contends with, but eventually disguises or excuses, the issue of individual responsibility. The link of personal psychology to religious imagery corresponds in this play, intentionally or not, with Jungian thought. The twentieth-century discourse of psychoanalysis especially of Jung, and also Freud's theory of motive, also presents the unconscious in terms (though internalised) of the Oedipus myth. Stratton's murder of Cory and the repetition of phrases such as, 'father and son'/father to son/my son' foreground the myth. There is also an analogy to the father/son relationship of God/Christ as Courteney states, 'Yes, yes, it's as hard to console a man for his son's death/as it is to console man for the death of the son of Man'. (S, 153) and accuses Stratton of 'Kneeling daily to that god you worship/The jealous God which is your jealous self?' (S, 39)

The analogy imposes a Christianised perspective onto Stratton's role which is stressed by his statement, 'God can expect no less from us than what God does to Man'. (S, 157) But by the end, it seems as if such statements are merely the intellect providing reasons for why he has gratified his wishes. One critic noted that:

Mr. Duncan seems to think that the responsibility for man's evil heart can be placed upon God. Stratton must face his life; he must accept responsibility but does not.<sup>50</sup>

The potential repercussions of his crime in practical terms, seem too easily dismissed. Instead, Stratton's selfish ends are gradually satisfied and his independent powers of reason are seen as merely the tools of his instinct. Only after the instinct's satisfaction does he arrive at a conclusion and subsequently rationalise it, as he does about murder, saying, 'All men hate the thing they love'. (S, 145)

At first, Courteney makes his friend responsible for his vices as man does God/Jesus and Stratton becomes an archetypal scapegoat, resented for his goodness. But in Act II, the scapegoat becomes anti-hero as Stratton seduces his son's fiancée, kills Cory and strangles his own wife.

The demand for a sustained reading of the play as parable is foregrounded by repetition of doom-laden verdicts on humanity, 'Thus do we kill the things we love./... Endless, endless!' (S, 159) (These lines are closely derived from Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*; a poem Duncan admits a continuing enthusiasm for in his autobiography.<sup>51</sup>)

<sup>50</sup>C. B. Purdom, 'What makes A Dramatist?', *Theatre Newsletter* (10th June, 1950), np., RDF

<sup>51</sup>Duncan paid homage to and emulated Wilde when he wrote a parallel work to his *Ballad of Reading Gaol* with *The Ballad of Stratton Gaol* after a brief imprisonment for salvaging petrol from the sea in 1943.

An image of human vulnerability pervades the play, leaving scepticism, defeat and suffering to dominate over any positive message. The view offered by Stratton and Maria during one of their reveries is that it is mortals' fate to endure time, 'Turning the rack of our hearts/Stretching each second till the minutes groan with hours'. (S, 120) The characters envisaged within this cycle merely play small parts in the wider picture of mortality. Life, as for Hamlet, is comparable merely to sleep and the view of mortality offered is simplifying, circular and pessimistic.

Stratton recognises his role within this cycle, emphasised by references to the family line. Maria points out how the river figures on the Stratton coat of arms, like inheritance itself, 'flowing from father to son'. (S, 70) One can only 'submit' to the river (signifying the eternal flow of time). (S, 70) Stratton realises 'what better security can a son have than his father's/death' (S, 96) and that he can never die. But he, as a man, is seen as all men, a point made through frequent universal statements.

Stratton is then only redeemed by his self-destruction and suffering. However, his, 'Better to be damned than to be redeemed' comment contradicts the next statement that will apparently redeem him *without* prior damnation: 'For those whom we love live on in our hearts/And by their death they redeem our life'. (S, 160) This confuses the emphasis on fate operating through external forces or 'universal design'.

The universal design idea is depicted by Stratton's role as a cog in the family wheel of tradition. Having created a son in his likeness, he 'can indulge in the sensation of being a god'. (S, 113) Exemplifying the perfection of the father, Stratton tells Cory, 'Still you are not me though you might like to be'. (S, 82) But this is an impracticable notion in the same way as is an author who claims individual creation but is obscured by his writing. Stratton's struggle with autonomy effectively displays the problem of over-idealising the father into a powerful God-like role. In family structures with absent fathers especially, paternalism is entwined with the God-like ideal of purity and autonomy, traits that are impossible in real terms. His autonomy is unattainable because the play clarifies his final obligation to a destiny dependent on his own Father-figure: God.

The play reveals the paradoxical role of fatherhood as well as the contradictions inherent in Christian sacrifice. As a man, Stratton can be father and son. But his role can also allegorise the Christ or Judas story. As he follows the path of 'all men' and their suffering, he cannot deny the experience of passion for himself. The play advocates exploration of such a relationship in these terms: Stratton goes through his own betrayal, his crucifixion and resurrection in the spirit in order to regain lost unity and harmony between his selves.

His role as representative from a world of universal values is foregrounded by having a '*voice above the music*' just before the final curtain, speak an epilogue that begins, 'What a thing is man,/Blessed with a spirit/Damned with a nature'. (S, 160)

The words remind the audience that it is our general fate as humans to undergo suffering while the dramatisation of personal suffering illustrates an individual case of such martyrdom. Stratton's actions are presented as being easily misinterpreted but such a presentation warns against our misunderstanding and intolerance of deviant behaviour when, in fact, this type of behaviour demonstrates our universal susceptibility and non-culpability.

However, the allegory and the inclusiveness of this message are destabilised by the portrayal of Stratton's particular situation. His unconventional suffering presents him as exceptional. He wishes to fulfil an alternative to his fate and break family ties. Refusing to step down from his law practice, he says, 'Why should I make way for my shadow'. (S, 80) But, in the last scene, Stratton's character is transformed from its excesses of 'self-expression/self disgust' (S, 159) back into a martyr. This shift throws the audience into a zone of ontological ambiguity. A last-minute Christianised message about sin and atonement is inserted into the play as Maria redeems Stratton by her death. Her knowledge of the filicide reminds him of his guilt so he strangles her and proclaims 'No, as her body fell so did my spirit rise'. (S, 160)

The implication of Maria's martyrdom, instead of resolving the family's dilemma, obfuscates the action in terms of its translation to ordinary modern life. Before her strangulation she persuades Stratton that, 'It is better to die/And live in you/Than to live myself and be dead to you'. (S, 159) At the same time, a lack of spontaneity is enforced by emphasis of the words '*inevitable*' and '*necessity*' relating to great love, its destruction and fear. (S, 159) Her violent death brings melodrama and tragedy to the final scene. While naturalism diminishes with the obscure words and behaviour, the previously realistic elements of the drama cannot help but signify to the audience that Maria is less a martyr than a victim of Stratton's psychological hell.

The play tempts this reading because Stratton's individuality is confronted by his comprehension of himself as prisoner of his own self-wisdom. He despairingly interrogates his own actions in the last scene, 'Oh, my son, what have I done?' (S, 157) and realises that 'I dared to know my nature'. (S, 158) His character is dualised by its internal complexity – his megalomania and desire for autonomy – and by the way he is pictured as submitting to destiny. This idea is exacerbated at the end of the drama by his individual awareness of entrapment in myth with the episode where '*(His hands rise almost involuntarily)* Stay where you are'. (S, 159) Stratton therefore plays out the impossibility of archetypal signification because Duncan has him refer to an idea of freedom, nature and will-power, which also translates into the notion of Freudian deviance (in realistic terms, man as selfish and destructive). Duncan applies or overlays a Christian philosophy onto the plot to give symbolic credence to certain (that is, all, and thus also his own) human actions.

Freedom and entrapment by one's genes were a particular anxiety of Duncan's. *Enemies* tells how he decides to look up his (supposed) Wittelsbach ancestry and reads that 'The male members of this family are noted for their passion for horses and poetry', then he remembers snapping the book shut in horror, 'resenting this playing out of other people's lives through my own'. (*HTME*, 117) Yet it is not so much the case that Duncan's personality works against the discourses required to express man's eternal problems. Instead, his writing re-addresses and redraws our universal understanding of problems such as the cycle of guilt and expiation by its presentation of embodied, suffering heroes. These heroes are constructed in scenes that foreground their ambivalence and multiple perspectives.

Duncan's theory of dramatic characterisation actually corresponds to modernist art and its attention to the implicit fragmentation of human character and its contradictory psyche. For him, an individual's life is not as symmetrical as art because the mirror that reflects the self holds many different portraits. He thought opera should aim to present characters who 'can at least show an emotional conflict within' and believed that 'this flexibility of mood has been achieved in contemporary verse and drama'.<sup>52</sup> It is clear such flexibility overrides the presentation of a singularly moralistic view or over-assertion of the rectitude of his beliefs.

<sup>52</sup>Duncan, op. cit., (Nov., 1951), p. 2.

## Part 2. Locating a Historical Subject

### *Introduction*

Duncan premised that 'the individual contains the crystallisation of the eternal problems of humanity' (RT, 4) and by this he hopes to achieve a detached perspective while an investment in the individual also impinges on the plays. The co-existence of both contexts is produced from and, indeed, creates an internally conflicted self. Although such a self appears in the poetry, Lane concludes that it does not produce impersonality or detachment because of Duncan's 'subsequent conscious assimilation of its existence'. (DL, 24) His definition of the desired point of 'impersonal' writing is when the 'I' ceases to be conditioned by the poet's contextual relationship with his environment. But because Duncan tends to appear in his poems as a dominant 'I', personal self-consciousness ultimately subsumes any paradox. This traps him into self-reflexivity and prevents objectivity and universality. External reality is always secondary to the foregrounding of his thought process, closing off debate and questioning about history.

Self-emphasis is a corollary of Duncan's style of journalism and criticism or when writing about events and personal participation is an intrinsic factor in the production of his texts. However it appears that the authorial thought-process does not subsume but in fact upholds a confrontation of the self with the external and the transient with the ideal. Much of *Enemies* maintains tension and overspill between the narratives of experience and of writing. Other memories emphasise the everyday environment against which his encounter with high art is brought down to earth. An example is the occasion Britten plays *Peter Grimes* for the family at their cottage. Before the recital could begin 'on the untuned piano,' the groundwork entailed:

my disappearing into the water wheel machinery with a hair pin which served to hold the join of the leather belt which drove the electric generator to provide the composer with light, and the hasty removal of one hundred-week old cockerels which Rose Marie was rearing round a couple of hurricane lamps in a box. (HTME, 34)

The crescendo of activity, usually incompatible with piano recital, is described to great effect. *Practical Ballad* (1945) gives directions for erecting a pig-sty and ends 'Strength, not ornament, is necessary./And that goes for a pig-sty, and poetry'. (CP, 83) Writing is compared with practical building and farming. Incongruous encounters also occur frequently in the plays, for example, the television screen and broadcaster's commentary on the anticipated miracle at Anthony's tomb. The absurdity of the tumbler's clumsiness before the statue of the Virgin is obvious.

The paradox of an objective expression of reality is sustained, albeit problematically, by Duncan's aim to demonstrate how 'apparent incongruities' of different 'levels of consciousness and experience' (*PCT*, 12) should be 'counter-pointed'. The same essay suggests that because only *apparently* incongruous, it is the dramatist's job 'to integrate them' (*PCT*, 12) into a dramatic congruity that reflects their real, though non-apparent, coherence. In fact counterpointing incorporates integration as well as opposition and thus confuses what it is that art (rather than reality) makes possible.

Duncan struggles to express reality through contemporary art that 'walks on a tightrope, poised between comedy and tragedy'. (*AO*, 4) Consequently, *Tumbler's* integration (or uniting) of lowly clumsiness with perfection, also entails its opposite, human failure and separation from Christ. The counterpoint techniques therefore play out contradictory ideologies and give greater validity to the characters' pessimism. Anthony is 'Imprisoned' and 'My own pride the punctual jailer of my/pride's own tyranny' (*TWTTT*, 51) while he also asks for 'mercy'. (*TWTTT*, 51) His personal deficiencies are the incentive for introspection and redemption but also man's reason for his failure to attain freedom. This leads to presentation of a necessarily fragmented individual who cannot reconcile himself to the world in which the drama presents its solutions. As well as conveying a preoccupation with objective vision, the post-war concern with faith and doubt is played out here as the plays articulate the paradox of religious truth while they do not wholly reject it. Therefore it is worthy to continue an analysis that accounts for compositional context along with the works' intertextuality as well as incorporating textual evaluation. I will show how intertext and historical conditions of production alleviate over-personalised elements of the work and, interestingly, affect its subtle multi-layers of meaning.

### *i. Post-War Faith and Doubt*

The conception of *Tomb* comes mid-war, as Duncan is having nightmares of persecution for being a conscientious objector. Along with 'the thought of imminent arrest' (*AMAI*, 268), Bosch's image of the distressing ordeal of St. Antony begins to reoccur in his mind – 'I used to wake up and find I was soaked with sweat' (*AMAI*, 268) – and he begins to write the meditations, 'hoping that it might make a masque which the community could perform in one of the fields'. (*AMAI*, 268) Duncan associates his own historical experience with the writing of a play that centralises the notion of guilt for avoiding duty and counteracts it with one of cleansing through the natural environment.



Baxter's review, 'The Poet and the Comic', gives further reason to cite historical context, in this case for the appeal of the play. The review was written in partial comparison with Askey's frivolous production *Follow The Girls* at His Majesty's Theatre. Its title acknowledges opposing cultural forms that signify stratification of post-war entertainment and audience. The majority continued to enjoy light comedy, conventional naturalism and the escapism and the fantasy of Rogers and Hammerstein's and Ivor Novello's musicals. There was a tendency to hero-worship big-name actors such as John Mills and Michael Redgrave. The other side of the page of Baxter's review suggests other factors intrinsic to Britain's post-war desire for escapism. The newspaper reports 'hundreds of food ships' that are to 'be unloaded next week'.<sup>53</sup> Troops are out and the dockers back. There are advertisements for salvage vital to the housing programme and a bulletin on Bow Church, the first to be rebuilt, displaying new trends towards rebuilding and hope as well as the dearth of an impoverished post-war economic climate.

For Baxter, it appears that to be incongruous is a positive attribute and he paints Duncan as 'a farmer who alternately puts his hand to the plough and the pen'. (BB, 1945) He expresses reverence for:

Ronald Duncan, who can mix a Bach Chorale and American Jazz... . If we live in age dominated by Calvary and the Atomic Bomb, why should a poet try to force his thoughts into a straitjacket? (BB, 1945, 6)

Baxter succinctly forwards the view that one must applaud the unevenness of the work because contemporary life is also like this. His words significantly link Duncan to his time.

For Browne, the incompatibilities were the high point of *Tomb*:

The spiritual experience owes as much to Gandhi with whom Ronald spent several months, as to the Catholicism in the framework of which it is set; it struck a responsive chord in many people's hearts at that moment, with its combination of frankness, the craving for roots and the search for the way forward into an unknown age. The second part, satirising contemporary religiosity had a good deal of fun in it, the kinds of fun which relieved the long tension of war... . (EMB, 159)

Browne characterises the post-war moment as a 'search for the way forward into an unknown age' which implies bewilderment as well as secularisation. Sinfield suggests that after the war, 'religious symbols and practices that used to supply it no longer speak adequately, for most people to a society that has changed beneath them' and that 'this caused much anxiety in the period'.<sup>54</sup> He cites a 1947 Mass Observation survey evidencing increasing doubt regarding religious issues.

<sup>53</sup>Reverse side of cutting of review by Beverly Baxter, 'The Poet and The Comic', *Evening Standard* (5th Nov., 1945), p. 6, RDF. Hereafter referred to as 'BB' in the text.

<sup>54</sup>Alan Sinfield, 'Varieties of Religion' in *Society and Literature 1945-1970*, ed. by Alan Sinfield (London, Methuen, 1983), p. 91.

The theme of irresolution and doubt as well as disjunctive styles are factors in the way that the messages of Duncan's post-war plays tend to be very mixed. The double life he depicts himself as living in *Enemies* helps to explain the dynamics behind the complex critical consciousness in his plays. *Tomb* was written not solely in isolation at Hurstbourne, but was produced out of the experience of farming and family life as well. It is not surprising then that multivalence affects its presentation. *Enemies* confesses a father's coolness towards his son, 'I had always favoured Briony, but Roger had never moved into my affections in the same way'. (HTME, 215) The theme of father repressing son clearly betrays personal anxiety as it comes to outweigh the reasons for spiritual change that Stratton is meant to go through in the course of the action. By Act III, he confesses he hates his son, 'For you have filched my life'. (S, 117) Though originally disquieted by the nature of evil itself the action focuses specifically on the deficiencies of fatherhood. But as if to detract from the singularity of Cory's, the natural logic of events decreases as the play goes on for a further act to extend its inner logic of symbolism with Maria's strangulation. So, while Stratton's character pins down the contradictions Duncan saw as existing in the world, the play also incorporates the contradictions associated with his individual life and its connection with his environment.

*Tomb* reflects Duncan's refusal to jettison aspects of the society that he also broadly criticised. People flock to Antony's tomb to check for an enshrined presence, and mock the Old Man who really is the Saint. Here Duncan's critique of the age of intrusive journalism is profound. But despite this, at no point is the past specified as preferable to the present. Instead, Antony says in the final scene, 'Everything must renew' (TWTTT, 98) and the postcard-seller's wife tells her husband she is 'glad' the tomb is empty because, 'Tomorrow you will leave and get a job that will keep us and give us something to eat'. (TWTTT, 92) While there is a critique of modern scepticism and the notion of an escape from chronological time these are both tempered by the acknowledgement of secular practicality and how hope can be retrieved from within it. Anxiety is present but there is lack of straightforward disaffection with modern daily life and the musical elements avert the grim prognosis more common to Eliot's plays of the period such as *The Family Reunion*. *Tomb* and *Stratton* evoke the necessity of confronting the everyday and spiritual. Anthony has to eat and, later, avoids the camera's intrusion; Stratton has to mend the burst dam on his estate and face an inquest. These realities are necessary to the plays' effect of communicable realism while the complex relationships between the two worlds prevents, as Baxter says, Duncan 'straitjacketing' ideas in the play. Duncan's autobiographies also construct a dual voice in the text: one that is over-conclusive so it can gain power over events, and one which deflates the self as a result of its powerlessness.

## ii. Personal/Textual History

Even with the success of *Tomb*, much of *Enemies* focuses on how the uncaring world fails to grasp the significance of Duncan's vision and writing. He declares, 'though *The Eagle Has Two Heads* and *Lucretia* had been performed on Broadway, both had flopped'. (HTME, 308) Even in this brief sentence one sees a typical Duncan-esque writing feature: simultaneous assertion and detraction – in this case, of achievement.

In 1945 Duncan was offered and took a job with the BBC. He worked for them again in 1946 and in 1947 undertook some film criticism for the *Evening Standard*. During this time, Duncan was trying to run the farm single-handedly, but needed extra work to maintain his family especially as Rose-Marie was now ill with tuberculosis (1945-1947). From 1946 he contributed his 'Jan's Journal' column weekly to the *Standard*. Though he undertook journalism and accepted a job in television, some of his commentary signifies the duality of his hatred of and dependence on the outside world and the mass.

*Enemies* presents the theoretical and idealistic thought behind his literary involvements but also encounters his writing activities with the 'reality' of the autobiographical world he experiences. He says of *Eagle*, 'I wrote almost the whole of this play in the electric trains that run from Waterloo to the T.B. sanatorium'. (HTME, 95) Therefore one can perceive an overlap between the vulnerable social realistic self, embedded in modern society and the more idealistic fictions of a personal, private self.

In many ways Duncan's is a conventional autobiographical subject because he engages with the world and presents the events he remembers as indispensable to the path of the narrative of his life's journey. His memories serve as examples that construct and reinforce his beliefs in how the world is. His personal moral conclusions are the sites of self-verification of the subject through textual closure of meaning. After many anecdotal episodes Duncan adds a retrospective summary such as 'fashion is all of taste' or 'We are often most merciful when we seek to show none' and 'Most of us are as far from reality as we can get'. But obviously, he does not learn his lessons at the time and to maintain interest and innocence, the autobiographical world he writes himself into must necessarily perpetuate new hazards.

Duncan establishes the impression that his consciousness is at the mercy of external events. He comments, 'generally I let the pressure of circumstances propel me'. (HTME, 345) They are mainly oppositional. How the world views his work often enters the realm of conspiracy theory. One hears how, in late 1949, *Stratton* was mis-directed. Marion Stein had just married the Earl of Harewood. At the first-night party, the interest was 'not in my play, but Marion's dress'. (HTME, 209) The

reason for the ill-fatedness of the Mercury production 'was the weather. The critics, sweating in the small theatre, were more spiteful than ever'. (HTME, 217) These are taken as the sole reasons for failure in a reverse type of serendipity.

Luck, chance meetings, contingency are also prevailing features of this narrative. Duncan only meets the sculptor Epstein in 1946 because he happens to be renting from the old lady 'Queen Victoria', in Hampstead. He assumes it is 'at Peter Brook's suggestion' that he receives a mysterious invitation to have tea with Olivier. (HTME, 230) It is only apparently with the great actor's prompting that *Juan* evolves, because 'Olivier's interest had stimulated me'. (HTME, 238) Duncan's interaction with others is important as it establishes his talent as necessary to them while he is able to undervalue himself to appear modest. The part of Dona Ana in *Juan* is constructed as a personal gift to Anna Proclemer. He states 'I wrote the part for her and not for Vivien Leigh'. (HTME, 239) Of the poem *Judas*, Duncan remembers how he 'let it lie in a bottom drawer' but 'Martin Browne and Edward Blacksell insisted that it was published'. (HTME, 363) Later we read how Olivier forgets that he ever showed an interest in *Juan*. The inference is that Olivier is not one of the enlightened few who recognise Duncan's indispensable talent, but the episode also records the deflation of the author's self-importance.

The more Duncan stresses suffering the more it seems he engineers and brings it upon himself. For example, it seems odd that he chooses not to enlighten the tourists who mistakenly expect his farm to be serving cream teas, until they ask for the bill. What redeems long-suffering or despair each time, is, in the plays, faith, and in the autobiography, less faith than comic action prompted by others' mistakes and accidental circumstances that confirm Duncan's view of foolish humanity. His refusal to submit to the reality of events, the perverse pleasure in the embarrassment of a situation and his playing out of the full scene and its consequences, actually inspires Duncan's satirical flair and the image of himself, amongst other constructions, as suffering sceptic.

Other evidence suggests that Duncan engaged with his immediate environment not only passively but capitalised on his liaisons with others and knew how to network. By 1944 the *Weekly Review* asks Duncan to write articles for them on Eliot's recommendation. His link with Portsmouth and the newly evolving *Scythe* magazine must have influenced commissions for work for the *Dairy Farmer* in April of 1944. In September, Omar Pound arrives at West Mill, then Britten and Pears stay for a week. Duncan certainly created an environment always open to visitors: a place to extend artistic acquaintance and for renewed conversation.

Rose-Marie's diary entry of 7th March 1944 records how they travel to Bude on the 4th where E. Martin Browne is producing Laurence Housmann's *Abraham*

and Isaac and *The Way of the Cross*, 'He tracked MB down to some vicar's tea party, which he gate crashed!'<sup>55</sup> Browne remembers the first occasion he meets Duncan as when 'I was approached by a short man with strikingly sad eyes beneath a massive brow. He said he had something to show me'.<sup>56</sup> Duncan's version in *Enemies* states that 'Martin Browne was at Bude' (*HTME*, 30) but does not mention his own visit to Bude or their lunch the next day and says instead that Browne approaches him first by letter at Eliot's suggestion and that by the time 'Martin came to West Mill, I had completed the masque and sketched the satirical anti-Masque'. (*HTME*, 30) The different versions of the same event reveal how the reality of events is glossed over, blurred and elaborated by biographical recall, as well as proving how Duncan has played down his own opportunism.

So, despite its emphasis on mistakes and accidents, *Enemies* does not construct a completely passive subject overpowered by the chaos of a misunderstanding world. Though there are signs of the narrator's reluctance to submit to their reality, neither does this signify a voice immersed in its own distorted subjective vision. Instead, his refusal is self-consciously inscribed so the truth of his subjectivity also appears constructed, creating a paradox. The reader sees external biographical fact turned into mythic or fictional representations. Parts of Rose-Marie's 1946 diary, written during her stay in the sanatorium, describe her husband's discussion with her of the libretto of *Lucretia*. Rather than assuming all-knowingness, he looks to a woman he is close to for advice about how Lucretia might behave in the rape scene. Furthermore, the external pressure of his wife's real illness obviously forms a crisis in their relationship, poignantly recorded in the autobiography. He writes, 'For months I had been aware that Rose Marie might die' but the next two sentences – 'I had stood by several of her graves. I had buried her on the cliffs of Devon' (*HTME*, 120) – combine tragic reality with fantasies about his own part in suitably aesthetic scenes of burial. Her illness is a constant inspiration for *Lucretia*. Of the final soliloquy before Lucretia's suicide, the narrator confesses that 'with my eyes on Rose Marie through the open door, I scribbled the speech quickly for Lucretia'. (*HTME*, 126) As he sees her hand trail over the arm of her chair, he writes Collatinus's epitaph, 'This dead hand lets fall'. (*HTME*, 126) Reid is aware of the problems of this type of composition because:

the danger is to cherish the response above the thing that creates it; it is a greater danger to use reality for the sake of the response in oneself, in yielding in order to make one more aware that one is alone, and if to experience is all, then one is forever rooted before the mirror of self-consciousness, its prisoner. (*Tribute*, 12-13)

Reid disapproves of such unremitting composition of life into works of art. With

<sup>55</sup>Rose-Marie Duncan, diary (March 7th, 1944). *RDF*

<sup>56</sup>Browne, op. cit., 1981, p. 153. Hereafter referred to as 'EMB' in the main text.

Duncan it means that an external event works as source for a dramatisation which is then self-consciously contextualised in another document, the autobiography, which itself acts as mirror and supposed jailer of Duncan's experience. But the process does not over-monumentalise reality. Instead it shows how the response – Duncan's fictional work – is embedded in its process of composition. He grounds the art in its original context by connecting both the event and the transcription of it. The event and its fictional version are differentiated as separate realities: the fictional version claiming precedence in terms of its significance for Duncan's assurance about his own ability to create. At the same time, both are equivalent because inscribed by the same medium, language. Duncan's autobiographical writing especially, self-consciously raises intertextuality as an issue because he reveals the subjective nature of his experience and how that experience is disguised by, and becomes art in another text.

Despite his writing foregrounding the textual, experience is as much an important element of the process of transcription and disguise: as much a part of the source event as it is of the event of artistic creation. Furthermore, despite Duncan's selection of each scene and anecdote the concept of chance is irreducible if what are seen as unpredictable events call the shots in the action. While the disguise of experience by art (into fiction or by writing) is inevitable, a wholly escapist mythologizing is deterred (while neither is the 'response' negatively foregrounded) because the art itself describes both the disparity and aptness of life and its transformation through art.

For example, Duncan recalls composing a scene for *Eagle* in the back of a car, despite the traffic jam:

But my emotions were in focus. Rose Marie was propped up in the front of the car. Archie Ling was driving. Where was he driving? He had a sort of death's head.  
(*HTME*, 129)

He goes on to quote the Queen and Stanislas's exchange about the fragility of great love. 'Where was he driving?' marks a sudden lapse in consciousness of the surroundings and an immersion in artistic creation. As Duncan overlays the immediacy of his expressive vision on top of the whole scene, Ling takes on a death's head. A loss of assurance is implied by the present-tense query and Duncan's shaping consciousness is activated as he sees the death's head imposed on Ling. The style aptly signifies the hallucinatory quality of the moment wherein actual experience is transferred into poignant emotion and potential tragedy is overlaid with the sad absurdity of human perception and its responses.

External contingencies enable the autobiographical subject to historicise itself and then combine historicity with imagination. Symbolic anecdote, insights and

revelations come from everyday events and trains of thought. When stumbling through woods Duncan discovers wild garlic that Rose-Marie adds to her salad diet at the tuberculosis clinic. Soon, 'Her cough had decreased' and 'the cavity had begun to calcify'. (*HTME*, 134) The tourist episode above is seen to be the inspiration for Duncan's decision to let West Mill, 'This thought grew like a seed in my mind'. (*HTME*, 213)

As is typical of autobiography, Duncan perceives his own centrality in the machinations of fate as his presence imposes divine significance on events. Unfavourable circumstances embed him in social, realistic concerns but also highlight his singularity when suffering gives him cause to criticise with opposing, private convictions. Vulnerability and thus a link to common humanity is presented along with the authorial arrogance of focusing upon his perceived singularity. Here, paradoxical doubling, actually intrinsic to the autobiographical form, is expanded and intensified. The agency of the protagonist is conceived through subjective formations of a self who is, ironically, repeatedly affected by time and change, as is Duncan's writing output. Historical forces impinge upon individual freedom and upon the process of composition of Duncan's works. Describing their impact actually affects the writing and detracts from his aims to remain 'high and aloof'. It frees the narrative from formal compositional devices that establish a more consistently assured omniscient voice. In these ways Duncan's autobiographical writing fittingly expresses the problematics of auto-portraiture.

It is important that Duncan's self-portrait is presented as contradictory and ongoing in its representation. In a visual description of himself as author, he depicts a disconnected physiognomy, wherein:

The mouth is small, the lips are thin: a feeble barrier for the wild and virulent tongue within. The chin is weak. The ears? I'd never looked at mine before. (*HTME*, 280)

The description does not impose coherence nor pin down a unified self. Instead of self-analysis divulging an essential core of being, the existent nature of the self is privileged. I shall discuss further the relevance to existential thought in section v. Moments of self-scrutiny, when they do occur, appear quite disarming. On explaining that he writes because it is the only thing he can do with any degree of skill, he concludes 'Of course sometimes I fall off the page, but nobody notices'. (*HTME*, 249) Such admissions, with reference to the complexities of his creative process, clash with Duncan's triter personal moral conclusions. When recalling writing *Tomb*, he expresses gratitude that Eliot shows 'no resentment' that, 'I was muscling in on what he might have regarded as his own preserves'. (*HTME*, 230)

Holmes sees autobiographical discourse as not conventional but radical: a 'maverick or mongrel art' and 'An unholy alliance of marriage between fiction, fact,

invention and truth'.<sup>57</sup> The recreation of fact must be balanced with reliance on other documentary evidence. So while any 'factual' pattern must be constructed from materials that already have a fictional element, one may still detail events that have a bearing on composition, as Duncan's own life and work are so closely connected. His autobiography assumes a reference to external reality to embody the subject within its environment. However, the compulsion to authenticate the self also requires that it monumentalise experience wherein the shaping consciousness turns life into art. Though artistic vision enhances life for the narrator it does not overwhelm his engagement with reality by myopically closing down his responses to events. The sense of the contingent, the inclusion of his own weaknesses, others' accusations, criticism and a sense of absurdity, create less of a closed vision as they reduce over-assertiveness in the discourse. With reference to its autobiographical function, the reduction of omniscience is an effect that, paradoxically, historicises the subject while it also emphasises the sense of a life fashioned in and through written texts.

### *iii. The Determinants of Duncan's Dramatic Success in the '40s*

Clearly, *Enemies* supplies an oscillating impression of Duncan's reliance on contingent, external forces for his writing and his opposition to these forces. Thus it is important to provide an account of the wider historical circumstances that afforded him both opportunities and situations to react against.

*Stratton* was written for a West End audience and Duncan acknowledges his consideration of public taste stating 'the play contained both a murder and trial scene which on one level made it sure of some commercial approval'. (HTME, 199) Though he declares that success 'became meaningless to me', (HTME, 266) the need for the approval of different figures is important as he cites Gielgud and Olivier 'by their repeated snubs', as contriving to 'kill any promise' (HTME, 200) he has as a playwright in this decade. He alters the title of *Saint Spiv* to *Nothing up My Sleeve* on its production at the Watergate in 1950, as the former title offends Eliot's 'theological sensibilities'. (HTME, 232) The way Duncan is inserted into his social-cultural ethos, and his resistance to it, thus resounds in the work. Contradictory ideologies are played out in his drama and reduce the pre-eminence of a singular, overly scholastic or superior authorial opinion.

On one level, it is easy to associate Duncan with an outmoded traditionalist position. He resented the soft-soaping subsidy process of funding with its hierarchical

<sup>57</sup>Holmes in Batchelor, ed., op. cit, pp. 15-26, (p. 15).



conditions. To him, the British Council was 'the dowager doyen of culture' and their post-war project to reinstate the arts, hypocritical because 'It was no easy matter for the Allies to produce anything that embodied the spiritual aims for which they had fought'. (*HTME*, 99)

Duncan's critical views during this period align him with Terence Rattigan, due to his comparable disparagement and dependence on the theatre audience. Rattigan also expressed disillusionment with contemporary arts management. His play *Harlequinade* (1948) is based round a touring theatre encouraged by the Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts. It attacks the idea of state intervention in the arts and 'new Britain' is discussed negatively with reference to the Labour government's ambitions to educate the masses. It presents the necessity and pressure of writing for the theatre under the consuming gaze of Aunt Edna, symbolic of commercialised culture, 'a hopeless lowbrow' who is respectable and middle class with time and money on her hands.<sup>58</sup>

When the 1945 Labour government reconstituted the field of culture and education, it provoked anxiety in the middle-classes who were settled in their ways. Because of his views, Rattigan was perceived by critics such as Tynan to be a middle-brow playwright who refused to accept progress. The discovery of *The Frontier - A Christian Commentary on the Common Life* amongst Duncan's papers suggests that in 1950 he read the pamphlet that covered the oncoming general election, the issue of unemployment, the modern mass production plant and regrets the decline of the middle classes.<sup>59</sup> These views follow ideas outlined by Eliot in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) on democracy and its detriment to art.

The emergence of the welfare state also prompted the concern and misgivings of Cyril Connolly and John Lehmann. John Bull believes these misgivings were part of a current, rather than out-dated, climate of opposition. Of current trends in theatre especially (citing Rattigan), he identifies 'isolationist' leanings, away from European and American cultural influences, back to tradition.<sup>60</sup> Duncan's opposition to education for the masses and his general distaste for the populace and America are all apparent in *Tomb*. The satirical character of The Man of Culture in *Tomb* introduces himself in his song, as 'a sort of epicure/Who'll eat from any dish'. (*TWTTT*, 71) Brother Sebastian curtly disparages the fact that 'nobody reads poetry' because 'Everybody's too busy writing it'. (*OLT*, 160) Duncan's vision is that art is

<sup>58</sup>Terence Rattigan, 'Preface' in *The Collected Plays of Terence Rattigan* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1953), p. xii.

<sup>59</sup>*Frontier* Vol. 1. No. 2 (Feb., 1950), ed. by Philip Mairet and Alec Vidler. *RDF*

<sup>60</sup>John Bull, lecture, 'Post War British Theatre', *Theatre in the 1950's* conference (London, 1997). Bull describes a division in immediate post-war models of 'Englishness'. He identifies an inimical leaning towards either 'Euromerican' or 'isolationist' positions.

not part of the mass or for the mass but what each individual should aspire to. Characters in the anti-masque of *Tomb*, identify television as an art that replaces 'All pens and poets by an active populace' (TWTTT, 58) and criticize popular culture's 'chromium progressiveness'. (TWTTT, 65) As part of a longer, older tradition of rebellion, various intellectuals wrote against the grain of the times and as much as they were nostalgic, also contested totalitarian control (Orwell's 1984) and production that acquiesced with commercialised culture. Duncan's critique can be seen to convey scepticism regarding modern social organisations that limit freedom.

Though his self-portrait is still constructed around reluctance and disinclination to 'sell out', it is ironic that without capital, his plays depend on acceptance by big-time managers, as well as on his personal friendships with those in the business. Duncan's career was not determined by inspiration alone, but also by the conditions of the West End theatre at the time.

The precarious nature of writing for the theatre is affirmed by Duncan's colleagues who were conscious of the commercial risk factors that existed despite the popularity of poetic drama.<sup>61</sup> In July 1946 Browne wrote to Eliot, who was soon to return from the States, that he had agreed to do Peter Yates's play and of his plans for his *Family Reunion*. On September 1st, 1946, Eliot wrote back voicing his concerns:

Ronnie Duncan, whom I gather you are seeing today, will be telling us of our gamble on the *Tomb* which we open at the Garrick for Matinees from September 16th. It is worth trying, I think, as we have some backing for it.<sup>62</sup>

Browne also admits that:

The theatre is lately governed by luck. At noon on that Saturday (3rd Nov., 1945), the Evening Standard came out with its weekly theatre column by Beverley Baxter (MP, friend of Churchill and Beaverbrook) who had belatedly, in a sense of duty rather than anticipation, made the journey to the Mercury. But he found 'something that is glorious, exciting' and urged his reader to 'go at once to the Mercury'. The experiment had been saved. For the next two years it made the Mercury the place which everyone who visited London wanted to see. (EMB, 186)

Williamson's comment on *Tomb's* success is that it was 'enormously helped' by Britten and Speight.<sup>63</sup> Being well known by then, their celebrity guaranteed its commercial success. Both comments argue for extrinsic, contingent factors having an effect on *Tomb's* overall appeal, rather than the intrinsic quality of the work itself. Such a view is important because it supports the possibility that Duncan himself had a strongly contemporary awareness and made use of contingent factors (such as the popularity

<sup>61</sup>Theatre after the war was monopolised by drama that catered to popular taste which included plays by Wilde, Coward, Preistley and Rattigan and musicals such as *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Oklahoma!*

<sup>62</sup>T.S. Eliot to E. M. Browne (1st Sept., 1946) quoted in Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 162 & 165.

<sup>63</sup>Williamson, op. cit., p. 144.

of other artists). Eliot's letters also show continued personal support for Duncan's play-writing at this time. On September 3rd, he wrote again to Browne saying, 'I have promised to go next week to see Duncan's adaptation of the Cocteau play'.<sup>64</sup>

Despite Duncan's emphasis on the difficulty of the climate in which he writes, on February 21st 1946, Rose-Marie reported in her diary that the first two thousand copies of *Tomb* had already sold out by orders. Speight, remembering this period in *Tribute* also believed that conditions were favourable to such drama. He tells of how they began the 'Poets' Workshop' with the support of Ashley Dukes at the little Mercury theatre, Notting Hill Gate, and how:

It seemed then to E. Martin Browne and myself that there was a new public for poetic drama; and the continued success of *Murder in the Cathedral* encouraged us in this belief. (*Tribute*, 54-55)

Browne recounts that during the years 1943 to 1944, 'In spite of war-weariness - or perhaps because of it - the theatre was awakening to a new life'. (EMB, 154) Browne's Pilgrim Players toured in 1945-48 under the aegis of CEMA. Ashley Dukes offered Browne the Mercury to put on his *Season of New Plays* by poets and this was again subsidised by CEMA. In this way state funding provided necessary patronage for Duncan's first successful production of *Tomb* (under Browne) in 1945. Self-financing club theatres had also established themselves between the wars and from this, small theatres such as the Arts, the Unity, the Watergate and the Embassy emerged. Duncan's work was to be produced at a number of these smaller venues.<sup>65</sup> In 1950 Reece Pemberton wrote in a letter to Duncan that Kenneth Tynan was 'very excited' about the play and 'wants to know what your plans are for it. Can we all meet soon?'<sup>66</sup> The letter, and the resulting production of *St. Spiv*, with Tynan as its director at the Watergate, indicates how the support of different talents along with use of suitable venues all worked to promote Duncan's drama in these years.

With the GPO, the CEMA and BBC and the popular press, commission opportunities grew for Duncan, who found a personal ally in the news-baron, Beaverbrook. With the Atlee government, there were stronger links to New York and Paris, so it was easy to tour work abroad. An exchange with the Studio Champs Elysees in Paris brought Lorca's *House of Bernarda Alba* to the Mercury and June and July of 1946 took *Tomb* to Paris. These factors mediate the image of Duncan writing in a vacuum with one of him negotiating in different ways for an audience's or patron's approval.

<sup>64</sup>T.S. Eliot to E. M. Browne (3rd Sept., 1946) in Browne, op. cit., 1969, p. 165.

<sup>65</sup>The uncommercial Arts Theatre similarly advanced talents such as Fry's with productions of *A Phoenix Too Frequent* and *The Lady's Not for Burning*.

<sup>66</sup>Reece Pemberton to Duncan (25th April, 1950). RDF

Critics such as Leeming and Geoffrey Bullough locate verse-drama within a particular social climate of 'post-war austerity'.<sup>67</sup> A life of persistent shortages encouraged the entertainment industry to provide escapist fantasy to a Britain lacking in affluence. But other evidence has shown that there was a confused cultural *Zeitgeist* to the post-war condition. An analysis of *Tomb* unveils a text reverberating with a pessimism that was also part of the audience's experience, despite its wish to leave behind memories of war. The play contains both acceptance and resistance to mass appeal and tradition, the social forces inscribed within it.

Duncan's ambivalent critique therein contributes to the overall impression of a writer caught between opposing forces. Other features of *Tomb* indicate his awareness of contemporary forms and styles. He mixed the backward-looking religious forms of verse drama with a blackly comic episodic style. Welland claims:

This transcends eclecticism however, in its deliberate playing off of Eliot against Auden and Isherwood; not only has it something to offer the differing audiences that the two main kinds of pre-war verse drama had attracted, but tried to evaluate those kinds and in so doing to clear the ground for future experiment.<sup>68</sup>

Duncan's awareness of current theatrical trends is evident from the episode of the 'dramatic critic' speaking up from the audience. The critic declares that 'One of the fundamental weaknesses of this play is the author's shallow conception of the people's fears'. (*TWTTT*, 82) The intervention creates a comic, self-reflexive moment that functions to allay criticism of the play and its author before it happens. Here, shifting authorial presence implies more susceptibility to popular culture than Duncan at first admits and this shows in the work.

#### *iv. An Effective Critical Voice*

Duncan's post-war writing hopes to appeal to the people's discontent over new sociological trends. The discontent his subject matter conveys should not be seen as rejecting Britain's *Zeitgeist* but as a participation in and exploration of its issues. Duncan's critical engagement with his time spills over from critical prose and journalism into the plays of the '40s: works that also sought to locate the contradictions he saw as existing in the world. In *Tomb*, the Astral Group who flock to the shrine to check for a saintly presence are seen as fanatical as they gather before giant television screens, serving as a visually satirical comment on the bizarre-ness of contemporary culture. Anne Ridler's play *The Shadow Factory* (1946) expressed similar distrust for the values of the contemporary urban community and is set in a

<sup>67</sup>See Leeming, op. cit., 1989, p. 172 and Bullough in Armstrong, op. cit., ed., pp. 57 & 59.

<sup>68</sup>Welland op. cit., in Armstrong, ed., p. 40.

specifically post-war factory. Duncan's regular *Jan's Journal* columns are characterised by a critique of new-fangled ideas. Jan's targets are chemical fertilizers – 'I can't see that any good can come out of spraying acid on to my soil' – and he laments that the young men of the village 'who were taught to drive tanks are now driving buses', and how 'every day every drop of milk goes into the factory churn'.<sup>69</sup>

*Tomb* foretells television's important role within the debate regarding high and low culture. It must be acclaimed for its incipient critique of television technology as a force that negates individual development. Gordon Ross comments:

Before the war... TV was just fun; now it had to fight a commercial battle as the entertainment business generally became more suspicious of its potential impact.<sup>70</sup>

In 1942 a public opinion poll had upheld a demand for monopoly by the upper and middle classes though 44 percent of 'the lower class would approve commercial broadcasting'.<sup>71</sup> Duncan must have been aware of the growing controversy surrounding commercial television broadcasting from this time on and now tapped in to genuine anxiety about technology's impact on art.

The medium was a tempting subject for commentators who could apply prophetic vigour to a phenomenon whose potential was still a mystery. Hubbell's 1946 book, *Four Thousand Years of Television*, devotes its last chapter to 'The Coming Revolution' stating, 'modern Aladdins have uncorked a modern genie. Let us hope we can control it'.<sup>72</sup> Duncan chose the new art of television, rather than radio or film, to symbolise wider cultural deterioration by its rendition of 'the hideously actual'. (*TWTTT*, 58) The Prologue, Chorus and Announcer characters introduce *Tomb's* anti-masque, providing a framing commentary. The Announcer describes the marvels of the Astral group's sensational discoveries, including the great Yogi whom 'we found in Manipur'... 'sipping a gin and lime' (*TWTTT*, 60) rejoins the Chorus, the exchange stressing the ironies of modern society. But a further irony confuses the foundation of the Prologue's comments that 'the play's no more' and all is visual, 'The world's a stage' (*TWTTT*, 58) because they are disputed by the elements of formal theatricality his presence constructs.

*St. Spiv* also describes the pressures of influence from a commercialised society. The latter features a film-director who is making 'The Life of Saint Francis' in technicolour. His hard-headed financial approach to spirituality is summed up by

<sup>69</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Jan's Journal' articles, *Evening Standard* (June 22nd, June 7th, December 7th, 1946), np., p. 6, np. RDF

<sup>70</sup>Gordon Ross, *Television* (London, W.H. Allen, 1961), p. 68.

<sup>71</sup>Peter Black, *The Mirror In The Corner* (London, Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1972), p. 30.

<sup>72</sup>Richard Hubbell, *Four Thousand Years of Television* (London, George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1946), p. 178.

his vociferousness as he bellows 'Where's the cripple?' (SS, 139) During the '40s Duncan's criticism of superficial mass culture is generalising but, at times, he also accedes that superficiality is most undiluted in America.

In 1953, Duncan was employed by Beaverbrook to cover the American election between 'Ike' and Adlai Stevenson. Rather than focusing on the Korean conflict, he describes conversations between barmen on Broadway, using such scenes as fodder for less political, dramatised illustrations. He watches minor events, sometimes participating, comically describing all, steeped in irony born from a wider criticism of state politics.

The issue of American misrepresentation disguises Duncan's own possible exaggerations. He slants his writing to a popular press audience in these pieces whose humorous description and satiric commentary detracts from the rather xenophobic arrogance of some remarks. At first Duncan immerses himself in American culture with grudging admiration, but also makes it grotesque for comic effect. He writes that it is a 'British disease' when 'the more patronising we appear to be the worse our envy really is' and that 'they do well what we attempt badly'.<sup>73</sup> He says, 'There is no working class because the lowest paid are well paid'. (DA, 1952) In another piece written in the same month he concludes 'the whole city is one huge variety stage' and 'that is typical of this country. They even carry moderation to extremes'. (DA, 52) Describing the nightmarish experience of Times Square he remembers an impression of '1000 neon lanterns, steam rising from the subway' and comments like 'I take a Benzedrine sandwich' (DA, 52), effectively use the language of his target. The event of the election itself confirms his distrust of technology: technology being an ally of insidious democracy, 'It is merely, a TV election. Even the tenements in Harlem all have TV aerials'.<sup>74</sup> Moral definitions become meaningless or interchangeable in the non-absolute, two-dimensional world Duncan the satirist creates in order to locate the contradictions therein.

*Stratton* uses the everyday professional background of the legal system for the main character to articulate the dilemma of being both judged and judge. As with *Tomb* and *Tumbler*, it is mainly critical of how too much virtue produces priggishness and claims that spiritual pride as well as vice can produce spiritual humility. As a so-called virtuous person, *Stratton* is unmasked as fallible and hypocritical, only an embracing of vice itself redeeming him.

The idea of unmasking reveals moral convention as something that is in actuality, and after proper scrutiny, confused and reversible. In this sense *Stratton* is

<sup>73</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Duncan in America', *Evening Standard* (4th Nov., 1952), np. RDE. Hereafter DA in the text.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 27th Oct., 1952.

more problematic than *Tomb* because its attempts to render 20th-century dialogue means it is overlaid with blotchy psychoanalytical and poetic symbolism. Such layering obscures the moments of clarification more often achieved by the verse of *Tomb* and *Tumbler*. Stratton addresses the notion of self-love but through non-monogamous love (Stratton's for his daughter-in-law, Katharine) where excessive forgiveness by the wife merely allows him more licence. After Courteney condemns Stratton's self-righteousness in Act I, Stratton's security is shaken; he is too shocked for tolerance and for the rest of the play the seeds of doubt regarding his authentic nature lead to a gradual rejection of conventional morality. The violent, natural urges of deviant behaviour are deemed justifiable, as is the eccentric figure. By the end of the play it is evident that Stratton's violent acts (shooting his son and strangling his wife) are crimes of passion, not moral acts and symbolic of *any* transgression. He is outside morals and believes he is within his rights as long as he acts out his emotions:

If it's a sin to love then who  
Can judge that sin, but those who love?  
And they would not punish us,  
Knowing we suffer as we sin. (S, 145)

If one has no appetite, then self-restraint cannot be practised and suffering would not occur. Duncan proposes liberty within community, and again his counterpoint notion operates, with suffering acting as a certain boundary point.

What Stratton is supposed to demonstrate is that society makes too many demands on us to be civilised. His character, as victim of this continual repression, builds up to a neurosis or hysterical outburst. The dramatic commentary concludes that social conventions are over-cultivated and foreshorten real experience.

Realism, Stratton decides, is ironically defined by convention as that which:

does not exist in seeing life as it is; but in seeing only that part which we can endure and thus accept. That's the convention isn't it? (S, 100)

This ends his rhetorical outburst about the suffocating journey towards oblivion, but as in the murder inquiry, he seems to find it easy to slip back into his conventional role adding, 'Well, to return to convention; shall we have a drink?' (S, 100) He is not wholly lost to civilisation but is still momentarily defined by its limits. At these points the sudden opposition within his character creates effective dramatic tension.

The idea that meanings shift according to convention suggests that conventional morality (as in Freud's view) is the barrier humans have invented to hold in check their baser instincts. A sense of right or wrong then is not intrinsic and an essential morality is rejected. But moral relativity is taken to its extreme by 'this modern charlatan', aptly named Father Opine. His adherence to reason and awareness that 'auto-suggestion will explain the case' is insufficient, because he doubts his

own convictions saying, 'Our terms of reference/Are inadequate for a conclusion'. (TWTTT, 63) He is at once a sceptic and an adherent waiting for a sign. At the tomb's side the prologue declares that Antony's temptations were only visions borne from 'contemporary frustrations./Saint Freud has more to say upon this subject'. (TWTTT, 62) So psychology is neither proposed nor dismissed and each discourse, along with the spiritual, constantly refers to the other.

These plays portray characters who are challenged by conditions of adversity and use images of tyranny, jailers and restriction by oppressive forces. Antony mourns, 'My own pride the punctual jailer of my pride's own tyranny'. (TWTTT, 51) Duncan begins his critique of the paternal yoke in *Stratton* by having much of the action hinge upon the family's division regarding inheritance and the family business. Cory is expected to move into the family house with his new wife. The son's young fiancée, Katharine, objects to 'The weight of all this past./How can Cory and I lead a life of our own. If all we can do is follow?' (S, 72) Whereas Maria stands for continuity and makes frequent comments about family tradition such as 'They are the experience of the past. And our freedom lies, not in defying them, but in respecting them'. (S, 47)

Katharine makes repeated observations on the resemblance between the male family members (in preparation for her real confusion of the two later in the play), while Maria continually remarks on her reduced vision. When she glances at the family portraits it is 'as if that shadow fell across my eyes' (S, 47) and later, 'How dark it is Cory, turn on the lights'. (S, 64) The idea of blind faith is applied to traditional family structure and opposed to the other characters' new-found doubts about inheritance of traits and career. The opening scene, with its extensive references to the family portraits, establishes Stratton's superstition that the family is doomed to tragedy by their genealogy and his subsequent decision not to become a judge and 'fall' like his ancestors. Later in the scene, Stratton decides to risk an exorcism by moving to London as a judge saying, 'The family tradition has become a tyranny.' (S, 46)

The father and son conflict produces a theme of duty and a main character who expresses continual anxiety about his place in the world. It is legitimate to hypothesise that, implicit in this theme, is a contemporary global angst regarding procreation and survival under the nuclear threat, which Duncan later treats more overtly in his novel, *The Last Adam* (1952). In 1947 American imperialist pretensions were extended; and by 1951 the US had pressured Britain to increase its defence expenditure. By the '50s, the Western alliance policy of deterrence had been socially defined as the Cold War. Anxiety regarding procreation in *The Last Adam* arises from its theme: the human race's extinction by the atomic bomb. As in



Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) Duncan's hero is left the last man alive. The printing machines still churn out the morning edition of the paper which reads 'HYDROGEN BOMB TO BE DROPPED TODAY!'<sup>75</sup> The hero's first-person narration foregrounds his isolated consciousness. His alienation, a state of being we know Duncan enjoys fictionalising, is further over-stated by the only other surviving person being a woman. Her gender immediately foregrounds their dilemma of whether to have intercourse for the sake of procreation. But the idea of 'responsibility or duty' revolts the last Adam because it makes him feel like a 'stud bull'. (LA, 90)

Duncan's post-war writing, even in a play like *Tumbler*, was concerned with guilt, duty and responsibility for personal action. The characters' main struggles are illustrated to the point of attempted reconciliation of free will with God's omniscience.<sup>76</sup> The struggle produces a sense of their contingency with history and up-dates the work to contemporary expression as it wrestles with various contradictions. A more subjective, questioning approach to both orthodox and fanatical religious duty emerges in *Tomb*. Pessimism occurs when the traditional view of the sacred is set against a critique of conventional definitions. Antony slowly realises the unworthiness of his great martyrdom. Brother Andrew's death as a result of over-exertion before the Virgin's statue in *Tumbler* is also of crucial importance to that play.

Duncan's sometimes anguished expression of a negative relationship to God occurred in plays which must be viewed as radical, because in this case they anticipate 'the existentialist preoccupation with religion' in Britain which, Sinfield says, only 'became extremely influential in the 'fifties'. (AS, 101)

### *v. Subjectivity and the Existential Vision*

The Second World War brought social and individual disintegration to Britain and by the '40s the repercussions of fascist dogma were horribly apparent. Sinfield, amongst others, cites the War as a key circumstance in the growth of secularisation which is associated with developments in existentialist thinking over the next ten years. Casey's assessment of the post-Second World War generation is of a time per-

<sup>75</sup>Ronald Duncan, *The Last Adam* (London, Denis Dobson, 1952), p. 22. Hereafter referred to as LA. It may also be relevant that Eliot's 1953 play *The Confidential Clerk* was concerned with illegitimacy out of his wish to return to legitimate order and so was symptomatic, in a different vein, of fears surrounding post-war insecurity and dysfunction.

<sup>76</sup>'Will' refers less to the Nietzschean concept (of power) than to Sartre's and Camus's notions of agency and individual choice, as opposed to determinism, which compels humans to choose badly.

vaded by 'the horror of the nihilism of 20th-century Fascism and Leninism when God's death really did destroy any sense of the sacredness of life'.<sup>77</sup> A common intellectual response was uncertainty regarding the future. As never before in philosophy and art, a unifying human nature existing before language and representation began to be replaced by a sense of the social construction of our subjectivity. The opinions of Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger took hold at the beginning of the 20th century and propounded a split and therefore unknowable self. The first strain of disillusion was expressed in texts by Sartre and Camus who focused inwards to find authenticity. The sense of a wider void became a preoccupation addressed in absurdist plays by Anouilh, Ionesco, Genet, Beckett and Pinter. They created theatre that challenged conventional representations of reality with the absurdity and uncertainty that came with the modern mode of consciousness. Therein the artificiality of social convention is made evident. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) had no great plan, cause or effect, to order the plot. Its scenes enhanced circular action with characters dramatising a wholly subjective, sealed-in self, experiencing only disconnection and meaninglessness. During the '40s Duncan's art also exhibited a degree of existential expression.<sup>78</sup>

Duncan never asserts directly that he read or adhered to French existentialism, but a coincidence of thought is suggested from the way his drama in these years contained similar concerns. It should be noted that Duncan translated Sartre and also adapted Giraudoux's work.<sup>79</sup> Much of the poetic reflection in his own plays emphasises the problem of making morally evaluative judgements in a non-absolute, only subjectively experienced, world. The dramas also question civilised existence and address problems of self-identity, notions of good and evil and sensory experience in modern society.

There are signs of an infiltration of anti-rationalist, existential thought from Europe to England, post-war. Dalglish proposes that such ideas were peripheral because the tradition of British empirical philosophy 'admitted no discursive space for contemporary developments'. (ID, 60) However, the new continental theory leaked into the country via works by Sartre, Camus, Murdoch and Radio 3 broadcasts. Among the English intelligentsia, Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* journal, Greene's writing and the European influence on British playwriting indicates an awareness of the

<sup>77</sup> John Casey, review of *God's Funeral* by A. N. Wilson in 'The Generation Who Live Without Creator Comforts', *Evening Standard* (7th June, 1999), p. 54.

<sup>78</sup> The philosophical opposition of essence and existence led to the formulation of Existential theory (mid-19th and early 20th century). It had a German tendency, its roots in Kierkegaard. In the 1920s to '40s it was more French influenced. The tenet of existence preceding essence posits that there is no essential core of being, resisting the ravages of time and change.

<sup>79</sup> Ronald Duncan translated and adapted *The Trojan Women* and *The Typewriter*. He also adapted and translated Puget's, Pagnol's, Sartre's and Cocteau's drama.

philosophy, which also appears to inform the emergent principles in Duncan's plays.

Duncan's post-war drama features characters restricted in their freedom as customary morality is seen as meaningless. The dramatic action questions principles of right and good, for example, when the tumbler is sacrificed to too-high aspirations and a moral duty to chastity and perfection. All dwell upon the inevitability of living with a burden of inherited guilt, *Stratton* in particular. Man's desire and his ability to reflect are his burden. The consequence of this, as *Tumbler* shows, is tragic death as an indication of true humility or authenticity. So whilst there is a need for this sort of enlightenment and attainment of truth in humans there is also admittance that it is an unreachable goal in everyday life because of our collective role.

Aspects of the sacred are applied to his characters' failure. Spiritual redemption comes not through mending one's ways or unselfish deeds. Instead, spiritual favour is shown towards authentic motives and the process of facing one's impulses through suffering. The unconventional presentation of these ideas strikes some resemblance to the tenets of existentialist thought, though there is a persistent religious sensibility, as for example, Stratton finally faces death and legitimises himself through reaching a point of complete despair after his anguish. It appears he is saved solely by recognising his own hideous nature: 'Thus do we kill the things we love'. (S, 159) Stratton's human depravity (an inclination towards the bestial also explored by Golding in *Lord of The Flies*, 1954) and essential guilt is confirmed by Maria's death, 'And by their death our soul is born again'. (S, 160) These are the conditions for Stratton's sudden revelation of his intrinsic being which is, in the Kierkegaardian sense, born from death and separation from God.<sup>80</sup>

*Tomb* does not reject metaphysics and theology; its aim is to affirm that mystery is pivotal to existence and to imbue flesh with spirit. However, Antony and the tumbler are unsettled and self-exiled and, along with Stratton, experience failure and are potentially tragic. As in Beckett's drama, the plays have space for the potentiality of belief, but these spaces are obscured or contradicted by scepticism and uncertainty. For Antony, 'beauty is immeasurable/And we perceive it through the projection of our souls' sad eyes'. (TWTTT, 97) The comforts of God are never reached in our lived reality. He is only appealed to as a source of mercy at the close of *Stratton* with the disembodied voice saying 'Rain compassion on this desert that is man'. (S, 160) The play embodies a secular and sceptical modernist view of the human condition – that man is now what he has always been and always will be – permanently isolated. In 20th-century prose and drama, extreme isolation was embodied by heroes confined within the limits of their own experience, with no pre-

<sup>80</sup>See Søren Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans., D. F. Swenson (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941). See especially pp. 116 - 119.

existent reality beyond the self (such as Beckett's Molloy, or Woolf's Septimus). These writers depicted life as essentially lonely or squalid and the consciousness of their subjects did not necessarily develop through contact with the world.

The struggle of human existence is thrown into relief in *Stratton* when the characters are made to address moral issues in a modern indifferent world with no absolute, comprehensive divinity. Cory's attack arouses Stratton's bitterness and he expresses disillusion for the rest of the play.<sup>81</sup> Even in *Tumbler*, because language cannot articulate absolute principles, a comprehension of absolute morality is not offered. Lack of a clear moral standpoint gives Duncan's plays an affinity with others of the period now considered to be existentialist.<sup>82</sup> As the result of a lack of absolute principles, Antony's inner experience is revealed to be an interior, privatised sort of religion rather than the universal religion of others. His character substantiates an un-knowable inner self rather than an integrated essential core of being.

For *Stratton* also it appears that God is not a transcendental deity but there in man's fulfilment of 'self'. His plea for compassion works solely as his redemption. With no omniscient character to help at the finale, *Stratton* can only rhetorically answer whether God is merciful with what *he* believes to be the answer: 'For those whom we love live on in our hearts/And by their death they redeem our life'. (S, 160)

While Duncan presents Antony as having an exclusive vision, his faith is not quite free from doubt and it is still defined by struggle. Antony's experience relates to Kierkegaard's conclusion that the very character of truth is its objective uncertainty. Uncertainty is produced by the sacred necessarily incorporating an expression of inwardness. Antony realises the paradoxical truth that 'Perhaps God has no permanent reality/But exists as and when we create Him' and suggests that God is born 'in the death of pride', (TWTTT, 21) which is what happens at the end of Act I, when Antony relents and eats. Thus the ramifications are that Antony is the creator of the Voice (God) at the end of the Masque. Thus he creates Him, not as truth, only as solipsism. When Antony cries out 'father' to the Voice, it addresses him as 'son' then Marcus is addressed as 'my son' by Antony, who is also 'Father' to the novices. (TWTTT, 52) The permanent reality of God is refuted by the way Antony's identity shifts between the voices, destabilising the consistency of his perspective. Furthermore, the confirmation that all other characters are aspects of Antony, affirms his

<sup>81</sup>His disillusion relates to Sartre's definition of *mauvais fois* or bad faith as the practice of following the 'herd' unquestioningly; believing one's society's values or institutions affects one's choices. This mode is the antithesis of sincerity.

<sup>82</sup>For example, Sartre's *Huis Clos* (1944) and Genet's *Hautes Surveillances* (1949).

<sup>83</sup>Their interrelatedness is intimated by the device of having all three novices complete one thought when they enter at the beginning of the Masque. See p. 12 of *Tomb*.

egosim, a state of self that counteracts community with God.<sup>83</sup>

The sense of a reachable 'essence', and its affirmation through God, then perceptibly dissipates. 'Man is self-contained and there is no without', (*TWTTT*, 81) is the Chorus's bitter conclusion. This is after Father Opine sees a face in the tomb with 'lips in humble prayer, his eyes with a proud look'. (*TWTTT*, 81) These are both Antony but Opine himself reflects the pride therein. His words indicate that, ideally, he should also encapsulate the older, purer self by activating a universal, collective memory. His soul-memory maintains the tradition of the ancient resurrected. Bernard has already recommended that Antony try to be 'within yet apart' (*TWTTT*, 41) from Time to which we are chained by fear and desire. But the idea is as problematic as Opine's final vague sense of something at the tomb. His experience suggests the attainment of privatised faith while Antony, by the end, articulates the unity of the soul. But Duncan's work does not approach the type of religious solutions that Eliot's and Fry's plays propose. Instead it tries to negotiate opposing poles: the unity of the bourgeois individual with subjective claims for the self.

By the end of the Masque, 'Now blind and deaf and weak to death' (*TWTTT*, 52), Antony fails to transcend his own nature – 'I now know my nature/but to know oneself is not to change one's nature' (*TWTTT*, 41) – and only overthrows it when granted Mercy. Sanctity is instead, proposed by reincarnation, as 'we thread death to birth' (*TWTTT*, 96) though generally, a failure to grasp the absolute permeates the action. 'A man cannot see the invisible image behind his eyes', says the Old Man. (Antony in Act II, *TWTTT*, 88) Suffering prevents salvation as well as being intrinsic for humanity to gain God's pity, 'The deserts of man blow through the heart of God' continues the Old Man. (*TWTTT*, 88) From this, there is a feeling of discrepancy that is also sustained in *Tumbler*. Consciousness and subjectivity are the elements that grasp towards absolute truth, though it is in the gap between truth and incompleteness – born from futility – that Duncan's rather esoteric vision comes, expressed for example when Opine feels as if he sees 'the photos on an unexposed and undeveloped film'. (*TWTTT*, 95) Rather than an Eliotian affirmation that this is the intersection or point of opening to the real-er world of Godliness, the fragility of the experience sustains the idea of hovering between essence and existence.<sup>84</sup> It plays out not only Duncan's appropriation and questioning of the religious theme but, more generally, post-war secularisation and its preoccupation with faith and doubt.

The opposition of permanent truth to the everyday consciousness of the tragic mortal is also a motif of Stratton's. He tells the mirror how 'all day I've been trying

<sup>84</sup> 'Essence' in idealist, metaphysical philosophy refers to the reality underlying appearances; existence being the perceptible, evident, outward being.

to remember/What I could not forget./Like a shadow avoiding the object which cast it'. (S, 41) The paradox is given more weight as a concept when it is extended by the image of the shadow. *Tumbler* also acknowledges how the human psyche inhabits the 'forest of our dreams' where we constantly flee:

From what we pursue; evading  
what we seek; always fearing to find  
What is not lost, but lies within our mind;  
As a lake beneath the curtain of the night. (OLT, 42).

The lake is the subconscious awareness of enlightenment and fear of the 'known', which can also apply to guilt, as it does in *Stratton*. Guilt inhabits an underlying, submerged position if it is repressed or shut out, as happens to Maria (Stratton's conscience) and her sight.

Images of blindness create a play-world concerned with subjective perceptions of the self. The characters cannot reflect their selves as a whole. To see themselves is to mis-recognise. Looking into the mirror Stratton asks of his reflection 'How can I know myself?' and:

Is that a true portrait?  
Or is this a true reflection?  
Or am I as John sees me?  
Which of these three masks is me? (S, 40-41)

The image of the mask refers to Yeats's use of masks as a device that in turn ties in with modernist dramatic concepts of the subject. The various faces one presents to others and to the self is an issue which captures a particularly Sartrean viewpoint regarding the inauthenticity of everyday role-playing. To control nature or to have all senses restrained by reason does not produce a real self. The idea translates into the same ability to redefine the self that Sartre described in his responses to psycho-analysis. To 'know oneself' one would assume the subject's nature was unchangeable and always fully conscious of itself. The reflection of a non-whole self and exposure of private and public performances means the play itself is a reflection of the art of disguise. The character of the individual is in a perpetual state of self-creation and no better self-hood can be uncovered even through introspection and self-analysis (as the self is an existence not an essence).

The poet Sebastian also senses that something eludes him, 'I was just thinking of something? I've never had – '. (OLT, 16) His perception has some correspondence with an existential subject who senses separation from the world of things. Stratton refuses to endure his situation and instead of being passive acts to change his world, for example, by projecting his emotional fear onto Maria and strangling her. Our attention is thus concentrated on the individual's personal estimation of the world and his action. The element of choice moves Stratton towards an existential position.

He must understand and recreate himself through his own, authentic, violence. This gives him an unconventional, outsider status. The positive potential of man's unconventional will is somewhat overshadowed by the epilogue. It concludes that history has proved overall the human condition is 'damned', doomed to misery, torn between nature and spirit:

What a thing is man,  
Blessed with a spirit  
Damned with a nature  
His eyes seeing heaven  
Whilst his hands construct hell (S, 160)

When Katharine sees Stratton's behaviour and under the inspection of the inquest, his act is modified into a moral crime by the look of the other. There is a conflict then because his violence has reference to goodness – as he is necessarily redeemed by his violence as freedom/will – and badness. Both are produced in terms of the action as co-existent possibilities. Rather than directing the action towards an obvious product the flow of action is a process particular to Stratton's situation. The unlikely nature of his path to final redemption makes less for resolution than consideration of the existing tensions in the play. The character then functions as a revealer of unconventional idiosyncrasy and irony.

Antony's fasting leads to prolonged self-enquiry laden with nihilistic thoughts, 'Loneliness has 'burnt out my heart and my desire,/ – and left self-love and reason'. (TWTTT, 51) This is because he chooses his own fate: to become a martyr and control his destiny by cleansing his body to death. Ready to die he announces 'By my own effort, I am free'. (TWTTT, 49) His will (or own voice) has refused sustenance in order to expiate 'sins' such as gluttony. He declares 'Now my will is my protection' (TWTTT, 50), but Bernard tells him, without 'fear and desire' he is trapped in a world that floats only 'upon your reason'. (TWTTT, 51) His captivity in the freedom only of 'my own mind' (TWTTT, 51) and final submission to failure, are inevitable in order for God's grace to intervene.

At this point, Antony still has some agency, as God tells him to 'eat what your poor servants brought to you'. (TWTTT, 52) While a command, it is an utterance that also bestows the idea of choice. Antony can overcome negative determinism and, understanding this process, he gains control of the situation. Paradoxically, he can reaffirm the idea of human volition and action by eating, even though he is just about to die. The subject is less of a free person accepting their destiny than its reverse. Thus, aspects of determinism are allowed whilst unpredictable, voluntary factors are also accounted for. In *Tomb*, it creates a dialectic, and the existence of such contradictions in reality is an issue constantly addressed by Duncan.

So while *Tomb* and *Tumbler* use storylines that prescribe characters' actions and

produce a sense of the inevitable, the Christian theme allows within it, their choice to accept or ignore its prescriptions (as in Kierkegaardian thought). *Tomb*, and *Stratton* especially, contain the idea of fulfilling a pattern of martyrdom but show the struggle of the individual within that pattern. Antony's need to transcend frailty by his desire for nothing but to be nothing is not the only option. Duncan therefore creates an individual freedom principle through exposing the need, ability and justification for creating one's own personal values, although he justifies them religiously.

Within the existential apprehension of absurdity it was not uncommon for a desire for personal salvation to exist.<sup>85</sup> 'May the gentle earth enclose him;/And the wind and rain embalm him,/'Til the day when Christ redeems him' (*OLT*, 58) is one of many pleas for intercession in *Tumbler*. The desire for salvation appears to outweigh pessimism by being given substantial weight as a theme but a struggle between faith and doubt still shapes the discourse. The underlying religious presence is, while indisputable, ultimately seen to be obscuring and contradictory. Because of the exposure of contradiction and doubt, the plays' religious elements are marred by the sense of misunderstanding, the unreachable and forsaken-ness. The existential logic found therein is less a problem of paradox than seemingly contradictory points of view existing at the same time. In fact the condition of an existential self-hood is paradoxical in itself and it is the paradoxes surrounding self-construction that Duncan's drama addresses.

#### *vi. Acting Out Angst: The Divided Self*

Writing shortly after *Stratton*, on operatic characters who express 'contemporary' sensibility, Duncan advocates an essentially disjunctive character, able to switch 'from intense sentiment to cynicism with one cigarette'. (*AO*, 4) One should go beyond character 'types', that is, 'complete demons or absolute prigs, wholly good or wholly bad'. (*AO*, 1) These are types 'never betraying these inconsistencies, incongruities and indecision which are the essential ingredients of all human character'. (*AO*, 1) Four years before Duncan had explained how his drama sought to render character through the individual who 'contains the crystallisation of the eternal problems of humanity'. (*RT*, 4) Although expression of eternal problems implies transcendence of quotidian experience, it comes to encapsulate what Duncan indicates is a contemporary presentation of contradiction and the 'indecision and self-deception' (*AO*, 4) involved in responses to situations of suffering or love.

Eliot wrote in the '40s of his dream to reveal both inwardness and out-

<sup>85</sup> As in Kierkegaard's and Karl Jasper's (1883-1969) advocacy of free choice to believe in an existence greater than that detected by science.



wardness, to delve beneath the surface of human character. He saw, underneath the exterior vacillating individual, an 'indomitable unconscious will' and beneath his design and contrivances that he was also 'the victim of circumstances'.<sup>86</sup> Marcus points out that the ideal for autobiography is to show the inner and outer self without shattering the (actual non-synthesis of the) inner and outer realms. But instead, autobiographical writing carries the complexity of 'man's encounter with himself' wherein his individual destiny (subjective truth) is placed within history (objective and linear). (LM, 155) This is because western culture's mixture of Christianity and classicism imbued the subject with a dual consciousness: of its history as well as its individualism. The difficulty of representing the inner and outer selves is, in fact, the real precondition of autobiography. It is not surprising that Duncan wrote extensive memoirs and verse plays as both forms explore that very difficulty

Emotionally flexible, cynical and cigarette-smoking characters signify a concession to everyday experience while they demand negotiation with abstract, overwhelming issues. The negotiation is regarded as problematic by Lane. He believes that Duncan seeks to go beyond the real and contingent to the universal in the poetry, but the endeavour is so imbued by subjectivity, that it is always a 'necessary failure'. (DL, 33) The failure comes when too *much* personality creeps in. For example, Reid notes that the Christ figure in Duncan's *Judas* poem (1953) is too 'subjectivised' and describes the work as 'spiritual incest' where 'reality is reduced to the measurements of one's own ego'. (*Tribute*, 13) In *Ascension* (1947) the poet speaks in the saviour's voice stating 'Forgive me, for I knew what I had done' (CP, 91) signifying a need to control the religious vision from the most authoritative position possible. Reid expands, saying, 'Duncan celebrates solitude before the eyes of others' (*Tribute*, 13) and infers that authorial self-consciousness mars his poetry. The question is whether this is applicable to other of his writing, and if so, whether Lane's accusations of Duncan over-personalising his art still hold true.

William Armstrong's view of Antony falls at a different point in the critical spectrum:

He fails to depict the individual character with psychological realism. The experience is universalised and therefore the character is too much a symbol.<sup>87</sup>

He discerns that *Tomb's* characters are asked to see their personal pasts in terms of a collective unconscious. Antony especially, must heal the divisions in himself by submerging his identity as an individual into that of the archetypal artist/seer. Stratton and the tumbler also, are not wholly good nor wholly bad though they still lapse into

<sup>86</sup>T.S. Eliot, 'Introduction' to S. L. Bethell, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (Staple Press, 1944), np.

<sup>87</sup>Welland, op. cit., in Armstrong, ed., p. 42.

symbolic, martyred roles which seek to re-instate perfection and sanctity.

Paradoxically, the martyred role is merged with that of the human subject doomed to mortality. Thus, failure occurs at the same time as their final sanctification. Redemption through humility is attained because the characters cannot measure up to the impossible standards for transcendence and eternal values aspired to in the plays but the idea is, at the same time, disabled because their roles demand that they fail in order to be redeemed. Such paradox means the characters, rather than merely functioning as mouthpieces for Duncan, enact their own fragmentation.

The religious references in *Stratton*, *Tomb* and *Tumbler* foreground the disjunction between metaphysical ideals/forms and the body's actual imperfections. *Tumbler*, for instance, addresses both artistic ideals and imperfection in its dramatization of a legend where, miraculously, a virgin's statue moves when it apprehends the perfect gift. The idea of over-dogmatic Christian doctrine is debated here. Marcellus ponders the imperfection of a rose:

There can be none: for imperfection implies the potentialities  
Of perfection.  
Nothing is imperfect unless it is immortal.  
And since everything in nature is material and mortal,  
Nothing in nature is perfect.  
Only man can be perfect;  
For he alone has an immortal spirit. Only man could be perfect.  
Therefore it is he, alone who is imperfect. (*OLT*, 38)

To call something imperfect then allows one to include the possibility of the perfect. The Virgin's statue supposedly moving for the 'perfect' offering should not really transpire if man is imperfect. It is based on an impossible premise, as God above is perfect because immortal. But the tumbler's body is perfect in its imperfection and the statue recognises this truth. The audience too, expect the truth of the myth to hold. The statue must move – and so it does. As with the tumbler's reckless hope and Opine's eventual understanding that without faith there is no reason, supernatural belief is depicted as true faith. It acts as a test for humans instilling the hope that redemption, or a miracle, may happen one day. Duncan shows dramatic characters who are constantly conceptualising, hoping to achieve and attain higher 'perfection' through man-made concepts that cannot represent the infinite or permanent. The ideology here is that Christian discourse is marred by contradictions with which humans are doomed to struggle.

Identity, as represented through the characters, is neither there or not-there. Instead, a continual exchange of identities and referencing goes on, for example, from past to present then back to the past:

Chorus: Are you Saint Antony?

St. Antony: While you are imprisoned in your own passions,  
I am merely an old man;  
The object alters with the eye. (TWTTT, 93)

Fluctuations in Antony's character are perceptible as he switches from himself to the 'Old Man' persona to 'St Antony' at the dénouement of *Tomb*. At this point, the 'Chorus' character transforms into Julian, the novice from Act I. Conventions established by the play-world allow the characters to transform through supernatural disguise. The modern-day evangelist, Father Opine, lastly becomes his 'true'-er self, Bernard. They all re-materialise from the ancient past of Act I which incorporates the non-naturalist device of time-travel. Their awakening into new roles takes place as if with a new, highly-aware consciousness. The Postcard Seller, addressed as Marcus, suddenly recognises the Old Man as 'Father Antony', (*He kneels*). (TWTTT, 93) Antony has reappeared to take the last step of his journey – from the fleeting ephemeral dream of life or 'the sleep of personality' (TWTTT, 94) – to a more authentic, a-historical or platonic version of reality. He seeks 'the remembered vision' behind 'the forgotten poem'. (TWTTT, 96)

The 'remembered vision' denotes a transcendental consciousness, verging on Jung's idea of race memory, but the 'forgotten poem' paradoxically obscures this with its haze of non-remembering. Thus a sense of disjunction between the two states prevails. Such disjunction adds to the underlyingly pessimistic idea that unity is only attainable conditionally:

Antony: I can only be Saint Antony  
When my three attributes  
body, desire and intelligence  
Make me complete, (TWTTT, 94)

though he adds:

But yet I cannot be whilst my intelligence  
struts in a state of knowing not wise enough for faith. (TWTTT, 95)

Opine (intellect) consolidates himself with Bernard (faith), to illustrate how intellect needs faith for its reason. For Julian, it is only good to sing if he is transcending personality with 'selfless art' rather than pride. The self can therefore include the dimension of the transcendental (as the mystical, art, or non-empirical) but only, it seems, before death or by speaking and therefore recognising the impossible. So the concept of integrated personality is more abstract, the idea of permanence something in and out of which consciousness slips, forever hovering between the 'remembered vision' and the 'forgotten poem'. (TWTTT, 96) The very idea of a fragmented self such as Antony's foregrounds the unresolved divisions between inner and outer worlds.

In the courtroom of *Stratton's* play world, the prisoner has no face, implying an ahistorical Everyman. The defence announces that 'few of us know who we are'

and 'that no man or woman is, until in love they are identified'. (S, 55) The lines imply that identity through being is only complete, rather idealistically, when 'in love'. More importantly, Stratton kills his son to assume his own physical mortality (and youth), but realises he cannot live on through his son permanently. The son both emulates and rejects his father as does the father his identity through heritage. Shooting Cory, Stratton cries 'No Cory! Don't shoot; put that gun down!' (S, 118) His role also entails being mistaken for his son by Katharine. Therefore the character is pushed through a series of 'am/am not' positions as he both struggles with and evolves out of his genetic destiny.

Humans are thus represented as struggling with essence, the element that determines what they are and do and governs their conduct. Duncan's individualistic, quasi-tragic heroes go against common routine and are valued if they choose alternative actions to a conventional life of beatitude.<sup>88</sup> Individual salvation is then conceivable while mass redemption is not.

Brother Andrew's (the tumbler's) character is also endowed with underlying complexity. His exceptional simplicity is supposed to signify great humility and therefore purity. The role is representative of a humble Chaplinesque type with whom the audience empathises. However, when the tumbler enacts the past-tense narrative of the Feast Day song: 'So I stood on my head to pray! (*He attempts this position*)' (OLT, 53), he follows his own dictated song-actions and becomes a character within a character. The direction '*He tries to remember the words whilst the accompaniment continues*', poignantly illustrates his ultimate failure to live up to the role of his own (and the play's) expectations for a perfect performance. Desperately trying to somersault but realising 'When Merry Andrew can no longer Tumble/What's the use of Merry Andrew, eh?', (OLT, 55) the clown himself draws our attention, by use of the third person, to the constructed nature of his function and identity. When he finally decides, 'I'll curl myself into a ball/And throw myself away' (S, 55), it signifies a complex mix of detachment, role-playing, volition and destiny as he oversees his own end.

As the tumbler begins his pierrot's dance with a running commentary, 'It's all about a man who fell in love with a lady who was/beyond his reach' (OLT, 50), a personal code is layered over into the speech and action. He goes on, 'So the man stands on his toes/And the tireder and smaller the little man got/the more his lady seemed beyond his reach'. (OLT, 186) This is a timeless fairy story, but as the tumbler approaches the statue, his story is given touching personal resonance when he

<sup>88</sup>This refers to an idea of personal freedom as opposed to existence with merely a socio-economic function.

realizes, 'That's the worst of fairy stories./They always come true/Especially when you make them up yourself'. (*OLT*, 50) Rather than a character reduced to 'the measurements of his own ego' Duncan has the character aware of his own role-play in a separate narrative. The fact that he is the teller of the tale inserts him into an autobiographical narrative on one level and on another as a figure or performer in an apparently fictional legend. The tumbler is constructed as two-dimensional and allegorical and also as self-aware, making particular reference to his own experience and past life as an acrobat, and this complicates the simplicity of the allegory. It is also an example of Duncan's aim to show inconsistency and disjunction within a character.

If the author is there, then he is difficult to pin down and locate because, in the plays, self-reflexivity highlights fictionality rather than omniscience. The critic, prologue and chorus characters in *Tomb* all represent author/God figures as they impart clearly didactic proclamations from their positions as commentators on the action. But by proclaiming they address self-reflexivity. Their position in relation to the use of literary and mythic allusion reinforces a sense of fictionality and difference. While the proclaimers arrange the future as sensationalism their artistic virtuosity becomes publicity. 'To Hell with you!/ This was my play' and 'I'll join no crowd' (*TWTTT*, 58-59) the Prologue protests to the Announcer as he is ushered away from the television 'studio'. But he decides to stay and heckle the players as a 'chorus' directing the audience in places to 'observe'. He also asks the audience if anyone will volunteer 'to kneel by the Saint's tomb?' (*TWTTT*, 82)

Though the volunteers are actors, their appearance still draws attention to the play as play-world, self-consciously separated from the audience's. Addressing world-construction questions the relationship between fiction and reality. The difficulty of representing an objective world is laid bare by the continual shifts between contexts. By this, Duncan reveals two levels of being. Antony's language uses concepts that come from a world constructed as purer and absolute. His character emanates psychic powers and foreknowledge. These aspects contest the reality of the everyday play-world of the anti-masque. It is significant that Duncan asserted in an essay written at this time that 'Absolutes, such as perfection do not exist in reality'.<sup>89</sup> Also, because language is used to construct both worlds, the 'purer' level of ideology or representation is overthrown by the way the alternative worlds are exposed as linguistic creation. The tumbler partakes in the process of exposing his own creation. Stratton can only ever represent his subjective world through the poetic language that

<sup>89</sup>Ronald Duncan, draft essay for *Townsmen* (1941), p. 5. *RDF*.

constructs it. Authors enter play-texts and characters appear to step in and out of the 'real' world of their authors as happens in *Tomb's* anti-masque.

The antithesis of art and life as it comes together in the theatre is not denied or affirmed but thrown into relief as the characters refer to their own performances. This prevents overly omniscient control of characters who might otherwise be immersed in over-privatised symbolism. The misfit cannot transcend these notions and refers himself back to his own impermanent performance. Divisions or inconsistency within such characters conveys a modern notion of subjectivity which then refers to aspects of contemporary social anxiety.

### *Conclusion*

As a verse dramatist choosing religious themes for his plays, it is significant that a desire for spiritual change is expressed but not envisioned by Duncan. His attempts to universalise fail, as a revival of the archaism of the past is shown only as defeat by language and time. Instead, conflict and antithesis occur when oppositions are set up between lived life experience and what language permits as art (through dialectic or overlap-life/writing). In both the autobiographical and dramatic forms, the writing itself takes the place of a stabilised subject and instead allows an ongoing transformation of self to occur. If the dramatic personae are over-personalised by their embodiment of authorial sentiment, then this is disseminated by its apt translation into aspects of loneliness, intense self-consciousness, their sense of paradox and the unintelligible and inhabitation of a subjective existence. Even *Tumbler* apprehends irony throughout its narrative. All these effects encompass ideas explored by existentialism and consequently, *Tomb* and *Stratton* in particular, mark the importation of unfamiliar and radical continental ideas into conventional English theatre. Duncan's impulses towards Eliotian conservatism and over-privatisation into traditional individualism are enacted but have lesser currency. Those impulses are homologous with how British culture resisted the very conditions which predicated intellectual exploration into secular 'angst'.

## The Royal Court Years

### *Introduction*

Duncan's writing through the '50s and most of the '60s continued to present him as a 'lone wolf' outsider figure. However, in many respects he was as much of a radical writer as his younger contemporary, John Osborne. At the same time his radicalism was qualified by entrenched traditionalist attitudes towards society, class and gender, which isolated him from the more dissident voices of the '50s. This chapter looks at the way that Duncan's career was affected by social change and new conditions in the literary and dramatic world during these years.

Although the writing Duncan produced after the '40s uses the same discourse of anxiety evident in his earlier religious plays, he continued to direct much of his energy into initiatives challenging the theatrical establishment. At the end of the '40s, after the production of *Stratton*, Duncan was overwhelmed with disgust at the commercial theatre and the way 'fashion parades as taste' so that 'only mediocrity can possibly survive where mediocrity alone flourishes'. (*HTME*, 199) Instead of admitting stylistic defeat and retreating into purely poetical isolation away from the theatre, during the '50s he composed plays such as *Don Juan*, *The Death of Satan*, *The Catalyst* and *Seven Deadly Virtues*. In 1953 he organised the first Taw and Torridge Arts Festival and from 1956 onwards was active as one of the founders of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre. Consequently, he can still be discussed as a revealing (and in some ways, representative) figure of his times.

Booker surmises that by October 1955, within British society, a 'new insecurity was at work', along with 'a hunger for sensation'.<sup>1</sup> A dominant feature of the '50s was the new youth culture which began to vocalise its desire for rebellion and protest. Leone, the young secretary in Duncan's *The Catalyst* (first performed in 1958), speaks for a more youthful generation when she pronounces that 'The avant garde of the 1930s/Now looks to me like a very dear tortoise in a very thick shell'.<sup>2</sup> She is caustic about Charles's belief-system, saying, 'Bur your lot are obsessed with trying to impress yourselves./And you're all so damned religious...'. (*C*, 24) Along with other evidence, such pronouncements within Duncan's writing of the period,

<sup>1</sup>Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs* (London, William Collins, 1969), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Duncan, *The Catalyst* (Bideford, Rebel Press), 1964, p. 23. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Catalyst* and *C* for page citations.

attest to a figure who, rather than withdrawing from the new decade with grace, remained receptive to his times.

### *i. The 1950s and Beyond*

As in the previous chapters, I shall continue with an historical analysis providing additional supporting material that integrates Duncan's works with the cultural background from which they were produced. It has been helpful to assess the work alongside contemporary evidence of its publication, success and reception, as well by other documents found from that time which exhibit Duncan's association and growing conflict with the theatre of the day. Reference will be made to the Royal Court school of theatre and specific affiliation to texts constructing and vocalising the anti-establishment art of the Angry Young Men of the '50s. In particular, I shall use John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* as a yardstick of Duncan's 'failure' in the light of the greater eminence of Osborne's play.<sup>3</sup>

In the '50s, Duncan could no longer be regarded as such a 'conspicuous figure' as he was for the '40s. His literary fortunes had declined and he seemed to have fallen just as quickly out of fashion as he had come into it. Oscar Lewenstein, ex of Unity and short-term producer at the Embassy, remembers, 'Some time in 1953 I met Ronald Duncan... . Now in his fortieth year, he had hit a bad patch'.<sup>4</sup> It is significant that 1952 saw Duncan having difficulty staging his new play *Don Juan*. His investment in the play led to him founding the Devon Arts Festival in 1953 as a venue for the piece. He went on to compose its sequel, *The Death of Satan*, and both were performed consecutively at the first two Devon Festivals. During the first, he began yet another affair – with the Arts Festival Secretary – and it was around these events (recorded in *Enemies*) that he based the story of *Catalyst* which starred Virginia Maskell, another woman who was to figure largely and dramatically in his mid-life.

*Don Juan* had been partly written for Duncan's mistress, Anna Proclemer, an actress whom he had met at a party in Rome in 1950. It is an important play because it can be related to early impulses behind the English Stage Company's formation. In 1953 – after his American election coverage and visit to Pound – Duncan met Lewenstein, the new General Manager of Esdaile's recently re-opened Royal Court Theatre. Duncan had petitioned him for a West End production of *Don Juan*. Lewenstein remembers:

<sup>3</sup>John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (Faber, London, 1957). Hereafter referred to in the text as *Anger* and *LBIA*.

<sup>4</sup>Oscar Lewenstein, *Kicking Against the Pricks* (London, Nick Hern Books, 1994), p. 9. Hereafter referred to in the text as *OL*.



He brought me his play *Don Juan*, because he hoped it might be produced either at the Royal Court or the Embassy Theatre ...though I was unable to help him get a production for it at the time, we became friends. Outwardly we had little in common. Politically I should say that Ronnie was a right wing anarchist... . However, we both considered the British theatre to be in a woeful state, and as we found out quite soon, we both wanted to do something about it. (OL, 10)

This reveals Duncan's willingness to collaborate with those considered to be of quite different political standpoints on projects he was committed to.<sup>5</sup> Lewenstein later joined Duncan in negotiations for the production of both his plays *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* under the auspices of their potential new stage company.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* both failed financially at the Royal Court in 1956.<sup>7</sup>

By 1961, Duncan was being petitioned for divorce by his wife for his affairs with the secretary, Antonia, and with Maskell. In the same year he was physically attacked by a carping playgoer during the first night of *Abelard and Heloise*. A year later, after his great love Maskell had married elsewhere and refusals for publication and re-productions of his work began to mount up, he took refuge in a small hut on the cliff-tops of the North Devon coast and began writing his autobiography alongside the epic, cosmological poem *Man*.

Through the '50s and early '60s, however, Duncan's repertoire of dramatic writing broadened. Reid writes:

The evidence is there: by 1957 Ronald Duncan had turned his back on religious preoccupations... . Then in 1960, he produced *Abelard and Heloise*, one of his most lyrical and moving plays.<sup>8</sup>

His contemporary comedy, *Catalyst*, was followed by others, *The Rehearsal* (written in 1960) and *The Seven Deadly Virtues* (1968). The historical plays *Christopher Sly* and *Abelard and Heloise* were both performed in 1960 while he also completed translations of Giraudoux's (*L' Apollon de Bellac* , 1957) and Sartre's plays (*The Trojan Women*, 1966). Duncan went on to write the script for a (now cult status) psychedelic film, *Girl on A Motorcycle* (1968) and was commissioned to compose words for a full-length radio musical, *The Rebel* (1968).

Overall, all the works of this period, 1953 to the mid-'70s – along with prose such as the short stories *A Kettle of Fish* (1969) and *Man* (1974) – indicate that

<sup>5</sup>During 1954, Duncan went on to work with Lewenstein and Mankowitz on the *Punch Revue*, a literary musical performed at the Duke of York's Theatre in 1955.

<sup>6</sup>See letters between Lewenstein, Duncan and Kennedy-Cox, r.e. plans for the new 'English Stage Society'. These refer to *Don Juan*, the *Death of Satan* and the lease of the Kingsway Theatre. RDF

<sup>7</sup>Terry Browne, *Playwright's Theatre* (London, Pitman, 1975). See 'Appendix B', where Duncan's plays take £367 for only 8 performances compared to the next lowest takings: £2, 757 for 30 performances of Wilson's *The Mulberry Bush*, (p. 112).

<sup>8</sup>Reid, op. cit., 1982, p. 187. Hereafter referred to as AV.

Duncan never settled into a literary mould that could be called typical, but continued to write in a wide diversity of styles. This supports my view of Duncan as a writer who never settled into literary complacency and continued to experiment. Though as I have already demonstrated, certain concerns recur, his approach to them and their emphasis changes through the years. It is fascinating that each decade signals some sort of minor departure for Duncan. What marks the shift in the early '50s is that religion is now more suppressed in favour of an emphasis on sexuality.

Over these years, the dramas through which the theme of the mistress are worked out reveal Duncan's effort to connect with his own place in history. He does this by questioning contemporary 'conventional' values in a world, which is 'Without vitality for love or hate'.<sup>9</sup> *The Death of Satan* has the hero sent to 20th-century England to study attitudes to love, marriage and infidelity. Setting the theme in this social context is generally a contrast to his poetry which is more insular, and is characterised overall, by a more plaintive and inward-looking tone.

As the '60s pass, so begin Duncan's 'dark' years marked by his rejection by Maskell in 1962 and her death in early 1968. The idealised figure of the lover/poet and his romantic yearning gives way to an older, malevolent self who refuses to mellow and continues to attack women with more intensity in his poetry, 'What's a woman but a funnel/With three holes; two for digestion/One for gestation?'<sup>10</sup> By 1969, with the publication of *Unpopular Poems*, one sees by the title that Duncan is already expecting a negative response. The next edition *For The Few* (1977) also signifies his expectation of a shrinking readership. By the end of the '60s, Duncan's morals appear increasingly antiquated as he rejects the 'morality' of permissiveness he had at first been seen to campaign for in *Catalyst*.<sup>11</sup> By the time he recalls his achievements of the '50s in *Obsessed* (1977) he is of the opinion that 'to my shame I must be blamed for being one of the precursors of this shoddy period called The Permissive Age'. (O, 16)

After 1954 when Duncan's 'Jan's Journal' columns from the *Standard* were published, his 'Tramp' series for *Punch* was the only regular journalism undertaken after that year, inasmuch as the 'Diary of a Tramp' became the 'In the Country' column for *Punch* until 1961. 'Jan' was more intermittent and after appearing briefly in the *Mail* in 1956, reappeared from 1959 to 1960 in the *Express*. However, since

<sup>9</sup>Ronald Duncan, *The Death of Satan*, (London, Faber & Faber, 1955), p.108. Hereafter referred to in the text as *DS* or *Satan*.

<sup>10</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Solitude 6', [1977], *RDF*.

<sup>11</sup>Duncan also appealed for the restriction of human breeding in 'Progeny Becomes an Issue', *Daily Telegraph* (10 Sept., 1971) and writes 'Why This Guilt About Ownership' in *Daily Telegraph* (May, 1966). In 'We Worship Strange Gods', he rails against democracy (draft for 'Opinion', *Daily Telegraph*, nd.) and defends 'The Conservative Party and the Arts' (draft, 1966). *RDF*

the mid-'40s, Duncan had pursued popular article writing and continued to contribute every so often to *Pie*, *Argosy*, *Everybody's Weekly* and the *Observer*. The press remained an important platform for venting direct and undisguised opinions on controversial subjects, either in article form or in volleys of aggressive, critical letters to the national papers.

Whilst Duncan had, in the '40s, acquired the image of a religious writer seen about with serious composers and the aristocracy, during the '50s he became a dandy, seen on the arms of film stars such as the Italian actress Anna Proclemer and of course, Maskell. He was now a playwright who wrote about adultery and lesbianism then recklessly entered his own play world by romancing the lead actress. Such activity enhances the notion of the ability of an artist to be self-dramatising as he writes his life into his work then in turn re-lives the work. In this way can *Don Juan* be related to *Catalyst* and that to the *Solitudes* and those also to *Obsessed*.

From the 1950s on, the number of archival documents generated for each year also grows more and more, to reach overwhelmingly detailed proportions in the late '50s and '60s. After this, the records change in nature by providing much less original writing, and letters and ephemera have less cross-referential quality. Instead there is a rise in mundane record documents and similar versions of already-written pieces of work, which peaks in the '70s and '80s.

The contentious and controversial relationship Duncan had with the English Stage Company from 1956 until 1966 is well documented in his archive and autobiography and raises the question whether his 'Black dwarf' image in the company, his public protest and subsequent neglect by the theatre, was consciously cultivated to promote the image of his suffering.<sup>12</sup> In order to contextualise Duncan's writing and locate his work historically, I shall go on to amplify the cultural ambivalence surrounding the image of the 'Angry Young Man' and the 'new wave' of British drama, which emerged from the mid-'50s.

## *ii. Duncan's 'Angry' Voice*

Allsop, writing on the '50s, says that Britain's consciousness of the bomb led to 'a state of physical well being' that permeated 'most of human society' but at the same time this 'easy life' was illusory because 'over-pinned by a nuclear device'.<sup>13</sup> This meant that British society was actually teetering 'on the brink of a mass nervous breakdown'. Allsop's comments are made in 1958, the year of the formation of

<sup>12</sup>John Osborne, *Almost A Gentleman, Vol II, 1955 - 1966* (London, Faber, 1991) p. 14.

<sup>13</sup>Kenneth Allsop, *The Angry Decade* (London, Peter Owen Ltd., 1958), p.195. Hereafter referred to on the text as KA.

CND. He conveys from his own period what he sees as a mood of inner apprehension and inadequacy, and its effects on the 'present day' of British writing.

Sinfield's more recent investigation of the period discerns a generally pessimistic view by the majority that modern Britain was savagely degenerate. Alongside widely diverse cultural influences there was, overall, an impression of inter-generational conflict and 'a failure of confidence in the secularist goals of science and politics'. (AS, 95) Hewison identifies by 1956, 'a general shift in emphasis in the arts'.<sup>14</sup> I shall expand upon the time-specific nature of these impressions and relate how they are inscribed as the conditions of production of Duncan's texts. The post-war societal malaise transmitted in *Tomb* remained relevant to the '50s and it was in his favour that Duncan's immutable discontent was to catch up with itself during this next decade and corresponded to the experience of a secularised public.

Duncan's fully imagined dystopian world in *The Last Adam* (1952) has similarities to Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) and its scenes of post-nuclear destruction. Duncan's novel should be mentioned again because it is symptomatic of ensuing post-war anxiety about the real potential of a holocaust: 'And the great wind blew straight down upon the city. Small bushes in front gardens had been thrust into the earth up to their branches.' (LA, 17) Written just afterwards, *Satan* presents Byron in Hell early in the play, referring to 'War in China and riots in Teheran' and how his writing ink has dried due to 'the central heating'. (DS, 10) There are references to Russia, coal, burning and the earth's thermal temperature. (DS, 10) These images associate Hell with the contemporary world, heat and destruction. Juan also makes a statement in the last scene that invokes a desolate world of redundant technology:

They've wired up the world;  
Everybody is in touch with anybody and  
Nobody has anything to say... ,  
The strata of geological time weighs  
On each man's shoulder. Expanding space  
Echoes his despair. It is a world crowded  
With loneliness. The wind blows through the wires. (DS 103)

The image 'the wind blows', suggests a (possibly nuclear) dystopian future. There is a concern with global conditions, and 'echoes his despair' certainly touches upon an expression of inner apprehension which Allsop suggests was part of the special circumstances and mood of the period.

A dominant sense of confusion and apathy regarding British politics is the consensus among cultural historians of this era. 1956, the year of the Suez crisis, was

<sup>14</sup>Robert Hewison, *In Anger: British Culture In The Cold War* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 83.

a consolidating year for the nation's disappointment and scepticism towards politics. Nationalist scepticism is epitomised by Porter in Osborne's *Anger*, 'we get our cooking from Paris (that's a laugh), our politics from Moscow, and our morals from Port Said'. (*LBIA*, 17) It is significant that Allsop, like Sinfield, goes on to identify one inherently conservative trend coming out of the writing of this decade. Firstly and more obviously it came from anti-humanists who accused society of barbarism because of the welfare state and commercial television. This was a 'leaning towards the right' (*KA*, 36) sort of thinking, which Wilson's and Holroyd's literature fitted into. The anti-humanist intellectuals formed a rank within which one can place Duncan as a thinker. However, one begins to see that this inherent conservatism is found within writing that also attacked the bourgeois 'establishment'. There are similarities between Lumley, the working class hero of Braine's *Room At The Top* (1959), Osborne's chief character Jimmy Porter and the popular portrayal of Colin Wilson who 'had left school at sixteen, worked as a laundryman, a hospital porter, a table-clearer in Lyon's Corner House, had lived rough in Paris and London.' Holroyd goes on to suggest, in retrospect, that Wilson 'represented different things to different people'.<sup>15</sup>

These conclusions serve to highlight the actual ambivalence of 'The Angry Young Man' era. This is an umbrella term under which outsiders, existentialists, angry men, heroes and anti-heroes, all co-existed.<sup>16</sup> Looking back, media coercion was clearly fundamental to the formulation of the term. Holroyd describes the era as 'the most successful post-war pseudo event'.<sup>17</sup> Osborne himself defies simple classification and in *Declaration* (1957) asks not to be identified with Porter's views. In the same publication Wain calls the Angry Young Man label a 'journalistic stunt'.<sup>18</sup> Allsop comments on the difficulty of validating the Young Men as a collective from the selection of their writing presented in the above seminal 'Angry' text. He says that their disagreements merely created more contrariety. From this it is less difficult to associate Duncan with what were seen as radical writers of the period. Allsop summarises the writers' differences based on whether they can be seen as socialist or not. There are the spiritual seekers: Wilson, Holroyd and Hopkins, who treated political discussion as redundant and democracy as invalid. Kingsley Amis articulated another current mood of disillusionment. His writing countered

<sup>15</sup> Stuart Holroyd, 'Angry Young Mania and Beyond', in *Colin Wilson: A Celebration*, ed. by Colin Stanley (Cecil Woolf, London, 1988), pp. 38 - 46 (p. 43).

<sup>16</sup> Allsop, op. cit., 1958. Allsop cites the first use of the 'angry' phrase in the title of Leslie Allen Paul's Marxist narrative, *Angry Young Man* (London, Faber, 1951), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Holroyd, op. cit., in Stanley, 1988, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Declaration*, intro. and ed. by Tom Maschler (London, Macgibbon and Kee, 1957), p. 90. Hereafter referred to in the text as *D*.

Osborne's social activism while it also opposed Wilson's spiritual 'guerrilla' and 'high priest philosopher' position. (KA, 8) But despite such contrariety, Allsop finds that, overall, the one possible sustaining factor is their 'dissentience'. (KA, 8)

Porter himself is indeterminate but this also, ironically, clarifies his dissentience or position of objection. The fact is that there is no reason why: 'There aren't any good, brave causes left'. (LBIA, 84) Kitchin states that the angry young man's 'high emotional charge' comes from 'the speaker's state of feeling rather than his state of mind or what he says'.<sup>19</sup> Less stereotypical than the new British counterparts to the James Dean type of delinquent found in *Absolute Beginners* (Colin MacInnes, 1958), a number of Duncan's dramatic characters have voices tinged with the same sort of 'dissentience'. Trevor in *Rehearsal*, a play Duncan probably composed in the late '50s, expresses anxiety and angry despair at his futile existence:

TREVOR: I'd like to be struck by lightning. A quicker death than being struck by a house in Henley.<sup>20</sup>

Leone is a character without conscience. For her life is 'To be what we are/Without indulging in self-pity because we run into what we are'. (C, 24) Porter pronounces a similar sentiment in *Anger*, 'They all want to escape from the pain of being alive'. (LBIA, 93)

Unfortunately, Duncan's preferred discourse of refined poetic language probably sabotaged his drama and prevented it from becoming as popular as other wholly 'realistic' dramas that spoke more colloquially about '50s and '60s society. Take for example, Trevor, who is 'state subsidised' and a character unsuitable for Theona because 'They haven't the same background'. (R, 201) His speech, by Act II, has become cultured and inventive, 'You're both in flight, fleeing from yourself. Patricia from a capacity for tenderness she dare not yield to' (R, 255) and makes comments like, 'The last generation is like a hand in the glove of our minds'. (R, 257) The lapses into old-fashioned expression partially associate Duncan with a past generation of '40s writers whom, Allsop believes, 'have taken the '50s on sufferance' (KA, 25) and whose elegies to the past used language too esoteric for popular taste.

Duncan's traditionalism sustained an opposition to various cultural change. His very opposition however, required that he insert himself with all his personal contradictions, into a current cultural ideology that was also underlyingly conflicted. Allsop supports the view of cultural ideologies being particularly oppositional in 1956 because, by then, the 'angry' movement had shown its fundamental dissension.

<sup>19</sup>Lawrence Kitchin, *Mid-Century Drama* (London, Faber, 1962), Chapters 1 and 7, p. 217. Hereafter referred to in the text as LK.

<sup>20</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'The Rehearsal', in *Collected Plays* (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), p. 258. Hereafter referred to as *Rehearsal* and R.

But rather than symbolising a watershed of any coherence, the new wave in the arts had 'no grand design of amity and purpose' (KA, 8) and instead, was a nucleus of widely opposing forces and 'new juxtapositions' such as jazz, Beckett, James Dean and Suez. (KA, 30) Duncan's writing of the new decade emulated ironic awareness of its paradoxes. In fact, he embodied them himself by, for example, appearing as a serious member of the literati but courting a glamorous starlet. Despite having reached a height of favour in the mid-'40s, Duncan continued to provide artistic material relevant to the next decade and beyond. Though his long-term involvement can be perceived as marginal, his alliance with the opening of the Royal Court and the English Stage Company in 1956 is significant. The Company also embodied oppositions and dissension which at many points incorporated, rather than excluded, Duncan's literary inclinations.

### *iii. The ESC: A Radical Standpoint?*

The theatrical background of the early '50s shows a persistence of the conditions outlined in Chapter 3: the domination of production management, the 'must-have stars' attitude and commercial interests of play-production still held fast by the middle of the decade. However critics have acknowledged that, by its end, George Devine – artistic director of the ESC – had helped to engineer the reinstatement of the dramatist in place of actor-manager stars. Spalding, for example, says 'Devine had become a catalyst for change and experiment'.<sup>21</sup>

In many ways Duncan stood apart from the new theatre movements of the '50s and beyond, but this is not to say that he did not sympathise with or allow his work to be influenced by their concerns. He was not as like-minded as others who formed the collective of writers attached in some way to the Royal Court. However, he was on the Artistic Committee of the ESC and attended his own rehearsals, other first nights and many of the Committee meetings.<sup>22</sup>

Produced concurrently with Osborne's *Anger* in May 1956, Duncan's first play to be produced at the Court, failed critically overall. The main complaint of *Don Juan and the Death of Satan* was its lengthiness, 'a far-too long story of the great rake'<sup>23</sup> and that it was 'romanticised to the point of tedium'.<sup>24</sup> Also:

<sup>21</sup>Francis Spalding, *Dance Till the Stars Come Down* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 217.

<sup>22</sup>There are sometimes twice-weekly visits to London noted in Duncan's diaries of 1958, 1960 and 1961. RDF

<sup>23</sup>Review by Robert Tee, *Daily Mirror* (16th May 1956), np. RDF

<sup>24</sup>PG, 'Review', *Daily Worker* (London, 17th May, 1956), np. RDF

Don Juan – swashbuckles his way unimpressively through a duststorm of barren ideas. Neither the poetry is significant enough nor the philosophy profound enough to justify so devious a route to reach so humdrum a conclusion.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, as the financial records show, ‘Attendance fell to a ruinous 18 per cent and the plays were withdrawn after eight performances’.<sup>26</sup>

Duncan was horrified at their negative reception and accused Devine, their director, of ‘inspired mis-casting’ and of slashing his texts to a skeleton: ‘my plays had been reduced to a costume melodrama’. (*HTME*, 387) Osborne’s memoir reinforces Duncan’s portrait of Devine as manipulative and autocratic as early as 1956. Osborne acted the part of the businessman in *Satan* and gives a back-stage account of the dress rehearsal of the *Juan* plays, which seemed like a ‘dreary party’. He remembers Duncan’s reaction to the performance when ‘his tiny form almost contorted with frustration’. (*JO*, 26) This description unhappily recalls Tynan’s verdict on Whiting’s lecture ‘The Art of The Dramatist’, given at the Old Vic in 1957: ‘I felt I was in the presence of a condemned man’.<sup>27</sup>

Wardle’s view is that Devine was not wholly an opposer of verse drama and never purposefully sabotaged Duncan’s plays:

Duncan’s allegations of sabotage are flatly contradicted by Duncan’s own friends who saw Devine after the opening, close to tears and bitterly reproaching himself for having ‘ruined Ronnie’s plays’. (*IW*, 185)

It seems Devine was obligated to produce them in return for financial support pledged to the Company. The Duncan archive contains letters from Sir Reginald Kennedy-Cox (chairman of the Salisbury Arts Theatre) that chronicle how during 1954, he eventually assented to sponsor the Company for £2000. This was with the proviso that *Don Juan* be put on in the first season along with the engagement of a certain actor, George Selway.<sup>28</sup> This clause became a crucial factor in the future angst which was to exist between Duncan and Devine. The document also stipulated that the plays should be put on ‘“in an adequate and complete manner”’, which as Osborne remembers, did *not* happen:

He put on two of Duncan’s plays in the first season with the unconcealed intention of killing them off as soon as possible. (*JO*, 16)

There is no evidence to suggest the extent of personal influence Duncan had on Kennedy-Cox’s contract document, though he alleges that his uncle had been in

<sup>25</sup>Milton Shulman, review, *Evening Standard* (London, 16th May, 1956), np. *RDF*

<sup>26</sup>Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 182. Also see Browne, op. cit., 1975, p.112.

<sup>27</sup>Kenneth Tynan, *Curtains* (New York: Athenaeum, 1961), p. 166.

<sup>28</sup>See ‘Contract Document’ and letters, Kennedy-Cox to Duncan. *RDF*



business with him, a reason for their meeting in Salisbury during *Tumbler's* performance. The content of the contract demonstrates the complex processes of compromise and appeasement involved with the formation of the company.

In *Catalyst*, Duncan's next play, he was forced (or astute enough) to translate his aesthetics into more naturalistic presentations of marital problems and domestic comedies. This following review of *Catalyst* clarifies an example of such translation:

Ronald Duncan is a member of the group of poetic dramatists which has been ousted from fashion by the invective of Osborne and the inconsequent wit of Ionesco. In *The Catalyst* (Arts), he has toned down the poetry to such an extent that it is only by hearsay that one knows it is written in verse. This is a bright, rather vulgar sexual comedy.<sup>29</sup>

As with *Juan* and *Satan*, there is also evidence of equally interested and supportive notices of the play. It appears easier for critics to set Duncan's work in contrast and as a 'failure' against the eventual greater historical impact of Osborne's new play (*Anger* returned for an eleven week run in October). Such a retrospective and comparative view tends to encourage the notion that the latter singularly symbolised an overnight cultural breakthrough. Rebellato proposes a counter-reading to this view of twentieth-century theatrical history, which he criticises for simplifying what came before:

Consequently, the old era becomes exclusively characterised by the absence of anger and the new era by its presence.<sup>30</sup>

Rebellato argues that the drama of the years before 1956 is often described over-scornfully as stuffy, 'modish' or elite. However, it is possible to re-assess the influence of post-war theatre with its Osborne emphasis, without assuming indisputable oppositions. Though difficult, this is a useful basis from which to re-evaluate Duncan's work.

In fact, on examination of the records of the Court's first season, we find Osborne in a minority as a new writer. Established writers such as Angus Wilson and Nigel Dennis were probably approached to mitigate the economic risks of the unknown rather than merely to appease Duncan. Wardle comments on the Company's pragmatism, that 'Tucking Osborne away in the middle of the first season made excellent sense'.<sup>31</sup> His statement, however, presumes the ESC already knew of the potential explosiveness of its discovery.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Anon. review, *Queen* (15th April, 1958), np. RDF

<sup>30</sup>Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That* (London, Routledge, 1999), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup>Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 171. Osborne says that *The Mulberry Bush* gave the Court a 'tentative start' and that *The Crucible* was produced using 'calculated caution'. See Osborne, op. cit., 1991, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup>Devine's response to Rattigan's conviction that the play could not be a success was, 'Well it is... and it's going to make the Royal Court possible'. Uncited source in Wardle, op. cit., p. 180.

Kitchin does not sustain the view that the ESC was the only reason behind the success of this 'new drama', heralded by 'a movement of young playwrights'. (LK, 32) In his opinion, by 1959, the Company 'had developed tiresome mannerisms'. (LK, 98) At the same time as giving credit to its early aims of 'encouraging new playwrights', (LK, 98) to him, George Devine's previous theatre experience 'scarcely revealed a destiny as patron of Porterism'. (LK, 99)

Kitchin is vague about which other forces are at work to ensure the success of the 'new drama', epitomised by Porter's 'redbrick failure' (LK, 99) character. Generally, 'the working classes' (LK, 60) are cited as prompting the 'significant advance' happening in theatre, this due to the benefits of 'wartime mobility', the fading effects of 'post-war welfare legislation' (LK, 99) and the new upsurge of state-educated intellectual criticism. He bases the company's breakthrough not on *Anger's* theatrical production but the 'success of an excerpt on television which boosted receipts at the Royal Court in time to rescue the ESC venture'. (LK, 99) A decline in cinema-going had caused an increase of television viewing.<sup>33</sup> The singular role the ESC played in the play's sudden breakthrough is, therefore, contestable because Osborne's material was also disseminated by the mass media.<sup>34</sup>

Different agendas and varied accounts document the convergence of the forces behind the formation of the Company. The only common policy one can perceive during the first year is that of the aim for a 'writers' theatre'<sup>35</sup> but this is, of course, so vague as to allow more or less emphasis on *either* 'new, young' writing, or intellectual and serious (established) writers. Such vagueness may support the impression that Duncan's aims and position during the peak years of the Court's celebrity were also nebulous. However Duncan was, at first, an initiatory and positive force. Osborne remembers that his and Devine's initial aims actually appeared to coincide, as, 'George looked to the *Novel* as the fountainhead for his dream of new theatrical vitality.'<sup>36</sup> Conversely, Duncan primarily wanted a management unafraid to stage 'experimental' and 'non-commercial' plays (*HTME*, 370) and he and Lewenstein agreed there was a need 'to revitalise the theatre.' (*HTME*, 372) Duncan was quoted in the *Stage* as saying:

<sup>33</sup>The television excerpt was broadcast in October, 1956. Also see Sinfield, *op. cit.*, 1983, pp. 155-156 where he traces a gradual decline in cinema attendance from 1946 until its 'sharp decline' during the late 'fifties and also a large increase in television set sales.

<sup>34</sup>See *British Theatre in the 1950's* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), ed. by Dominic Shellard, for a collection of 'revisionist' accounts of post-war British Theatre.

<sup>35</sup>See, anon., 'Saluting A New Venture', *The Sketch* (London, 23rd May, 1956) np., as one of the press releases which claims 'a writer's theatre' as one of the aims of the new venture, *RDF*. Also, R. B. Marriott's article (10th May, 1956). *RDF*

<sup>36</sup>Osborne, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 15.

We are not going in for experiment for the sake of experiment; we are not avant garde or highbrow or a coterie set. We want to build a vital living, popular theatre which, in time, will develop an approach and acting style of its own,

followed by:

I know what can be done to attract the so called ordinary person into the theatre by what I have seen at the Devon festival.<sup>37</sup>

Duncan's rejection of the highbrow and consideration of the audience, along with Devine's literary interest, suggests that each conceded to the other and, in so doing, adapted their roles as spokespersons to suit the image of enthusiastic company figurehead.

In the Court's first season Duncan and Devine were mutually in favour of their playwriting competition winner, *Look Back in Anger*. Duncan had pledged his support by writing a telegram of congratulations to Osborne. Unfortunately, his support was to turn to accusations against the latter and a wholesale distrust of the 'theatre being used as a soapbox for polemical political views'.<sup>38</sup>

The mutable nature of Duncan's relationship to Colin Wilson is significant. After his play *The Death of God* had been rejected by the ESC, Wilson had written a disgusted letter to Devine via the press saying 'It looks as if the Royal Court has lowered its standards all round'. The *Mail* quoted the letter on its page three, calling Wilson a 'petulant young man' and mentions Duncan as one of the committee of three who rejected the play. The paper also quoted some outspoken comments by Duncan:

The play was bad. It was all argument and no drama... what he should really be is a publicity man for a detergent firm... . He seems to think that what makes a play is a mixture of religion and sex - and he has a very banal attitude to both.<sup>39</sup>

It is interesting that in his critical reporting mode, Duncan appropriately uses fiery and provocative phrases. They seem hastily composed and rather unconsidered, indeed the type of language that, because so simplistic, could also be used to describe his own brand of drama. Furthermore, Duncan was alleged in this article to have commented that it was quite usual for 'authors of much greater standing' to have had plays rejected, but 'You don't hear them wailing'. It is indicative of Duncan's inconsistent self-representations over time and within different types of writing, that one later sees him use Wilson's accusation of lowered standards against Devine

<sup>37</sup>R.B. Mariott, 'Theatre for Playwrights and for the People', *Stage* (10th May, 1956), np. *RDF*

<sup>38</sup>Ronald Duncan quoted in anon., 'Playwright Breaks With Royal Court', *Chelsea News* (22nd April, 1966), np., *RDF*. Also see letter, John Osborne to Duncan (23rd April, 1966), where Osborne states he put £7,500 of his own money into *Patriot*. *HRHRC*

<sup>39</sup>Anon., 'The Outsider's Play Is Thrown Out', *Daily Mail* (28th Sept., 1957), p. 9.

himself. Duncan did exactly what he had derided Wilson for doing in 1957. He 'wailed' in defence of his classified choice of writers in *Notes* to the Committee of February 1960:

3. Plays by competent playwrights which do not conform to the provincialism of Sloane Square are dismissed before they can be considered by the Artistic Committee, i.e. the plays of people like N. C. Hunter, Bernard Kops, Denis Cannan, John Whiting, Christopher Fry, Peter Ustinov, etc.<sup>40</sup>

By April he exposed his feelings of betrayal to the press saying, 'I feel like a butcher among a bunch of vegetarians.'<sup>41</sup> It is obvious that the particular approach and style of the ESC had not evolved into the sort of theatre Duncan envisaged. Of Osborne he said:

Though he has a great talent, it is a mistake to equate commercial success with artistic achievement. With some exceptions we have consistently produced plays of a socially realistic kind as though we had just heard of Ibsen,

and also 'I am used to being in a minority'.<sup>42</sup> This is typical of the way Duncan retracted some of his firmly-put convictions, especially when his own writing was not finding favour, which was starting to be the case in 1960. Over the next five years, Duncan wrote a number of news articles along the same lines, re-stating the complaints outlined in his 1960 *Notes* and pointed out the contradictions of how public labelling applied to the ESC.

By 1965, Duncan had cultivated a position of adversity towards the artistic policy of the Company. He wrote sneeringly to Gaskill the new Artistic Director (who had professed to be 'deeply out of sympathy' with his plays), 'I never had any hope that I could penetrate the censorship which has become established in Sloane Square'.<sup>43</sup>

In the newspaper exchange of April 1966, he pointed out what he saw as the ESC's 'narrowminded'-ness as a company which had claimed to be 'against the Establishment', but which had only formed 'a new Establishment'. To him, the discord between Osborne funding his own production of *A Patriot For Me* and the non-commercial image of the Court, only signified hypocrisy towards its original aims. The *Times* reported Duncan's allegations that *Patriot* was 'too expensive'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Ronald Duncan, *Notes On The Artistic Policy of the English Stage Company*. RDF

<sup>41</sup>Ronald Duncan quoted in Dean day-Lewis, 'Duncan Quits Royal Court in Policy Row', *Daily Telegraph* (19th April, 1960), p. 17.

<sup>42</sup>Edward Goring, quoting Duncan in news article, 'Kitchen Sink Theatre in Revolt' (Mar. 11th, 1960), np. RDF

<sup>43</sup>William Gaskill to Duncan (27th Sept., 1965) and Duncan to Gaskill (2nd Oct. 1965). RDF

<sup>44</sup>Anon., 'Mr. R. Duncan Quits stage Company', *Times* (19th April, 1966) and also anon, 'Mr Duncan Resigns In Anger', *Guardian* (19th April, 1966).

Osborne's defence was that if the Lord Chamberlain had granted the play a license earlier, then the ESC could have transferred the play to the West End allowing it to 'make a considerable profit for the company'.<sup>45</sup> Though Duncan's reply allowed a courteous apology to Osborne, he reiterated, as his point of contention:

that the production costs of £10,000 for a play are too expensive, whoever bears them, in that they set a standard which makes it difficult for a company to risk staging new playwrights.<sup>46</sup>

Both authors used the press to exchange adverse commentary and participate in their own publicity. After their initial antipathy, Wilson wrote privately to Duncan in 1957, sounding surprised at the furore he himself was helping to generate around his work and reputation: 'It seems fortunate to me that the press should have taken me up and made a "personality" of me.' Regarding their exchanges in the press he commented that 'this sort of thing is deadly to us both'.<sup>47</sup> In September he had written for the first time, somewhat defensively, describing Devine's alleged 'change of attitude to me' after the director had indicated a contrary 'original position, expressed to me when he asked me to lunch' (to discuss the play).<sup>48</sup> In a second letter Wilson wrote:

And as writers, we are merely cutting one another's throats if we give in to the temptation to go in for this sort of thing. We have very little in common - but at least we have more in common with one another than either of us has with readers of the Daily Mail.<sup>49</sup>

It is fair to say that he and Duncan showed signs of integrity in private. They met soon afterwards and embarked upon a life-long friendship. It is possible that their association, with Wilson's efforts to contact and visit Duncan at this time, may have encouraged the latter's developing hostility towards Devine. Duncan had had a similar experience of an earlier agreement (discussed over dinner) about the Company's policy, later being abandoned.<sup>50</sup>

Different interpretations of policies and 'hopes' quickly became a moot point within the committee. From his privileged position as a commercially successful playwright, Osborne can afford candour on this issue, implying that general intentions were a compromise and soon afterwards, discredited:

<sup>45</sup>Osborne to editor, *Times* (22nd April, 1966).

<sup>46</sup>Duncan to editor, *Times* (26th April, 1966).

<sup>47</sup>Wilson to Duncan (4th Oct., 1957). *RDF*

<sup>48</sup>Wilson to Duncan (28th Sept., 57). *RDF*

<sup>49</sup>Wilson to Duncan (4th Oct., 1957). *RDF*

<sup>50</sup>Browne, op. cit., 1975, p. 116. Browne states that during a lunch between Duncan and Devine, it seemed they 'were in complete agreement with the kind of drama which was needed to revitalize theatre'. (p. 11) Duncan also wrote in his autobiography that the new Artistic Director 'was enthusiastic' and 'approved' of his list of writers (*HTME*, 378) though no-one can prove the exact nature of the original policy, as no-one else was at the lunch with Duncan and Devine.

Their original intent had been to introduce plays by all of them, a strategy George successfully resisted by a concerted campaign of devious manoeuvring over the next ten years. (JO, 16)

During the early stages, while the Company was still negotiating for the Kingsway Theatre, Duncan was inviting certain colleagues such as Ustinov to compose works for the new venture, stating that 'It is our policy to present new plays by contemporary dramatists'.<sup>51</sup> The first public version of the ESC's *Aims and Objects* were set out in the pamphlet, 'The English Stage Company Limited', in the authorship of which we can assume Duncan played a major part.<sup>52</sup> It used brief and rather idealistic statements containing phrases such as 'consistently progressive policy'; 'to tour contemporary English plays abroad'; 'seasons of plays intended for younger theatregoers' and more specifically:

the following artists are in sympathy with our aims and the Company hopes to present their work: T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, Peter Ustinov, John Whiting, Ronald Duncan, Gabriel Marcel, Benjamin Britten, John Piper.<sup>53</sup>

It is significant that the above list names artists who were all personal friends of Duncan's, many of whom cannot be considered as exactly 'contemporary'. His hopes for a 'different' theatre still depended upon already established names while his dreams for a poetic type of theatre continued. In 1953 he proclaimed that:

The gap between the playwright's typewriter and the first night curtain has always been large... By removing one wall, this naturalistic theatre claims to let the audience look in on life. But that is not the job of the theatre... poetry belongs to the theatre.<sup>54</sup>

A preference for French arts and non-naturalistic styles is clear by his translation of Cocteau's *The Typewriter* (1954), *L'Apollo de' Bellac* (1963) and *The Trojan Women* (1966). By 1966, Duncan's protests against 'the theatre of febrile social protest, topical and frivolous' were levelled directly toward the New Wave of British Theatre.<sup>55</sup> This view echoed those of Arden, Whiting and Ionesco, the latter stating in 1963 that:

Social reality is that of inauthentic, two-dimensional hollow man. The theatre must turn its attention inwards.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Duncan to Peter Ustinov (poss. Jan.-Jun., 1955), nd. RDF

<sup>52</sup>It was printed in March, 1955, when Duncan was working closely with Lewenstein and Blond to ensure financial backing for the Kingsway theatre. Philip Roberts ascertains that 'he alone made the list' and states 'There's no reference to any consultation with Devine' as Devine was abroad and did not require consultation at that point. See his *The Royal Court Theatre and The Modern Stage* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 29.

<sup>53</sup>See Greville Poke's response to Harewood's *Memorandum on Artistic Policy* of May 20, 1960, which restates the *Aims and Objects* as the 'policy originally proposed by Ronald Duncan as incorporated in our first prospectus', marked A, (p. 2). RDF

<sup>54</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Murder by The Management', *Observer* (29th March, 1953), np. RDF

<sup>55</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Socialists of the Savoy Grill', *Sunday Telegraph* (May 15th, 1966), p. 25.

<sup>56</sup>Eugene Ionesco, *Times* (11th Feb. 1963), np. RDF

The original 'aims and objects' for the ESC are then, in part, reflective of Duncan's bi-polar urges towards both new and old, the traditional and the experimental. It is this which often makes his outlook seem fundamentally divided and hard to understand. But the same bi-polarity occurs favourably when presented through contrasting dramatic characters such as Juan and Marcia. This introduces a refreshing conflict of ideas, instead of having Duncan's voice imperiously quoting oversimplified moralities.

The new interest in drama at this time meant that writers began to experiment in a multiplicity of forms and Duncan could not help but be influenced by this ferment of creative transition. The New Wave of British 'kitchen sink' drama, which reached its height in the early '60s (with Delaney, Jellicoe and Wesker), avoided poetry and the expressionistic qualities that had intellectualised European 'absurdist' plays into a school of their own. Rebellato implies that what differentiated the new drama was an anti-intellectualisation, an assertion of 'feeling'. (DR, 144) *Catalyst* expresses, through Leone, this type of emotional assertion. She makes blunt statements such as: 'At least we like life for its own sake' (C, 24) and 'I don't want your charity, I want you'. (C, 24) The shift away from verse was clearly noted by Duncan who, after writing the *Juan* plays, believed he had found:

an idiom which could carry contemporary sensibility and situations. I felt I had at last pulled it off in *The Catalyst*. Indeed, I was very pleased that none of the critics had spotted the play was written in verse. (O, 21)

One can see that Duncan adjusted the verse in his drama to accommodate the gradual shifts in taste championed by the ESC towards more colloquial prose dialogue. Typical of his own skills of disguise, Duncan managed to transmute his theatre through a personal formula, blending a poetic substructure with an aptitude for contemporary styles.

It is clear that Duncan was not reclusive but thoroughly in touch with the West End theatre scene through his own agent and from meeting others involved with the ESC's formation. He interviewed Miller for the *Mail* in 1956, saying, 'He is my favourite contemporary dramatist'.<sup>57</sup> Having evidently seen *The Crucible* he comments 'Its construction made me feel as though I were only an amateur at playwrighting.' Nevertheless, he could not resist applying his own brand of poetic symbolism, elevated diction (thinly disguised) and elements of expressionism to his writing, whatever the period. It was this personal brand that differentiated his works from the persistent development of more socially realistic modes of theatre. Reviews such as this one of *Catalyst*, demonstrate the contemporary expectations of realism:

<sup>57</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'The View From Mr. Miller', *Daily Mail* (18th Oct. 1956), np. RDF

Perhaps because he is writing in verse, Mr. Duncan has not bothered to make the formation of the three-some at all convincing on a realistic plane.<sup>58</sup>

As late as 1963, Tynan notes the relevance of Duncan's critique in *Catalyst* when it was revived as *Menage A Trois*:

His wit, at its best, has a jaundiced, heartfelt edge, and when he plunges his knife into the soft underbelly of the bourgeois marriage, he twists it with alarming effect.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike the language in *Juan*, the dialogue in *Satan* and *Catalyst* is more flexible and colloquial. The range of characters in the former allows some interesting interplay, for example, between Evelyn's directness and Juan's embellished speech:

EVELYN: Well, I'm waiting...  
Or do you make love with words?  
DON JUAN: It's words that make us love  
from these alone you must interpret my heart's tense  
Or make meaning of my mind's metaphor...  
EVELYN: You mean? (*DS*, 45)

Evelyn's incomprehension throws Juan's antiquated attempts at meaning into harsh relief. She signifies a (not unattractive) simplicity equated with realistic modes of representation, direct action and anti-intellectualisation:

DON JUAN: I shocked?  
EVELYN: Yes. Or is it that I'm not attractive?  
DON JUAN: No  
EVELYN: Then what are you waiting for?  
(She leads him to the divan) (*DS*, 45)

The situation in *Catalyst* contains long stretches of circular analysis and questioning based on the characters' self-deceptions and misinterpretations of each other's utterances:

THERESE: You don't love me anymore.  
CHARLES [Sitting down]: For the last half hour I've been telling you, I do. (*C*, 38)  
  
THERESE: Then you have seen her?  
CHARLES: Talking to you is like knitting with a piece of elastic. (*C*, 53)

Despite the lack of action, the play manages an authentic expression of emotional conflict and mutual confusion borne out of argument. The brevity of exchanges such as these adds humanity and realism to the way the characters communicate:

THERESE: Must you?  
CHARLES: Do what?  
THERESE: Do that. You've already sharpened that bloody pencil  
three times this evening. (*C*, 50)

The prosaic dialogue in *Catalyst* does not hint at the new prominence of lower-class forms of vernacular speech and despite its pessimism about modern marriage it does not address wider issues such as national identity.

<sup>58</sup> *Queen*, op. cit., 1958.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Tynan, 'Theatre', *Observer* (24th March, 1963), np. *RDF*



Duncan did, however, use working-class culture to display types of conflict in, for example, *Birth* (1936), *The Unburied Dead* (1938), *Pimp, Skunk and Profiteer* (1939), *Jan's Journal* (1946), *St. Spiv* (1950), *The Janitor* (1955) and *The Urchin* (1959). Work such as this proves that Duncan by no means avoided social conditions; much of it expresses a desire for radical change. However he only attempted colloquialism at 'Orace's (*St. Spiv*) level in his 1959 play *The Urchin*:

O' KELLY: Cor' what a brick! I don't 'av (sic) put me foot in it  
whenever I opens me mouth.<sup>60</sup>

*Urchin* is a clever blend of different elements and indisputably current influences. The story is taken from the earlier *Tumbler* and was commissioned by Maskell. Jean O' Kelly and Sid live together, unwedded, in a tenement next to Rufus, a guitar playing West Indian, by whom Jean eventually has a mixed race child (like Josephine in Delaney's play). Rufus is stereotyped as a jazz musician but the stereotype is also criticised as he shows diffidence towards his ability:

O'Kelly:  
Anything wrong? I mean anything new.

Rufus:  
Just tired: recording all day. And now I've got to go and croak like a bullfrog in that damned club all night. (*U*, 33)

Though Rufus is qualified in law, the English system is limiting his potential, which prompts him to return to Barbados:

Rufus:  
I've been qualified for four years; I'm still singing in clubs. And if I stay here another ten, I'll probably be crooning from the gutter. This bloody country pretends it hasn't a colour bar, they say they believe in racial equality. They do; as long as people like me croon, punch bus tickets or take a job on the underground and stick to our proper station. (*U*, 36)

*Urchin* has associations with *A Taste of Honey*, a play composed the year before in 1958.<sup>61</sup> This was the year of *Absolute Beginners* as well as the Notting Hill Race Riots. Even though Duncan's play for television was never produced, its existence shows that he was not afraid to participate in what were obviously topical cultural concerns. Also, his collaborations with Thomas Eastwood during the '50s associates Duncan with other playwrights who used this composer, such as Osborne (*Anger*) and Nigel Dennis (*Cards of Identity*, *The Making of Moo*). For these, Eastwood supplied the musical background obviously thought fitting for contemporary drama.

Most often it is the lament for the lack of 'good, brave causes', by the particular type of character that Porter is, that is assumed to have struck a chord in

<sup>60</sup>Ronald Duncan, *The Urchin* (1959), p.1. Hereafter referred to in the text as *U* and *Urchin*.

<sup>61</sup>Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* was performed in May 1958 in Stratford East and in the West End in February 1959.

audiences at that period. In 1955, the majority of theatrical and artistic culture still sustained a polite naturalism, while the escapism of poetic drama was no longer hankered after. Lloyd-Evans suggests that Wesker's and Osborne's style of 'new naturalism' signified a breakthrough due to its use of the 'raw prose of a frustrated generation' and embodiment of 'the brazen antithesis of the old conventional 'heroical'.<sup>62</sup> Osborne's refusal to impose a conventional heroism on Porter, along with his helplessness and the special 'vernacular' articulation of social themes, perhaps raised its level of interest above the equivalent despair Duncan expressed in his plays.

But one cannot oppose Duncan completely to the type of successful dramatist that Osborne represents because for every glaring difference there is a congruence. In fact Wardle points out the 'strange similarity' between Ronald Duncan and John Osborne:

both elitist, both attracted to religious themes, both given to interpretative abuse, and in these two productions, both saying much the same thing... . Don Juan and Jimmy Porter are both men of passion invading the territory of good manners. The message is the same: England has gone to sleep behind a mask of respectability; it would be better to wake up and feel something, even if that means treating your wife badly or being sent to hell. (IW, 185)

Audrey Williamson, writing as early as 1957, presents a refreshing view of Osborne and Duncan's work, because she is evaluative of her own time. Already she observes that *Anger* has 'created a remarkable impact' and:

It is a picture of contemporary youth at its most disorganised, egotistic, cruel and dissatisfied, without causes to fight, or beliefs with which to fertilise its barren psychological soil. When the torment of his anger has subsided and his views on life broadened, Mr. Osborne may mature into a dramatist of considerable intellectual dimensions.<sup>63</sup>

Williamson believes the play's impact rests on its verisimilitude to what are contemporary social truths. Though she contrasts Duncan to Osborne, she implies that the older playwright is equally thought-provoking and his ideas justifiably mature:

*Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* represented the antithesis of *Look Back In Anger* in moral values... they arouse more questions, human, religious and metaphysical than are dreamt of in young Mr. Osborne's philosophy. They are the older generation's challenge to the mixed-up-kid mentality of today, turned in on itself and psychologically shattered by the introspection, without spiritual roots or the instinct for self sacrifice, materialistic as reason insists yet drastically disturbed, not tranquillised, by the age's acceptance of the rational. The winds of heaven, scattered by the keen blasts of reason will return, Mr. Duncan suggests, even if only one man preserves them in hell. (AW, 184)

<sup>62</sup>Gareth Lloyd-Evans, *The Language of Modern Drama* (J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1977), pp. 82 and 112.

<sup>63</sup>Audrey Williamson, *Contemporary Theatre, 1953 - 1956* (London, Rockcliff, 1956), p. 183 & 184. Hereafter AW.

Juan's character is challenging because he preserves some hope for the spiritual and anti-rational, while the society the play represents in order to satirise it, is the 'tranquillised', not the disturbed side:

Outwardly, his picture of modern society... is as depressing as Mr. Osborne's; more so, in that it is thinly satirical and not pierced, as in the younger man's play, by the genuine anguish of living. But it clings to the intuitive religious instinct of man and propounds a moral basis in life: it accepts that humanity was meant to have a soul and the destruction of the soul is a matter for despair. (AW, 184 -185)

Despite offering more of a mature, moral solution, Duncan's anguish is apparently less 'genuine'. Though equally despairing, it is less disturbing because it is old-fashioned and less representative of real, 'modern youth'. Williamson proclaims that 'the next generation of playwrights is on the move' (AW, 186) which verges upon ranking Duncan with a contrary sort of playwriting. But at the same time as acknowledging the possible reasons why Osborne's play 'works', her criticism compares it with Duncan's work as well as differentiating it in. On the whole she affords it a respectable position within the spectrum of the ESC's dramatic repertoire:

*Don Juan and The Death of Satan*, nevertheless, were worthy of this Company's production and show the breadth of intellectual outlook of the directors. (AW, 186)

Such views place Duncan with some certitude into mid-century dramatic writing. This placement should not cut and dry him into a mere forerunner of an oppositional and distinctly progressive theatre movement. Instead it is a view that recognises that Osborne was part of rather than outside theatrical capitalism,<sup>64</sup> that the ESC originated as a variegated scheme and that the critical success of Osborne's first play was, at first, very gradual as shown by these reviews:

At present he (*Osborne*) is still mistaking violence for strength and cheapness for wit. There is no need for blood to be spilt over this piece, the ESC will have more important work to offer.<sup>65</sup>

This is an interesting but less than successful offering by 26 year-old John Osborne. Jimmy Porter (Kenneth Haigh) is boorish and ultimately boring.<sup>66</sup>

It is evident that a similarly complex network of influences and accidents (to which both were susceptible) affected the reception of both Duncan's and Osborne's plays. Duncan's theatre never achieved the same popular acclaim as Osborne's, but one should not forget that, as with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which caused an isolated stir in the days before the ESC, so did Duncan's *Tomb. Anger* was also a 'gamble' for

<sup>64</sup>See William Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction* (London, Faber, 1988), where the artistic director admits that 'The first years of the court were carried entirely by the transfers and film rights of Osborne's plays'. (p.129)

<sup>65</sup>Anon., 'Reviews', *Sketch* (23rd May, 1956), np. RDF

<sup>66</sup>R. M-T, article, *News Chronicle* (8th May, 1956), np. RDF

the Court and it is in this light that Osborne's rise can be seen as akin to Duncan's in 1946 and similarly dependent on the conflicting elements which allow a play success. It is not through a simple 'failure', but for varied and complex reasons that Duncan was unable to sustain his dramatic success.

In 1968, when Duncan was interviewed and asked about the Royal Court and the National Theatre, he stuck to his bid for singularity and placed himself specifically against and apart from what all new theatre writing stood for:

I stand for tradition, they believe in change for the sake of change. I stand for craftsmanship... I believe in a minority, in elite, an aristocracy if you like.<sup>67</sup>

Duncan's urge for the aristocratic is even detectable in *Rehearsal*, where class-consciousness is addressed by Trevor, who uses the vocabulary of a rebellious, though educated, youth:

TREVOR: [to PATRICIA] You may sneer at my background. But shabbiness is not poverty. It's this luxury that is utterly bankrupt. (R, 222)

Words like 'utterly' seem inappropriate to the way his character is constructed, though his speech is made more fiery with the liberal appliance of 'damned' and 'bloody'. His position is subversive to a minor degree as he becomes source of all the tensions within the 'Loamshire' country house. But Trevor's immersion in the family's marital complaints immediately traps him into the domain of the middle-classes. The play ends with Trevor and Theona '[unaware that they are as her parents were at the beginning of the play]'. (R, 257) So while *Urchin* achieves a balance between fantasy and social realism, in *7 Deadly Virtues* and *Rehearsal*, marriage is darkly painted. The scene of the family has regressed into a private theatre of its own making. Duncan's role as wronged spouse haunts both of these plays whereas O'Kelly operates as Duncan's 'other', a rootless, feminised, Chaplinesque figure in *Urchin*. The co-existence and combination of styles also enables us to perceive Duncan as a playwright influenced by the transitions and overlapping of theatre conventions and social mores at this time, rather than contrasting his work to simplified views of new dramatic expression.

<sup>67</sup>Lee Langley, 'The Idealist Tripped Up By Pebbles', *Guardian* (Oct. 10th, 1968), np. RDF

## Conclusion

It is clear that Duncan was influenced by contemporary movements in theatre while he also bore an affinity to playwrights who were iconoclastic in different ways, such as John Whiting<sup>68</sup> and Arden, who had appealed for more poetic drama in 1961.<sup>69</sup> Arden incorporated verse into plays like *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1954) and *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1965). While the naturalism of *Anger* may have influenced the continued depiction of ordinary life in art on through the '60s, alternative dramatic styles were to emerge –Orton's farce, for example, and plays which used unreal and metaphorical frameworks such as those of Mercer, Stoppard and Bond. Beckett used expressionistic, starkly symbolic sets, and structured worlds with uncertain linguistic references. Pinter brought the circularity of everyday speech close to a poetic idiom in plays that tested the absurdity and limitations of language.

Duncan can be seen as an out-of-date playwright only if new realism is simplistically opposed to poetic drama. But it is also intrinsically reductive to see Duncan merely as one of the school of poetic dramatists. There are in fact similarities between *Anger* – seen as a seminal play of the new wave of British drama – and less radical productions of the decade, including Duncan's work. This view is as opposed to identifying the unique features that contributed to *Anger's* sensationalist position on the London stage, and would then mark *Don Juan* for example, as old-school and a failure. It is more useful to perceive Osborne's success as being part of a rather complex expression of English identity that would, nevertheless, begin to challenge the European and American playwrights' dominance. Also, its production coincided with other expressions of dissatisfaction with society that happened to be voiced by a younger generation.

There are elements of Duncan's dramatic writing which typify his own generation: a romanticisation of the lower classes, poetic symbolism and middle-class language. These factors, as well as his intellectual critique, risk its classification as élitist. But the emergence of sexuality as a theme and departures from naturalism are experimental, although sometimes over-endowed with personal vision and therefore too inaccessible for public enjoyment. Nonetheless, inaccessibility is essential for the progress of theatre writing because obscurity challenges the stasis of what has become traditional. While Duncan's plays offer experimental modes and ideas and cannot be defined as typical verse-dramas, they are not deeply obscure. His main dramatic works

<sup>68</sup>John Whiting criticised the Court for its esoteric policy in 'Half Time at the Royal Court' in *The Art of The Dramatist*, ed. by Ronald Hayman (London, London Magazine Editions, 1970), pp. 180-183.

<sup>69</sup>John Arden, 'Verse In the Theatre', *New Theatre Magazine* (1961), pp. 12-17.

of the '50s instead uphold a voice of adversity which engages with the social reality it criticises. Duncan did not therefore segregate himself from his cultural environment.

During the time Duncan was involved with the ESC, it emerges that the critique in much of his writing addresses the anxiety and attitudes towards the place of women in that society. As well as in specifically autobiographical narratives, his plays most prominently foreground marriage and its transgression through infidelity. The next chapter, with reference to works mainly from the '50s and '60s, examines how the subject position taken up by Duncan repeatedly addresses sexual identity. The next two chapters will evaluate the relative potency of iconoclastic, subversive elements in his work against his more misogynist, conservative tendencies.

## Women at the Kitchen Sink: Representations of Gender and Sexuality

### *Introduction*

In 1959, Macmillan was claiming that the British people had 'never had it so good!' But with the new found prosperity of the 1950s came the phenomenon of youth culture and its explosion in the Notting Hill riots of 1958–1959. Davies and Saunders summarise the new 'Saturday Night Culture' as one of 'hedonism (and) sexuality with more than a little subversive sympathy for the single male'.<sup>1</sup> Their summary denotes the conservative aspects of rebellion in this period. The following analysis of the decade foregrounds a literature with themes of misogyny and sexual anxiety at its centre. John Braine's novel *Room at the Top* (1957) presented women within the traditional dichotomy of Madonna and whore. Duncan's writing from this time and beyond, displays a 'macho' anxiety similar to many of his 'radical' contemporaries.

Chauvinist statements occur such as (Juan to Catalion), 'women seem so alike nowadays/That it's quite impossible for a man to recapture the relish of being un-faithful to anyone'. (DS, 54) Osborne's Jimmy Porter displays a similar contempt for women, 'When you/see a woman in front of her bedroom mirror, you/realise what a refined sort of butcher she is' (LBIA, 24) and 'Why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?' (LBIA, 85) Duncan's *Catalyst* contains a noticeable amount of sexist generalisation about women. Charles arguing against jealousy says 'the pleasure for a woman is/When another woman knows'. (C, 45) Possibly attempting comic relief in the argument with his wife he says of Leone 'But she's not a human being, she's a woman'. (C, 15)

Osborne exhibited an unwillingness to be identified with his characters: 'I have been over-publicised because of something I have written and made money out of'. (D, 64) But his personal sexism is revealed to be similar to Porter's in some of his comments, for example those made in *Women and Beauty* journal: 'I don't like a too knowledgeable woman - I feel it is against her sex' as well as in his autobiography.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Alistair Davies and Peter Saunders, 'Literature, Politics and Society' in Sinfield, op. cit., 1983, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>John Osborne, 'reply' in *Women and Beauty* journal, nd. Cited in Allsop, op. cit., p. 129.

Like Duncan he was loath to divorce, 'I wasn't intent on marrying Mary, and I was reluctant to go through the business of Pamela being pressed into unwilling action'.<sup>3</sup> Allsop identifies Porter's anger as a 'sexual neurosis' that is wrapped up in class conflict. Women have 'humbled and exhausted him' (KA, 109) and the play reveals sexual anxiety and resentment more explicitly than it does sexual rebellion.

Weeks identifies a paradigmatic shift in attitude as the factor provoking increased sexual anxiety in British culture. During the '50s there was 'a major reassessment of the whole field of sexuality'.<sup>4</sup> The post-war emergence of the welfare state and its issues of reproduction and social planning placed an emphasis on the new role of women as income contributors. The 'heightened post-war stress on the importance of monogamous, heterosexual love' led to 'a series of moral panics about vice' which eventually culminated in the Wolfenden Report of 1954.<sup>5</sup> The committee's work outlined a new moral economy, which tightened up public penalties while it liberalised private practices (prostitution and homosexuality). This signifies the contradictory effects of beliefs regarding private and public morality, a contradiction underlying Duncan's and others' work of this period.

### *i. Sex and the Double Standard*

The co-existence of newly sensitive attitudes along with dated representations of women is evident in the following reviews. On the *Don Juan* (double bill) of 1956 the critic notes that 'Duncan's rather undergraduate wit on the subject of women and their physical propensities produced rather uneasy laughs from the audience'.<sup>6</sup> Later, this more misogynist view of *Catalyst* ironically implies the author's sensitivity:

Author Ronald Duncan has taken a sensitive scalpel to the relationship between man and calculating, predatory womankind.<sup>7</sup>

New writing such as *Room at the Top*, Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* were conventionally classed as radical for their time and Duncan actually wrote a newspaper serialisation of the Sillitoe film for the *Evening Standard* in November 1960.<sup>8</sup> The language and style summaries and mimic Sillitoe's prose and Duncan shows skill and concision here. There is no record

<sup>3</sup>Osborne, op. cit., 1991, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup>Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society* (Essex, Longman, 1981), pp. 232.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>6</sup>M.R., 'Don Juan', *Kensington Post* (25th May, 1956), np. RDF

<sup>7</sup>H. Weaver, 'Great Catalyst on a Hot Tin Roof,' *Daily Herald* (26th March, 1958), np. RDF

<sup>8</sup>The Woodfall Company produced the film version in 1960.



of what prompted this commission, but it certainly informs us of his connection with popular literary productions of his day and his participation (if only partial) in the themes, language and imagery of 'angry' young writing.<sup>9</sup> Radical because of the social realism, the novel and film of *Saturday Night* depict the life of Arthur the hero, played by Albert Finney, and his affairs with two married women. Geraghty, writing on the 1960 film, identifies signifiers of 'the tensions around masculinity' expressed through the hero.<sup>10</sup> In the opening scene, Arthur's face 'remains hard', demonstrating 'a masculine capacity for control'. (CG, 63) In terms of the action, Geraghty comments on the way Finney appears boy-like when Doreen visits, his body in the bed obscured by an eiderdown. The scene associates domesticity with desexualisation, typical of realist narratives of the new wave, in which 'marriage undermines and drains sexual energy'. (CG, 65) Arthur's masculinity, however, reaches an impasse at the close as, despite his aggression, his inability to act leads him to the romanticised resolution of marriage. Ambivalence towards the conventions of marriage emerges in *Catalyst*, when Charles declares he is no longer part of 'a conventional couple', but Therese replies 'We still are. We've merely changed the convention./The couple is now a trio'. (C, 80)

Duncan's serialisation of *Saturday Night* is evidence that he also took part in the complex network of popular literature's commercialisation by its translation into varying cultural forms. As in the novel, the woman who captures the drunken thief is still insulted by Arthur as the same 'swivel eyed get!' but in the next scene where the 'hero' shoots Mrs. Bull with an air rifle, Duncan rounds off with his own phrase, 'Arthur grins. One has to get some relief, some way'. The use of 'one' briefly slips out of the style he is trying to emulate and suggests Duncan's personal impulse sometimes sacrificed the authenticity of the original.

There was a trend of films in the '50s to portray men in marital trouble as humorous. *Bonjour Trieste* (1958) starred David Niven as a playboy, with Deborah Kerr as his straitlaced partner. Women were either prudish bluestockings or Monroe type vamps. Such images drawn from popular culture continued into the '60s with Bardot's sex kitten roles and the Bond films. In *Catalyst*, Leone herself perceives her situation as possibly stereotypical and out-dated. Obviously it is more than, 'Just the music hall joke:/Middle-aged boss with sexy secretary, is that it?/ "The problem the married woman has to face" '. (C, 18) Duncan does address and up-date her role by

<sup>9</sup>This may have been prompted by Duncan's serialised adaptation of the film of *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* for the *Standard*, in April of the same year.

<sup>10</sup>Christine Geraghty, 'Albert Finney: A Working-Class hero' in *Me Jane, Masculinity, Movies and Women* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), ed. by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim, p. 63.

rejecting the farce element of the situation and giving Leone autonomous desire. LEONE: (on Therese) 'She can't think/That just because I sometimes wear a pony tail/That I never need my oats'. (C, 19) Unfortunately, the use of male sexual terminology reinforces her voraciousness. By the third page of the *Catalyst* script, Therese has summarised herself and Leone as 'lazy, scatterbrained and helpless' and their secretary as 'so coltish and clumsy, she makes me feel a model of feminine grace'. (C, 11) The women are aligned with conventional womanly characteristics. An ideal of feminine appeal is pictured in *Catalyst* by the erotic imaging of Leone's clothes and contours signalled by Charles's distracted comments, 'Didn't I tell you not to wear that jumper/While we are working'. Leone answers coquettishly 'Don't you like my profile?' (C, 19)

Compared with such depiction of mistresses, the wife in Duncan's last autobiography, *Obsessed*, is seen as dependent and asexual.<sup>11</sup> The glamorous figure of the mistress, in this case the film actress Maskell, is described as both childlike and whorish. *Obsessed* includes an erotic description of how, after the first night of the play, the author takes her home and she falls asleep, 'I kept still and watched you part your legs, then move your hips, as though copulating with some figure in your dream'. (O, 20) The first time they make love, 'I was surprised your behaviour had seemed so virginal, not that I'd any experience of virginity, except my own'.<sup>12</sup> When visiting her old Convent:

I found myself standing before a larger than life wooden statue of you posed as the Virgin Mary. With you beside me in your red velvet shirt, black stockings and high heeled shoes, I felt ill-cast as the immaculate conception.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, 'It was the child, the urchin in you I adored'. (O, 82) But when Rose-Marie disappears, Maskell begins to fill her role:

You began collecting suits I'd left at odd cleaners. And though you were little more than a child yourself, you visited Roger at school; you started to mother Briony. (O, 71)

These views of women are problematic because they are seasoned with elements of sexism that exist among signs of snobbery, racism and conservative thought in many of Duncan's texts. Such signs prioritise the white male individual as arbiter of high culture. However, Duncan's sometimes 'extreme' views should not be viewed in isolation but as an effect of and as participation in the discourses of the time. Sinfield

<sup>11</sup>Ronald Duncan, *Obsessed* (London, Michael Joseph, 1977). Hereafter referred to in the text as O.

<sup>12</sup>This, on p. 28 (*Obsessed*), is a veiled reference to the fact that Rose-Marie was not a virgin when she married Ronald Duncan. It explains how he alone could claim sexual inexperience as the motive for his affairs.

<sup>13</sup>Duncan goes on to mention this statue's appearance in *Abelard*, written for Maskell. (O, 79). There is a photograph of the statue in the archive. RDF

associates the 'repellant misogyny of much Movement and Angry writing' as 'part of the attempt to repudiate the perceived ethos of the literary establishment'.<sup>14</sup> Though not definitively New Wave, Duncan should be viewed as a writer who in many ways repudiated the establishment and showed signs of progressive thought, aspects which figure him as a participant of the culture he criticised. He participated because the culture also existed as a site of conflict between antagonistic influences, especially those regarding domesticity, morality and sexuality. As an example, Sinfield states that 1950s ideology is 'telling us different stories: the enticements of women to earn money and consume conflict with the demand to stay in a homely role'.<sup>15</sup> This chapter shows how Duncan appropriates misogynistic discourses to defend his ambivalence towards women and justify his own participation in the politics of sexual exchange. Chapter 6 investigates how his ambivalence at other points de-stabilises conventional masculine identity.

Morality and sexuality are pertinent discourses because Duncan never gave up his entanglements with women. His success with them perhaps helped to diminish any feeling of literary failure. Visiting in London; submitting journalism to provide for his household; giving lectures and acting as landlord/farmer; Duncan continually worked on creative projects and commissions. During all this, he wrote letters, gave advice and lived out the tribulations of adulterous trysts and family quarrels. New hope would derive from each affair, but they remained the main cause of marital grief, and the major thematic preoccupation of his activities, fiction and autobiographies.

By the mid-'50s, we hear how Duncan's marriage has been corroded by his compulsion for extra-marital dalliances, 'We were going through a bad patch, the difficulties of our forties: or shall we say, mine?' (O, 10) Again, reminiscing, the narrator admits his culpability but immediately afterwards describes his wife's strange habit of bringing the girl back to him, using the image of 'A pendulum swinging between uxorious disapproval and sophisticated connivance'. (O, 10) Later Duncan uses this image to describe his own emotions:

I persisted and waited, and endured swinging on a pendulum which was pivoted in my own insecurity. Swaying between the two of you, terrified of losing neither. All men are babies; but I am such a baby, I don't need one mother but two. (O, 77)

Describing his own wavering does not help him understand Rose-Marie's mood swings. Duncan uses the stereotypical roles of mother and baby to infantilise himself.

<sup>14</sup>Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-War Britain* (Berkeley, University of California, 1989), p. 81.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 206.

The present tense insists upon his continued infantilism as if it is an essential and excusable trait. The defensive tone is intensified by frequent reminders of his wife's connivance:

she clung on; and finally, in order to share my obsession, maintained that she was attracted to the girl herself. I was easily convinced. It made my conscience easier. We set up a *ménage à trois*. (O, 10)

One begins to suspect that Rose-Marie's 'sophisticated' connivance was probably born out of helplessness and desperation. In his private autobiographical 'notes' on the 1952 affair with his secretary, Duncan records a different, less disputable reason, 'I wanted to try and make a relationship between us - from which Rose-Marie would not be excluded or be made jealous about'.<sup>16</sup> But it is significant that in March 1954, Rose-Marie had been ill in a clinic and was 'consoling herself with psychoanalysis'.<sup>17</sup> The secretary returned after an earlier banishment and it is at this vulnerable point that Rose-Marie allegedly urged the three-way affair.

Women, as lovers, helpers, muses and enemies, all go through pendulum-like motions of demand and withdrawal from Duncan, creating a continual frenzy in him. His memoirs are full of descriptions such as, 'I stood immobile, a gale blowing through my mind, emotional chaos' (O, 77) and 'That summer was an agony'. (O, 159) The experience of seduction, indulgence, deception and the drama of domestic and emotional devastation all become an ongoing concern in and sources for Duncan's fictional ideas. By 1960, *Sly*, *Abelard* and *Rehearsal* were finished and in 1961 he resumed *Seven* which was begun in 1955 as a play for television called *The Portrait*. By 1964 'The Perfect Mistress' story was published in *Argosy*. Altogether, a concern with marriage and betrayal dominates. The storyteller of the 'Perfect Mistress' is the reader's confidante and also the 'friend' of the character Bratton Douglas. The narrator, establishing the theme and critique, comments on Bratton's marriage on the first page, 'Those of us who suffer from it, do so in silence, not the silence of discretion, but the discretion of sheer exhaustion'.<sup>18</sup> Assuming the authority of the objective observer, the narrator tells how Bratton's wife's jealousy 'wore him down' and justifies his friend's role as philanderer: 'he never offered a woman anything but his need. He did not seek temptation, it ran after him'. (PM, 130) We then hear how his wife 'began by hurling her girl-friends at her husband to indicate her own confidence in herself'. (PM, 131) What follows is a thinly disguised version of Duncan's own version of the

<sup>16</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Notes re. Antonia' in *Pink Journal* (nd., probably 1958 or 1959), p. 6. FL

<sup>17</sup>Duncan, op. cit., (nd.), p. 6. FL

<sup>18</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'The Perfect Mistress', in *The Perfect Mistress and Other Stories* (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 129. Hereafter referred to as *Mistress* and *PM* in the text.

experience presented in *Catalyst*. In this version, after one affair, the wife's jealous accusations of her actually innocent husband drive him to take on an invisible mistress, whom he eventually leaves her for.

*Mandala* and *Girl on a Motorcycle* were completed by 1968, and in 1969 Duncan began work on more fiction, the *Kettle of Fish* stories. These stories mainly feature an older, solitary male narrator reminiscing, or listening to another friend tell his own story, so that omniscience is distributed through more than one voice. *The Bitch* features a bachelor narrator who listens to an old friend's 'tedious matrimonial tales'. His bachelor independence allows him to be a harsh yet objective-sounding judge of the narrated action, in which he does not much participate. Dunning's wife is 'psychically a virgin'<sup>19</sup> and soon her husband meets Rosslyn, a skater, 'She was twenty-six, a brunette'. (KF, 148) Though Dunning resists her temptations, Rosslyn claims to his wife that they have slept together. After being sued for divorce the man is re-married to Rosslyn. Dunning here interjects 'That's when my punishment really began' (KF, 151) effectively preparing for the moral. His ex-wife mercilessly takes on the role of his mistress, eventually leading Rosslyn to believe the same infidelity story as used before, 'Of course I reminded Rosslyn of the previous occasion but she refused to see any parallel. Women always believe the worst of one another'. (KF, 153) Dunning tells his friend how he leaves them both and how 'they consoled each other'. (KF, 154) Dunning's companion is now a harmless dog and not, he specifies to his mistaken friend, 'a bitch'. (KF, 154) This we deduce to be the term *only* applicable to human females.

As time goes on, salacious female sexuality is a recurrent theme in fiction which defends ageing philanderers. In a 1981 story, a judge's first reaction to a female character who is to seduce him is, 'She looked like a vulgar advertisement on a holiday brochure'.<sup>20</sup> When he notices she is not wearing a bra:

He felt angry. She was, he thought, as flagrant as one of those pornographic pin-ups on those magazines in the bookstall... . Damn and blast her insensitive frigidity. (UG, 34-35)

Chauvinist statements such as 'We both know that frigidity in woman is not a rare phenomenon' (UG, 47) are manifold. Unlike the plays, the later prose fiction communicates a more cynical attitude towards women. The story *A Kettle of Fish* tells of a priest whose hobby is the upkeep of a stable full of young women kept harnessed like horses. When Professor Shand tries to re-'humanise' one, her reluctance confirms

<sup>19</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'A Kettle of Fish', *A Kettle of Fish* (London, W.H. Allen, 1971), p. 148. Hereafter referred to as *Kettle* and *KF* in the text.

<sup>20</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'A Case of Frigidity' in *The Uninvited Guest* (Bideford, Rebel Press, 1981), p. 34. Hereafter *UG* in the text.

the Father's doctrine on the female gender 'horses like being treated as ladies and women like being treated as horses'. When all are re-tethered, Duncan concludes for the reader, 'They were, of course, only ordinary girls with their feminine love for security'. (KF, 46)

The fictional female characters tend to figure only as seductive and initiating (mistresses) or predatory and aged (wives). Because of the sometimes reductive commentary in the fiction it is of interest to examine female roles in the narratives Duncan presents as autobiographical. Again, the women are modelled as secondary and vague but are still worthy of inspection because, though they are just as open to flawed recall and inaccuracies, there is more at stake for the author/narrator. Duncan writes within a convention wherein the reader expects a level of authenticity. It is in his favour that rather than being ordinary, Rose-Marie and most of Duncan's mistresses are connected to an eccentric and unorthodox lifestyle but, for example, the Italian actress Anna Proclemer emerges with frustrating brilliance, only to wane. In *Obsessed*, a large part of the narrative is dedicated to how Rose-Marie petitions him for divorce, then disappears for months. She re-appears sympathetically when the narrator is in some crisis over which he needs mothering. Believing he has mouth cancer – actually a tooth abscess – Duncan finds Maskell absent and goes to his estranged wife's flat where 'She was at her best: practical and wholly concerned for me'. (O, 96) But it is also made known that during this period, Rose-Marie begins and maintains connections with feminist and lesbian women. 'Gretchen' is in her thirties, with West Indian blood, 'her powerful motorbike like a stallion between her legs'. (O, 29) Despite this image Duncan notes that 'No man, especially me, was likely to have assessed Gretchen accurately'. (O, 29) The only way he can control his presentation of her is by transparent demonisation and homophobic disdain. She becomes either a casual side-effect to Rose-Marie – 'Gretchen kept her amused' – or an evilly controlling 'Iago' character. (O, 37) Duncan gives the impression that she exercises complete control over his wife's decisions:

Within a few days of Gretchen's arrival, the festival had become a funeral. I was cast as a philanderer, you as an insensitive mistress. (O, 36)

Gretchen looked smug, Rose-Marie resolute. (O, 38)

I was determined to rescue Rose-Marie from Gretchen. (O, 86)

Their female solidarity obviously threatens his male dominance, so the possibility of Rose-Marie's choice and enjoyment of the relationship is suppressed. This is the sort of masculine fear which was more ingenuously expressed as suspicion by a hero like Porter in the mid-'50s, for example Jimmy resents Helena's support of Alison saying 'What are you plotting?' (LBIA, 54)

There are hints of Maskell's independent mind. Duncan tells how she suggests he build a writing hut on the cliff-edge (O, 106) and of how she visits geriatric patients in London hospitals at Christmas. (O, 2) She also organises the ecological 'Green Cross' society and its Annual Tree Planting Day. (O, 83) Her character's role is often overshadowed by Duncan's subjectively impaired reconstruction of her behaviour or achievements, 'I sensed you were going through some crisis. I didn't know what it was' (O, 115) and 'Somehow this film was finished, I can't remember its name'. (O, 139) He constantly asks questions that get no response, 'was it fear of her? Or was it jealousy? I don't know. I don't believe you knew either' (O, 86) and 'Or were you? I shall never know'. (O, 153) In reality, Maskell was widely admired as an actress and tributes at her death remembered her refusal to take part in 'cheesecake' publicity.<sup>21</sup> Rose-Marie's autonomous opinions and artistic talent are verified by the existence of her diaries, letters and art-works, stored in the archives. An undated dream diary contains some revealing self-analysis as she remembers her relationships with other women:

I then began to court [*Gretchen*], seeing another chance of having a relationship with someone outside of Ronnie - my own interest and my own importance. And it was important to me that she wasn't physically attracted to him, or to men.<sup>22</sup>

Her 1958 petition for divorce signals the choice not to bear Duncan's dalliances, as do Maskell's non-acquiescent ultimatums also expressed in letters to him:

For me it was love I wanted – Yes, all or nothing. I had the whole of a half of you... . If you love me and I know you do – leave me alone. I shall never return to you as a wife or a mistress.<sup>23</sup>

Antonia's letters state the same exasperation, 'You have always demanded that I give myself to you in all ways and yet every time you blame me for depending on you'. Her resentment is 'because I know you will never be able to give me and yourself what we need, the time alone together' and she accuses him of setting her and Rose-Marie up 'in competition' with each other.<sup>24</sup> The letters prove that, at the worst of times, there was a dialogue between Duncan and these women though whether he always acknowledged their views is another matter. Women's divergent views provide conflictual subject matter within his literature. Echoes of these accusations emerge in dramatic dialogue most effectively. Discovering the 'private' and differentiated source adds a new perspective to our view of the female subject and of the times.

<sup>21</sup>Anon., 'Obituary' for Maskell, *Evening Standard* (Jan. 29th, 1968), p. 1. RDF

<sup>22</sup>Rose-Marie Duncan, *Diary* (nd.), np. RDF

<sup>23</sup>Maskell to Duncan ('Sat', probably early 1962, & April 23rd 1961). FL

<sup>24</sup>Letters from Antonia, nd. (1956-7). FL

Though Duncan often posits adultery as if it should redefine human relations in reference to marriage, we see his affairs take on the same features. Trevor in *Rehearsal* quotes Flaubert: 'Il trouve dans adulterie toutes les platitudes de mariage'. (R, 213) When Juan seduces Evelyn, who is married, in *Satan*:

[*They embrace and, during the following duet, each – unnoticed by the other – idly turns the pages of a coloured magazine which lies behind the other's shoulder on the divan, this action belying the intensity of their speech.*] (DS, 46)

Duncan tries to avoid the pessimism this prompts by constantly extolling the virtues and salvable state of his own marriage, because he still has feelings for his wife as well as his mistress, 'I now had to persuade Rose-Marie to drop this farce which I didn't want anyhow'. (O, 88) Of course to regain a peaceful marriage would be to neutralise the state of drama and antagonism that Duncan actually thrived upon. Charles and Therese's stormy marriage is only evidence of their closeness:

LEONE: Most marriages are a hideous sham:  
A Tyranny of tiny cruelties – I know yours isn't.  
I know only too well Charles is still in love with you. (C, 42)

This denotes an overlying awareness that marriage, as a convention is something Duncan hangs on to at the same time as trying to let go of. Prizing the role of husband, he refuses to divorce Rose-Marie, as does Charles in the *Catalyst* and will not surrender his mistresses either. After his final split with Maskell, Duncan still writes pleading letters to her saying, 'I am begging you to be my friend, we could write little notes to each other. You must give me the right to choose my own pain'.<sup>25</sup> His inability to relinquish affairs means he has to go on defending the 'have one's cake and eat it' accusation. In *Obsessed*, he does this by using ordinary, touching examples such as the tri-partite exchange of Christmas presents, 'Gestures like this made it quite impossible for me to restrict my affections to either one or the other of you'. (O, 134)

There are points in the plays, where masculine bias resides alongside other risqué scenes, where women take the initiative. *Seven* has Melanie leave her ineffectual husband Christopher and Angela strips in an attempt to seduce him:

ANGELA: [*about to undress*]... Let me take this damned dress off.  
[*She turns for him to undo her zip*] Go on, I'm waiting.

CHRISTOPHER: No. (7, 322)

But the play sets up contradictions because Angela is 'ecstatically reassured' by Christopher's dour refusal and thus her liberal behaviour is also refused. Despite his show

<sup>25</sup>Duncan to Maskell, nd. (probably early 1962). FL



of strong will, Christopher is also despised in the play as he is too self-deprecating, cannot feel jealousy, and commits what is presented as a cowardly act of suicide at the end.

Despite having worked on *Obsessed* (1977) during the '60s, the text displays conventional attitudes toward women: those, which delineate the 'feminine' aspects of woman as biological with approval. Duncan's writing of the '50s addressed the question of women as an issue of the time and so appeared up-to-date without having the tools to be wholly enlightened. By the '60s, though, the representations of women appear as more typical of his generation and thus slightly out of date. Duncan reveals his generation's non-enlightenment and lack of progression when he confuses gender and political standpoint in describing Gretchen's character:

But for all the masculine traits which she affected, I never met a more feminine mind; I use this in the most pejorative sense for Gretchen was especially emancipated from reason. She read *The New Scientist*... . But she had never learned the alphabet of logic. Gretchen was, you said, a postscript from Miss Pankhurst... . I suspected her of being a Party member. (O, 30)

Her femininity, equated with irrationality, is explicitly opposed to co-existent 'masculine' traits such as handy-man competence, and whilst her 'feminist' alignments are mocked, it is unclear whether feminism is equated with or made antithetical to femininity. Duncan's bafflement leads him to conclude that she is as inauthentic and suspicious as a spy and as without 'truth'. Feminine traits are quickly demonised when co-existent with power or masculine qualities. During the divorce he visits an unhelpful female solicitor who looks at him with 'feminine contempt'. (O, 59) When Wahl queried his views on 'Women's Lib' in 1973, Duncan still conveyed perplexing views. He stated that he desired 'variety', not seeing women as 'being inferior', 'women are different – they're infinitely stronger than men', but he obviously only wanted them to be distinct in their difference from him:

I like to see women's legs; I like to see their femininity; I like to see them messing about as feminine creatures. I don't want them all business-like career girls... . I don't want women to support me; I want to support women. I like variety.<sup>26</sup>

Duncan's analyst during the '50s, 'derived most of his ideas from Jung' (O, 119) and may have encouraged his perception of men and women as strongly psychologically differentiated. Jung believed that our behavioural predispositions in erotic relations are based on archetypal images. Like Freud, this basically categorises the female as less aggressive and more dependent and pliant. In *Solitude* 7, the woman the poet describes is 'As wet lilac bruised with scent'. (Sol. 7, 21) Heloise is 'a small bird' and a 'tiny fish' in comparison to Abelard the 'air' who blows upon her and the 'lake'

<sup>26</sup>Wahl, op. cit., No. 20, 1973, p. 80.

who must 'flow over' her.<sup>27</sup> Maskell is often portrayed as needy and helpless. As Duncan gives the actress driving lessons he notices the psychological significance driving has 'to a girl', 'Perhaps it signifies freedom or their emotional drive', but he implies her defectiveness by his comment, 'You were never a good driver'. (O, 138) He goes on to remember a time when she crashes, then loses her nerve and refuses to go on set unless, 'I stood in the wings to give you confidence'. (O, 139)

Critical references to modern marriage reach fullest dramatic expression in *Catalyst*. On one level the play presents female rebellion against the injustices of the man, but on another there are signs of the man's own rebellion against dogmatic, peremptory women, their rebellion now part of their peremptoriness:

You silly little bitch, can't you see  
It's you who are being conventional, not me?  
Both you and Therese put this pistol to my head:' (C, 70)

Showing further perplexity towards women's motives by generalising about them in stereotype, Duncan has the female characters cite other females as underhanded traitors. When Leone is trying to suggest that Charles takes her away, she says 'I'm frightened of her', then 'You know nothing about women/When they appear to be fond it may be from hate' (O, 69) and 'You should have been born a woman/Only a woman could think as low as that'. (O, 70) Gradually the women's implication of the male in their dissatisfaction is turned away from his responsibility and into a betrayal of their own gender.

The theatrical presentation of a husband's gradual discovery of his wife's infidelity through her lesbian emotion required a fresh dramatic discourse. Duncan's problems with the new discourse are displayed in the way that the play, at points, duplicates traditional attitudes towards gender roles. The 'emancipated' female discourse however is squarely acknowledged, if not wholly endorsed, due to the complexities of action and plot. Some reviewers saw the play as incredibly frank for its time. Hobson comments upon the rendering of 'homosexual emotion':

I have never known anything as frank as this upon the stage before. Mr. Duncan is acute, witty, accomplished and fundamentally serious.<sup>28</sup>

Kenneth Tynan said that *Catalyst* was:

a verse satire which I urge you to see for it is the first serious English play about sex for many years and the only one known to me which deals with the classic male dilemma, the necessity of choosing between the ideal physical partner and the ideal intellectual partner, who almost never coincide in the same woman.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Ronald Duncan, *Abelard and Heloise* (Bideford, The Rebel Press, 1975), p. 30. Hereafter referred to as *Abelard* and *AH*.

<sup>28</sup>Harold Hobson, review, *Sunday Times* (nd.). *RDF*

<sup>29</sup>Kenneth Tynan, review, *Observer*, nd. (almost certainly March, 1958). *RDF*

Instead of foregrounding the 'classic male dilemma' it is more valid to focus on how the deviant image of homosexuality in *Catalyst* challenged the context of sexuality in the late '50s and early '60s.

## ii. Bisexuality

While Genet, Burroughs and the beatniks in the US produced radical writing on homosexuality and drug-based experiences, it was to a much greater degree than British art did in the '50s. This may have been rooted in inherent cultural conservatism. Weeks says of the decade that:

the real change (to growing anxiety about sexuality) cannot be divorced from the heightened post-war stress on the importance of monogamous heterosexual love, which threw into greater relief than even before the deviant nature of both prostitution and homosexuality. (JW, 240)

No wonder that Duncan, never admitting gayness in himself, has the theme of bisexuality more as a sub-category within that of the wider deployment of (hetero-) sexuality in his work.<sup>30</sup> The notion of bisexual nature is capitalised on in relation to women rather than men. A fear of emasculation of the male character is evident because Charles is only bisexual in relation to Leone's masculine femininity, *not* other men. 'If you're suggesting I'm a...' (C, 81) he protests at the end of the play after the *women* have 'come out'.

In *Catalyst* the lesbian betrayer can also be a lover. This idea is grounded on Duncan's less fanciful renditions of personal experience of Antonia in *Enemies*. *Catalyst* presents Therese's bisexual inclinations as therapeutic for both women while it interpolates maleness by ignoring male homosexuality. Therese says 'Leone and I know that we love each other/But whatever our relationship is it only exists because of you'. (C, 80) Conversely in *Obsessed*, Gretchen's lesbianism, because she is not bisexual, is extreme and treacherous to the narrator. Maskell's past and ambiguous dislike of Gretchen is used by the author to freely ponder upon her female (not his own) 'intuition' of Gretchen's dangerous potential:

because you too found her attractive and were frightened of her influence on you. Perhaps you saw through her divisive intentions and realised that her influence on Rose Marie would be ultimately destructive. (O, 29)

There is an echo of Freud's belief that female bisexuality could be phasal with a 'repeat alternation between periods in which masculinity or femininity gain the upper

<sup>30</sup>To be gay was not an unknown trait amongst theatrical circles in the forties (eg. Beaumont and Rattigan) and subsequently public knowledge of the lifestyle or later 'coming out' has acted as biographical evidence for the sexuality of such 'personalities', though in Duncan's case there is no evidence that he was gay or that his lifestyle incorporated homosexuality with other men. Again, paradoxically, he had gay friends: Britten and Minton, but despised Pears and Devine.

hand'.<sup>31</sup> He envisages, as a process, something that is an obvious requisite of bisexual practice. Duncan uses a similar theory as a means of detecting and labelling sexual inclination. Male desirability is maintained if the woman's lesbian preferences are only phasal. He imposes sexual ambivalence upon his picture of Maskell when he describes times when she is in denial of, wants to or possibly has, indulged in homosexual behaviour. Just after her dream/masturbation scene, he remembers her 'questions about Rose-Marie and Gretchen. I mistook your curiosity about them for concern over me'. (O, 21) Just after this recollection he proposes a link between her questions and another memory of her distress as she tells him 'Three women were waiting to pick me up at the stage door. Lesbians'. Duncan then applies the technique of implication by omission to the utmost, 'As I learned later, much later. You didn't tell me then, what else had happened'. (O, 23) Because the emotive narrative of *Obsessed* has made clear the selective nature of the narrator's memory and the precarious nature of the relationships he is revealing, this type of cliff-hanger sentence is common in the text and often used to imply, connote and suggest things indirectly. Authenticity is still inferred by Duncan disclosing his retrospective knowledge after past ignorance that in turn indicates decency, tactfulness, and censorship.

The implications of the American Kinsey Reports (on male sexual behaviour in 1943 and female in 1953) probably reflected, to a degree, British culture's parallel anxiety about female sexuality gaining the upper hand. The reports supplied evidence of a shift in relation to male roles. The latter contained data that emphasised the clitoris as the centre of sexual fulfilment in women, thus jeopardising the importance of the man as necessary in providing vaginal satisfaction. Homoerotic sex and masturbation became provably more dependable than the husband's means of provision. By the mid-'50s, Rose-Marie's interest in achieving orgasm moved to other women, rather than being content with having her husband learn better techniques from other women (this is covered in *Enemies*). The theme of two women consummating (potentially) physical love with the blessing of the male (as onlooker or participant) brings to mind standard male fantasy. This fantasy is what structures *Catalyst*, a plot-construction that could be seen as masturbatory on the part of the man, and thus controlling of the female characters. However the play includes a dialogue of conflict which breaks up the fantasy element into more realistic modes of presentation. Questioning and conflict rather than wholesale acquiescence to the male point of view is established by recurring altercation between the male and female characters:

<sup>31</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'The Psychology of Women' in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [1932], trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London, Hogarth Press, 1974), pp. 144-174, (p. 168).

THERESE: I've been living in a fool's paradise... Then why?

CHARLES: I suppose we deceive those we love  
To protect them.

THERESE: You didn't find it necessary to protect me before. (C, 40)

CHARLES: You left us together too much, I suppose then it was too late.

THERESE: You'll soon be convincing me that it was all my fault. (C, 41)

Male forms of meaning are given their reverse side from the wronged woman's point of view. Here is a credible semblance of her resistance to the power relations of the marriage. Duncan certainly does not shrink from having only one character convey moral authority. Juan says to Marcia 'it's only by learning to love each other/That we can learn to love God too,' and she replies 'you seem to have all the answers/Though yours sound like an apologia for promiscuity'. (C, 70) But other words and gestures neutralise the apparently dialogic nature of its discourse. By the end of the scene, Marcia has found herself inexplicably in love with Juan, prepared to give up her 'precious independence' and influence, as 'Those were toys/I was a child, you've made me a woman/Now take me away'. (C, 89) Here, the woman's submission encourages the ideal situation for male fantasy.

Because of censorship it was difficult for *Catalyst* to speak openly about real social attitudes to homosexuality. Therese at one point protests, 'What d'you think we are: a couple of...?'<sup>32</sup> (C, 79) Her denial refuses stereotyped definitions while also conveniently implying that censorship is operating to prevent the shock of direct reference. The traditional heterosexual couple is proposed as a source of disaster in marriage. However for Charles, the bi-sexuality in his menage á trois does not decrease its reproductive possibilities. The female's lesbianism is phasal and therefore bisexual. She will still be available to the man as woman, when she or he feels like it, as Therese tells Charles at the end, 'Do what you've always wanted to do./Love two women, unexclusively;/And be loved by two women, unpossessively'. (C, 79) One feels Duncan exercises restraint and conservatism here as female liberation through a woman's love is not asserted in favour of, or without needing, the masculine part.

Following Foucault, bisexuality is then shown as culturally unconventional but also as curative. It neutralises difference beyond the social but also reconstructs the social in male terms. Duncan doesn't position gayness against straight culture, it becomes a general solution and symbol of (ultimately heterosexual) freedom, rather

<sup>32</sup>Christa Wisloe's German play *Children in Uniform* was passed by the Lord Chamberlain in 1932 only because it was seen to signify the decadence of the 3rd Reich. Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) was entirely banned in the UK until 1960, though produced at the Arts in 1956.

unconnected to specifically pro-gay social legislation. Duncan uses sexuality to challenge the power of convention but the play also shows how power is exercised through sexuality. The philosophy that fitted Charles's needs is at first rejected and denied but by the end it is re-applied to fortify his original desires and their fulfilment. The man wins all, while a discourse of sexual liberation is also asserted. In its historical context, *Catalyst* can be placed alongside other dramatic productions of its period, which contained overtly sexual content. Kitchen identifies a 'steady increase in rampant femininity' (LK, 66) as an issue in drama of the '50s, citing plays such as *Orpheus Descending*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *The Picnic* and *The Rainmaker*. The plays tend to highlight female desire but depict women as repellent and unruly, ultimately repressing positive female sexuality.

*Catalyst* followed the erotic theme by highlighting a female affair in the plot. However, their sexuality becomes an area of neurosis or concern. Therese does actually apportion some responsibility to Charles saying 'Perhaps if you'd been man enough for either Leone or me/She and I wouldn't have needed one another?' (C, 81) While momentarily questioning Charles's masculinity, her statement also neutralises independent desire of a woman for a woman and reveals another version of the deficit model.

'Permissiveness' increased by the later '60s and, by the early '70s, Duncan was producing writing that reacted against growing liberal attitudes. He was occasionally critical of homosexuality in his prose. In the short story 'The Poltergeist', the narrator's despised, 'pompous' and 'smug' brother Charles, is 'ambivalent, ambidextrous and homosexual: three valuable attributes in contemporary society', despicable because 'he had always managed to censure my heterosexual infidelities'. (KF, 124)

*Seven*, a play Duncan was finishing in 1961, is also censorious in that it refuses to divert from the traditional segregation of gender in sexual relationships. Despite the outspokenness and 'otherworld' roles of Satan and Angel, Satan complains about only getting men 'down there'. He emphasises the 'trouble' being that he is 'strictly masculine' (7, 272) and tells Angel:

Things wouldn't be so bad if we'd been blessed... [*He corrects himself...*] cursed with a touch of bi-sexuality. But I wasn't. I was, as you might say, condemned to women. (7, 273)

Opposing meanings are confronted and exchanged here as well as a rejection of personal responsibility. These are narrative tools also frequently employed in Duncan's autobiographies to maintain the narrator's rectitude. The slip from 'blessed' to 'cursed' in the play-text posits bisexuality as a positive possibility, but conventional heterosexuality is re-instated as an inevitable force beyond Satan's control, by the use of 'condemned' to signify his coercion and reluctance. Reading of events in Duncan's

life at this time there is clearly a feeding of his own sexual circumstances into the ideas of the play. It was a time of upheaval as he, his wife and Maskell were all visiting psychiatrists. This probably generated a great deal of tension as well as discussion of coercion and responsibility.

Nonetheless, much of Duncan's writing leads one to doubt whether the sometimes repressive views on women are wholly personal opinions or function to illustrate his satire of modern culture. In *Satan*, for example, liberated women are pictured as part of the general modern decline into indifference and its 'amorality'. Satan asks 'when women cease to make men suffer, what chance has God or Satan?' (DS, 102) Other presentations of female characters show surprising insight. The 20th-century character Ana, whom Duncan calls Marcia, is given the voice of a 'women's libber' with credibility and more sympathy than the emancipated female characters in *Tomb*. She sets up an interview situation with Juan and describes her responsible position as editor of *View* magazine. Juan appears overly condescending, 'Yes darling of course it is' and ridiculously self-deceptive as he sweet-talks the woman he believes to be Ana, 'When we look into/Each other's eyes, our souls recognise, /And all your words are wasted'. (DS, 66) Marcia's exasperation is apparent. Her following responses are worth quoting at length:

MARCIA: Never in all my life  
have I met a man like you before.  
... Or found such insufferable male arrogance before.  
Women exist for more than  
The crumbs men throw them.  
The modern woman's made for more than love.  
... She need not be a detached shadow  
Waiting for the image of a man,  
before her life is given validity or meaning.  
... Independence is the most precious thing there is. (DS, 72)

She goes on:

Women are free now,  
free in way they've never been before.  
In a sense the modern woman is the first woman,  
For up till now a woman's been not what she was  
But what she thought men thought she should be.  
... women were passive,  
Women were tender...  
And once we'd given birth to a replica of you  
We were fulfilled and finished. (DS, 72)

Her lines are Duncan's characterisation of a spokesperson for 'modern' women. They are not satirical in that they present how a traditional thinker would view a woman's libber. Instead they reveal a clear grasp of issues surrounding the gender debate. If anything, Juan is the character satirised by his impractical, persistent archaism. Marcia actually rejects the identity he wants for her and argues against his theories

and therefore refuses his power over her. She is not silenced. Because Duncan has given her the potential for dualism by her double name, she partially fulfils her role as 'Ana' by meeting him at the sepulchre in Act II, scene 2. She is subsumed into the historical fiction Juan wants her to be, saying 'What I am is yours'. (DS, 90) She cannot escape the bounds of his belief, but his belief is in an impossible ideal and this is foregrounded when he ultimately refuses her by saying, 'It is not enough/You leave me nothing to look up to/better to die with an illusion /Than live with a reality one cannot face'. (DS, 91) As a female character she cannot exist independently from Juan's male 'truth' which calls attention to the difficulty of her self-identification. Her portrayal as both reality and illusion fails and becomes incomplete, proving the impossibility or difficulty of her portrayal as conceivably 'feminine', in the play.

Duncan's plays about sexuality and relationships do not have at their heart a clear-cut moral dictum; instead, he presents a complex and shifting network of power relations. On one level, the focus on tri-partite relationships, male mystification towards the female, male conservatism and ambition for empowerment, all mirror the discourses found in *Anger* and in prose works such as *Saturday Night*. The impact of Arthur's role in the latter, depends on him being able to comment on his sexuality and exercise freedom through sex by means which subordinate women, though he is ultimately subject to them. Duncan's plays reflect the same uncertainty towards defining and representing contemporary women in relation to men and thus participate in the complex discourse on sexuality operating in Britain during the '50s most prominently and also beyond. *Catalyst* illustrates how Duncan uses sexuality as subject matter through which to challenge convention and construct an ethics of individualism, both issues signifying a critique of institutional authorities. At the same time, though, the play is an example of the way that much of 'new wave' art showed signs of being trapped by the standards prescribed by those very social and cultural institutions.

### *iii. New Themes: Matters of the Heart*

I shall now identify techniques used in Duncan's narratives to establish authority by looking at particular key themes in his work of the 1953 to 1974 period. These themes are infidelity and forgiveness; gender difference and bisexuality; and psychology and psychoanalytical ideas. All these themes are related to the preoccupation with new gender roles Duncan noted in society. These ideas were not, of course, novel: the 'New Woman' for example, had been portrayed in drama amongst other texts, at least since Ibsen. But Duncan is forced to note the effects of formerly avant garde or intellectual positions on gender pervading all levels of British society. After



the already-mentioned US election coverage and *Write With Both Hands* articles of 1953, a piece of journalism appeared later that year titled *When Women Rule the World*. Therein Duncan paints a satirical picture of the consequences of the emancipated role of women which, if they have their way, will result in a nightmarish and unjustly (for the man) liberated asexuality:

The so called weaker sex will have thrown off the mask and assumed full control... . It will no longer be assumed that it (marriage) should be a permanent arrangement. Sex, for women will be merely distractions and interruptions to their careers: men will have no difficulty in overcoming temptations; the problem will be to find them... . Both sexes will wear a one piece plastic boiler suit which... will have the advantage of hiding their bodies completely.<sup>33</sup>

In 1951, Duncan began to write *Christopher Sly*, the musical version of the *Taming of the Shrew*, as well as *Juan* which, along with *The Last Adam* (1952), the Eisenhower and *Women* articles of the next year, can be contrasted as a trend with his previous concentration on religion and articles based on opera, poetry and husbandry. This supports my view that, as the '50s draw on, there is a growth of Duncan's commentary specifically about the female sex.

The questioning of morality in contemporary society had been crystallised in the anti-masque of *Tomb* and Duncan went on to extend the idea of each traditional vice being shown as a 20th-century virtue, most comparably in *Tomb's* up-dated version, *The Seven Deadly Virtues* (1963) which is written in prose and is also faster-moving and more comical than the *Juan* plays on the same theme. The voice of censure, in this case Satan, is more light-hearted than in the latter plays, but has the same complaint of 'Something is seriously wrong with contemporary morality. The sorting has got out of hand'.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of more abstract notions of spiritual deterioration, people's infidelities are used to illustrate this critique. Melanie is unfaithful to Christopher as she cannot live up to his image of her perfection. When he forgives her, she is defeated by his charity and leaves again. Satan deduces of Christopher's behaviour, 'That's not charity. That's indifference'. (7 304) In the parallel story (both illustrating, in alternation, how the seven virtues and vices are not what they seem), Lavinia tries to prostitute herself to pay for her husband's bad art after a sale falls through. Her very reluctance defines her to the Angel as 'a sacred prostitute'. (7, 319)

From the betrayal of son and wife in *Stratton*, most subsequent plays focus on the build-up to attempted seduction, actual seduction and its aftermath. The related

<sup>33</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'When Women Rule The World', *Daily Sketch* (Dec. 19, 1953), np. RDF

<sup>34</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'The Seven Deadly Virtues', in *ibid.*, *Collected Plays* (1971), p. 271. Hereafter referred to on the text as *Seven* and 7.

theme of forgiveness continues to pervade the poetry and much of Duncan's remaining work. Forgiveness features, beyond the *Juan* plays, in nearly all other ensuing dramatic work from *A Man Named Judas* (1956), *Urchin* (1960), *Jean de la Lune* and *Rehearsal* (1960) to *The Rebel* (1964). Variations, such as lack of forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance or conniving tolerance, also appear in *Catalyst* (1958), *Abelard and Heloise* (1960), *Christopher Sly* (1960) and *The Gift* (1966).

Most of the plots depend on the idea of love and its achievement or failure between wives, husbands and mistresses. Changing domestic relationships and the shifting impulses of temptation, captivation and disconnection between people are probed minutely in *Catalyst* where all characters are very conscious casualties of the different rules of love. *Seven* also manipulates these situations into new patterns of meaning and definitions of illicitness. The 1960 collection of poetry, *The Solitudes*, is a sequence of poems about the effects and influence of love, which as a series describes seduction and temptation, addressed either to wife or mistress and a concern with relationships dominates. Much of the poetry uses direct address to various women as 'you' and contains combative argument and generalisation about the opposite sex:

And of course women have their own temerity,  
They can't brag of their affairs with effrontery...  
No, your lies and adulteries give me as little to forgive  
As your insensitivity did--or does.<sup>35</sup>

However, the different stances and inconsistent moods therein reflect the dramatically shifting responses to Duncan by his wife and mistresses, as their relationships interrelate and alternate between rupture and alliance. Other narratives foreground illicit relationships right through the '50s, and so imply that such liaisons had great significance for Duncan. Perhaps he pursued the illicit to facilitate his identity as an unconventional artist, or simply to know himself as a desired, desiring male in relation to females. The theme has implications for how the self is pictured as both male and sexual and refers to my examination of how gender is constructed through that language.

For Duncan, love, fidelity, betrayal, sexuality and gender roles are all linked and thus his gender, as male, is defined by and in the domain of the 'Other' as 'other woman'. The following sections apply a measure of psychoanalytic discourse to language and its representations using Lacan's premise that the conscious mastery of the unmanageable by the subject's ego is only ever an illusion as is the visual unity it

<sup>35</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Solitude 22', *The Solitudes* (London, Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 41. Hereafter the *Solitude* poems from this edition will be cited by number and page number in the main text.

sees in the mirror.<sup>36</sup> The premise calls for a feminist critique of the male autobiographical portrait as a whole, because the female is seen as mystery and otherness to the man, and (as shown in the next chapter) because the self-portrait is split by its own demands to cohere.

#### *iv. Infidelity: Duncan's Private Religion*

This section of my study reviews more instances of how Duncan's writing conflates narratives about his personal life with religious ideas to authorise his behaviour and the activities of his fictional characters. In 1955 Duncan was working on the long poem *Judas* whilst embroiled in the affair with Antonia, his secretary (initiated in 1952). In 1953 Eliot is writing to Duncan about the poem and 1955 saw Duncan adapt Bost's play *A Man Named Judas* for the Devon Festival. It is hard to discern exactly when Duncan began work on the poem itself. It seems he was still writing it and the play version concurrently in 1955 and had sent more drafts of the poem to Eliot by late 1955. Records show that the author worked on *Judas* and revised *Catalyst* in turns through late 1956 and 1957. By 1957 *Judas* was finished while the first transcripts of *Catalyst* are dated 1956. Duncan went to see Diego Fabbri's *Il Seduttore* in March 1956, decided to adapt it as *The Philanderer*, and worked on the piece during 1957 and 1958. The work is differently titled and a separate play from *Catalyst* but there are many similarities, which indicate that the adaptation obviously highly influenced it.<sup>37</sup>

The concurrence of all these compositions leads one to make connections between the preoccupation with religious faith found in *Judas* and the topic of marital fidelity. Duncan rejected both as mere conventions. His own definition of 'faith' is used only with reference to a new type of virtue: charitable promiscuity in unconventional relationships. A growing and repeated theme is that too much (martyred rather than charitable) forgiveness is not workable. In *Seven*, alternate scenes revolve around the unhappy couple, Christopher and Melanie. Christopher is too passive and as Melanie points out, this is her reason for leaving him, 'I warned you that by always forgiving me you were driving me to do something unforgivable. Now I have'. (7, 329)

Conventional vices are motivated by love and suffering is more redeemable than indifference. Juan, *Satan's* 'amoral atheist' (*DS*, 44), is given another final redemption by Satan. Unlike other artists who believed only in sensuality, rationality

<sup>36</sup>Lacan, op. cit., 1977, pp. 1-7, (esp. p. 4).

<sup>37</sup>There are similarities of plot and character between the first transcript of *Catalyst*, *HRHRC* and *The Philanderer/The Seducer/Three Times Two* (1958). *RDF*

and experience, *he* has learned to suffer. Juan is traditionally passionate and the action melodramatic. Dona Ana's death heightens his Faustian lack of repentance, 'I will not repent that love'. (DJ, 84) The statue of Don Gonzalo has its revenge by condemning Juan to an eternal hell, 'It is that love which is your hell/to desire Dona Ana forever'. (DJ, 86) But Juan is redeemed before the end curtain, despite him being frozen into a statue, because '[DONA ANA'S *hand moves and rests on DON JUAN. His statue seems to relax.*]' (DJ, 87) This is despite the fact that Juan still hesitates to admit a comprehensible belief in God and thus denies the devil along with Wilde, Shaw and Byron. Satan cries, 'Even you my son? Have you no pity?' (DS, 106) but he still grants the equivocating libertine 'That symbol of faith which will make you suffer for ever for/Him. Amen' (DS, 109) and puts the cross around Juan's neck.

*Catalyst* and *Seven* also feature characters who are redeemed by love or suffering. They connect to *Satan* because they are also treatises on marriage and its afflictions. Especially emphasised is Charles's so-called 'sin' of loving too many people, the iniquity of it formed out of 'this putrid myth:/that if Jack loves Jill he can't love Jane'. (C, 37) *Enemies* also refers directly to that 'silly convention' of 'If you love me you can't love her' when Duncan describes his marital difficulties. He goes on to admit it was 'naive of me. Indeed, I almost convinced myself that tolerance was connivance and gave me a licence which I had used with restraint'. (HTME, 303) He uses a tone of maturity and moral conviction. By inserting 'almost' it seems that he was not wholly naive and even at that time had a sense of his wrong-doing so was, in fact, intentionally misinterpreting her behaviour. Tension is produced between the positions of self-justification and awareness of other points of view in the narrative. The tension continues in the same vein in *Obsessed*.

In *Catalyst*, Charles's wife Therese endures his affairs for years before discovering that she is herself in love with his latest *amour* and secretary, Leone. Duncan writes of his own parallel situation, alleging that Rose-Marie feels resentment because, she says 'The others weren't in my house'. Of her explanation, he realises in retrospect that, 'Its simplicity convinced me at the time'. (O, 304) Similarly, the 'wife' character Therese, agonises to Charles, 'They didn't share my house. It wasn't in my house'. (C, 35) It is made clear a little later that she is repressing her own desires for his secretary with references to 'We need you' (C, 61) 'The three of us' (C, 62) and 'I did not know!' (C, 74) Later she confesses to Charles, 'I was envious of you. I swear I didn't know./But it explains my tolerance of your affairs'. (C, 78) This movement projects Duncan's preferred 'simplistic' interpretation of his affairs onto the fictional characters.

The family becomes the domain where society's ills are fought out and made apparent by their destructive effect. Tanner applies to literature an idea of marriage which is relevant to Duncan's presentation of adultery in his drama:

It is only when marriage is seen to be the invention of men and is felt to be the central contract on which all others in some ways depend, that adultery becomes, not an incidental deviance from the social structure, but a frontal assault on it.<sup>38</sup>

Duncan ties in domestic scenes of infidelity to a wider social critique. In *Catalyst* after Leone leaves – a withdrawal denoting her position of 'mistress' and thus moral deviant – Therese anxiously denounces the society that renders Leone a victim of anonymity, 'London can be the loneliest place in the world./So many like her are imprisoned in terrible privacy'. (C, 55) Juan demonstrates by way of his adulterous encounters, that people no longer suffer, while Catalion's research around the hotel leaves him to conclude, 'it's a world in miniature' and 'It's both guiltless and Godless'. (DS, 55) The emotional restraints of modern society are criticised by Juan's vision which forges links between the characters' personal situations and the texture of contemporary culture. The attack on indifference and emotional repression seen in *Stratton* is extended in *Seven*, subtitled 'A Contemporary Immorality Play'. *Seven* satirises and caricatures the false values bound up with the so-called sacrifices and compromises of banal marriage, mainly through infidelity. The Devil and Angel replay scenes from the lives of those considered either as sinners or virtuous and redefine their behaviour and, consequently, their after-life destinations. For Juan, trapped in an indifferent society, infidelity is categorised as part of the excitement and etiquette of old-fashioned romance:

women seem so alike nowadays  
That its quite impossible for a man to recapture  
The relish of being unfaithful. (DS, 54)

When defending his own infidelity, Charles in *Catalyst* draws attention to the banality of conventional morals, even though a 'brawl' is not indifferent behaviour:

Can't you see this scene is utterly banal, conventional and squalid?  
In how many homes, in how many flats in this very building  
Is a similar brawl on an identical theme  
Going on at this very moment, and why? (C, 37)

Censure of secular society is articulated by recasting adultery as a domestic deviation capable of being radically anti-social. However the articulation doubles back on itself. The desire to influence the audience by identifying a common ground of social critique is mediated by and sometimes at odds with the way this malaise is, in the same movement, over-internalised or discarded in favour of personal conscience.

<sup>38</sup>Tony Tanner, *Adultery In The Novel: Contract and Transgression* (London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 18.

Because of this doubling back there is not a straightforward equation between personal experience ('incidental deviance') and the context of the modern world, which it should be affecting. Instead, as in the above examples, the personal intersects with historicity at the points where it is most often shown to be incompatible with it rather than 'assaulting' or transforming it.

In order to explore the doubling-back process further, it is useful to refer to Sinfield's thoughts on the '50s, whereby he detects a transferral of society's religious impulses from church to sexual obsession. Marked by the noticeable fall in church attendance in the mid-'50s, he concludes that increased secularisation was encouraged through commercialisation of religion into a more business-like structure, and cites the 1954 visit by Billy Graham to Haringey Stadium.<sup>39</sup> Personal experience becomes more important and religion is recouped in privatised form through worship of nature, isolated communities and sexuality. A parallel impulse is traceable in the way Duncan's heroes speak with a self-defensive tone that justifies itself by reference to high moral principles.

At the beginning of the '50s, Duncan's previously macroscopic religious yearnings are re-mapped onto his private life as locus of authenticity. We see shades of the Lawrentian notion that morality is more authentic at the personal level, and that if necessary, we have to contravene conventional moral codes to create a new, deeper morality on the level of personal conscience. In Act II of *Juan*, Dona Ana is now living at the convent. Don Juan mocks her crucifix and her religion as 'dogma':

You talk of faith. But it's you who are unfaithful:  
Seeking a God outside you, betraying the God  
Crying inside you. (DJ, 50)

Negative images of religious imprisonment are mapped onto the family in *Juan*. The abbess comforts Ana on the morning of her vow:

Most novices break down when they  
Come to be professed. It is a kind of modesty  
All women show when they become brides...  
Brides of Christ or brides of men. (DJ, 42)

Her words link the emotional strain of religious commitment directly to the domestic realm of marriage.<sup>40</sup> Duncan's move to personal moral coding was now paralleled by the way existential philosophy 'became extremely influential in the '50s' (AS, 101):

The limitations of secularism were conceptualised also within existentialism, which repudiates all the absolute categories, religious and secular. (AS, 100)

<sup>39</sup>Sinfield, op. cit., 1983, p. 92.

<sup>40</sup>Another example of this is Duncan's translation of Sartre's *The Trojan Women* (1966) which tells Euripides' story of how Helen's elopement was cause for fracture of the whole state. Here marital disharmony refers directly to macrocosmic transgression or breakdown.

Attention to existential ideas was, by 1956, focused around Wilson's *The Outsider*. Such ideas were no longer peripheral. Wilson's book constructs an 'outsider' figure who overcomes terror (the existential threat of chaos) with sheer willpower. He, the elect individual, perfects his reason, cultivating direction and purpose. The book, drawing from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, states that the artist in particular is 'law-giver' and living life with intensity will help a man change to superman.<sup>41</sup> Rather than with social considerations, organised belief systems or scientific logic, superman status is achieved through metaphysical consciousness. Confirming an individualist philosophy, Wilson stated in *Declaration* that, 'I cannot talk in terms of 'we', only in terms of 'I'. (D, 51)

In the same publication, the 'beat' writer, Stuart Holroyd, proposed similar views and criticised modern society for devaluing individualism while 'One aims to reach God through the self'. (D, 182) The only constraint is social conscience. Like Duncan his ideas are never far from solipsism. Social guilt is erased by introspection which cleanses the subject and protects them from the depraved, irredeemable majority. Leone criticises Charles's conventional social conscience, 'Not content with personal conscience, you had to invent/A social conscience and a religious conscience'. (C, 23)

In a 1967 piece Duncan draws religion back to the self, transcendence being the path to 'a man's' freedom. Entitled 'Freedom from Material Objects', it appeared in an anti-democratic journal:

But there are other freedoms which cannot be fought for or voted for because they can only be obtained through spiritual education... Freedom can only be approached via a religious attitude. How else can a man overcome the shadow of death and the prison of his own loneliness?<sup>42</sup>

This individual exists in its freedom by reaching spiritual transcendence over earthly goods and materiality. But in an article called 'Why This Guilt About Ownership?' written that same year, Duncan advocates another figure whose wealth, property and land grant him his liberation. Duncan protested about the State's attempts to provide because eventually 'the country will be poor because it will have castrated the individual's urge to create wealth and fend for himself'.<sup>43</sup>

These diverging views come from the same voice speaking with authority both about religious radicalism and conservatism. If attributed to a single author, the voice appears unthinkingly hypocritical. Another view is that Duncan's presence as writer is typical of a discursive, fluctuating presence and how, as a textual subject marked by historicity, his voice dismantles currently conventional views while constructing

<sup>41</sup>Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1956).

<sup>42</sup>Ronald Duncan, article in *Process* (May, 1967), p. 12.

<sup>43</sup>Ronald Duncan, 'Opinion', *Daily Telegraph* (20th May, 1966), np. RDF

personal references in order to sustain an adversarial position, however paradoxical. Such a self is also relevant to Holroyd's view which states that man should be made aware of his own divided nature, a necessary condition which artists reveal. If one deals with the self first, then one can deal with the world and this world can only be led by a specialist minority, 'The only way to save the self is the self'. (D, 183) The self grasps the widest extent of experience, even by wild oscillation between positions and will eventually 'find his equilibrium in a condition of dynamic tension'. (D, 199) Dynamic tension is a condition that Duncan's art highlights. Theona and Trevor's love in *Rehearsal* will survive on this tension. He will give to her 'The man I am. Who will love you at breakfast and hate you at supper and need you all the time'. (R, 258) For Holroyd, the struggle to resolve tension rather than the actual resolution is the condition of true creativity, 'for man is most creative therefore most fully himself when inner conflict has brought consciousness to the highest pitch of intensity'. (D, 199) Theona's father David in *Rehearsal* also envisages intense adversity as the force behind creativity:

A poet has to be as ruthless as a surgeon; he has to have the strength of a boxer, he fights himself and punishes himself; he has to have the courage of an explorer who discovers a land of terrifying loneliness and then has to find the endurance to settle down there. (R, 225)

Leone in *Catalyst* echoes Holroyd's notion that 'to live intensely is to live consciously' (D, 192) when she says 'It is when we are hurt most that we are alive most'. (C, 62) Therese's self-hood comes with the discovery of her repressed love for Leone, 'It won't be easy, it won't be peaceful, nothing will be secure, But it will be living'. (C, 78)

Duncan, with his own marriage going through difficulties, contemplated at length the irresolution of love and its ability to contravene social mores. Approaching Wilson and Holroyd's preference for intense experiences, Duncan's writing about love (as opposed to marriage) deduces that it is there to help one realise the world beyond the material. Juan's love for Ana transcends and extends the self and thus approaches the Divine, 'I did not believe in heaven/But heaven is where you are'. (DJ, 52)

Unfortunately for Duncan his 'self-consciousness' and the 'personal vortex' at work means his writing cannot 'sustain its referential link beyond personal experience'. (DL, 24) As Lane proposes, the 'I' of the poet, as the written representation of Duncan in the work, is 'the channel for which the desire for the external is expressed'. (DL, 23) The external, outside, or 'real world' is a tautology in Duncan's terms, for his autobiographical experience. He needs to write himself self-consciously into his poetry to make the world into a personal truth (rather than a truth per se). Lane suggests that the act of writing down meant more to Duncan than the event itself.



What he identifies is known as solipsism. Thus Duncan's own shaping consciousness is emphasised as he re-appropriates religious and psychiatric discourse, the definition of love and other principles, into his own subjective realities, in his plays and poetry.

It is worthwhile at this point to explore a technique commonly used in Duncan's writing: of changing definitions to re-view the conventions forged by language. It is clear that definitions are changed to suit his particular world at the time and to exalt and redeem 'bad boy' behaviour. For example he makes a sexual 'lover' equivalent to Christ's 'love'. Juan wonders 'Perhaps it takes someone who was known as a great lover/To recognise one who was a greater lover?' (DS, 105) The 'All consuming love' Abelard has for Heloise is highly personalised. He declares, 'I love you as an image of my own soul' but this appears to be an easy route to the Divine wherein 'by loving you I will come in time to it/and to Him too?' (AH, 35) *Solitude* 16 asks the female addressee to 'Forgive. Accept. Contain', to love the speaker 'wholly' so he will become divine and 'Holy'. (Sol. 16, 27) Using the creed of love, earthly love becomes holy and the subject, whole. Personal experience thus becomes the basis for divine apprehension.

Juan says when he searched for his God, he found one 'but my God had jet black hair/Lips that were her lips, breasts that were her breasts./And all my prayers were old desires'. (DJ, 27) But because he refuses an orthodox, exclusive belief in God it follows that he would then have to deny woman *as* God and accept her as substitute, 'I do not believe in God/But in this miracle which you are/I did not believe in Heaven/but Heaven is where you are'. (DJ, 59) By transferring to the past tense – 'I *did* not believe' – his unorthodox belief is further complicated by it being conditional on his personal apprehension of the female. *Catalyst*, to a lesser extent, appeals for more license, acceptance and less judgement by arguing for a Christian type of love. Charles asks 'How else can a man extend himself, get out of him/self but by love?/ By letting his love grow from one to two till the whole of/humanity is...'. (C, 36) But aspersions are also cast on Charles as Therese accuses his high principles of actually implying 'low motives and private/pleasure'. (C, 36) There is a troubling acknowledgement of the possibility of Charles's duplicity as his 'non-possessive' love is considered a neat label for fulfilment of sexual drives. Self-justification, by re-defining things as radical and liberal, is seen from another point of view as being solipsistic, reactionary and damaging.

What is most aptly demonstrated in Duncan's plays is the truth of the individual's personal experience. This truth, however subjective, does not help our transcendence to a higher plane. Instead, by the time Duncan wrote *Catalyst*, individualism is applied to relationships to prove that we are only able to love another because the other is likened to our image of ourselves. Leone says to Charles

'For to dream of you/Would mean I was a thing apart from you' (C, 27) and she repeats 'We are what we love'. (C, 76) Therefore we seek to complete our insufficient selves by parasitically feeding upon others as mere projections of ourselves. By the end, Therese asserts 'None of us is whole'. (C, 80) In other words, we are as false as our view of the other.

A number of the *Solitude* poems imagine the poet achieving complete identity with the woman he loves:

For me to say I love,  
Or that I still desired you  
Would be as tautological  
As tactful,  
For we are in that state  
In which there is no predicate or object. (*Sol.* 14, 26)

Merging identity with the other highlights and redraws the limits of possession. The speaker cannot state 'he' loves her as he was only separate from her in the days 'before you took me to yourself/And from an individuality/Made one identity'. (*Sol.* 14, 26) Though with 'no predicate or object' the poet addresses the lover as 'dearest' at the beginning, then as a past tense 'you' and as 'we' by the end. Thus the poem still assumes an individual speaker's position as it articulates on her behalf. It is an impossible position because the poem cannot fully represent merged identity due to the style and tone of the writing. It thus makes problematic the issues of who is speaking and the changing status of the addressee.

Again, in *Solitude* 17, the poet can only accept the idea of her new lover by becoming him or by him becoming a stand-in for the speaker, 'I... am he, at one remove'. (*Sol.* 17, 28) He assumes the strength of their love will never allow either to escape one another's presence:

The more you run from me,  
The more you run to me,  
What you become I am. (*Sol.* 17, 28)

Ultimately the poetic characters' exchange and merging of identity renders unstable the whole notion of love. Wanting union with one's lover indicates desire for a state of non-tension, an escape from the friction of the everyday, a state of peace and immutable tranquility. But a relation established upon total identification with the other is overly narcissistic. The same impractical deduction is foregrounded in *Catalyst*. Charles tells each woman in turn that 'We are of one another' (C, 14) and 'You have given me yourself'. (C, 47) But if we can only love another when that other becomes ourselves then it is false that we are what we love, for when we do love there is nothing but ourselves to love. But if, in loving another, one's self disappears, then we are not loving another, for there is no self to do the loving. So while Duncan

proposes the self as the only certainty, it is a troubled assertion because he also shows the autonomous subject disintegrating and dispersing into other realms such as the sexual or the divine while, paradoxically, it tries to achieve certainty.

In *Catalyst*, sexual love is less linked to divinity than presented as something which helps one forget the self while also serving the self. Leone has an affair with Charles but at the same time she proposes 'vitality', meaning one should have no conscience nor responsibility for an other. 'Be oneself' she declares, stating her only purpose is 'To stay alive'. (C, 24) Love serves self-satisfaction rather than any spiritual achievement. The audience sees the indisputably selfish behaviour that has allowed them to be fully 'alive'. Charles says, 'I suppose it doesn't matter what we love;/It's that we love that matters', (C, 81) but the statement appears to rationalise the acts of injuring others, lying, deception and destruction. For Charles, morality is eliminated. If no-one is specifically evil there is no absolute line drawn. Consequently no-one can be fully good either. Reality is then a moral void but it is exactly the type of vacuity which is found so abhorrent in *Juan* and *Satan*.

In *Satan*, Anthony Liss's views are mocked, he believes in 'toleration' not guilt. (DS, 61) The passionless modern couple do not believe in sin in the old sense. The characters' boredom is their modernised punishment and, 'You're supposed to be suffering' (DS, 17) complains Satan, who appeals for a return to fire and brimstone. He condemns only the virtue of self-love. The idea formerly proposed in *Tomb* and *Stratton* – of true virtue being attained only through some experience of sin – is maintained. Satan tells the Bishop 'By being temperate and chaste, you knew nothing/Of the drunkard's misery or the philanderer's brief remorse'. (DS, 25) Juan's visit to earth has a dual purpose. The personal, to find Dona Ana – and also to report to Satan on 'why people don't suffer here in Hell any more'. (DS, 28) All these plays are preoccupied with justification of acts of betrayal and conflate passion with religious passion: a move which entails locating, as Sinfield says, 'transcendent significance instead in the self'. (AS, 101) In *Catalyst* the repudiation of absolute categories of morality make it evident that Duncan was still having problems making betrayal sound intellectually respectable.

Most plays lead to a point of fragility when, in justifying personal meaning, inconsistencies arise, mainly from the lack of proportion between what is said and what is done. Definitions are criticised and utilised to the point where their defensive re-application cancels out the criticism. Ana disputes Juan's faithfulness and Juan admits the 'attempt but not the achievement' and that 'My intentions were to destroy/My memory of you. I was more faithful than I knew'. (DJ, 49) A few minutes later, having argued his case, Ana takes his cloak for mending, admits her love for him and kisses him. (DJ, 50) Ana in the 20th century is perceived by Juan to be his

own creation as if she should not have an independent existence outside him. As she removes her cross Juan is repulsed as he'd rather her be virtuous, pious and unreachable and so more desirable, 'It was your chastity that made me desire you'. (DS, 90) Her characteristics of godly piety are those for which the Bishop was irredeemably sent to hell at the beginning of the play, 'You are in hell because you were charitable, chaste/Temperate and honest'. (DS, 25) Virtue and vice are re-defined by inversion but there is also inconsistency because their definitions continue to shift.

Inconsistencies also arise in *Catalyst* where one thing is said then acted out to mean something different. Forgiveness as tolerance is now condoned. Therese first appears to be liberated, however shallowly, saying 'You know I don't mind so long as I know what you are up to' (C, 12) but later Charles has to plead with her, 'There's no need to be jealous'. (C, 35) The idea that an excess of forgiveness should be condemned emerges when Leone is shown to resent Therese's charitable 'connivance'. (C, 25) However Charles is shown to perceive the irony of her statement in 'I should have thought your generation would have approved of tolerance'. (C, 25) If, as the play implies, each character has the potential to be a catalyst, then each one has the capacity, unlike the others, to remain unchanged by the process of transformation to which its existence is intrinsic. However, Therese's words at the end of the play indicate that Charles, rather than the mistress, is the Catalyst. (C, 80) This also implies that he is likely not to change his ways. By using the title *Catalyst*, Duncan takes the authoritative position of scientist and hypothesises a formula for a human experiment as a way of comprehending his own experience. But because of the tripartite patterning of adultery in the play's narrative and his own life, there is no symmetry to the formula, so while Duncan posits adultery as a cure for sickness, it also appears to be the cause.

Notes found scribbled on a draft of *Solitude* 22 increase the sense of dissimulation:

This is the poem I wrote after Rose-Marie had told me that in return for my abandoning Antonia, she had slept with a composer... and a painter - The confession delayed 18 months during which time her virtue was used as a lash on my back.<sup>44</sup>

This only intensifies the Duncan's self-righteous tone in the poem which asks, 'How could I learn to forgive/If you failed to confess?' (Sol. 22, 39) However, Duncan's own autobiography tells of a time when he was seeing two women at once and 'lying, not because I wanted to deceive but because I did not want to hurt you', (O, 107) and it states 'Neither of you knew how often I visited the other'. (O, 90)

<sup>44</sup>See 'Solitude' draft, 'If Our Ability to Love...'. HRHRC

After describing his infidelities in detail throughout *Obsessed*, the possessive-ness Duncan shows towards his estranged wife against her girlfriend, Gretchen, appears quite hypocritical:

Ever since Rose Marie had left me in the autumn of 1958 I had struggled to squash the divorce, break her dependence on Gretchen and gradually re-establish the status quo ante... . You too wanted me to rescue Rose Marie from Gretchen. (O, 158)

Duncan gives the impression that he is aware of his culpability as he tries to diminish it by the implication ('you too') of Maskell's complicity. From this, it can be concluded that Duncan forms his autobiographical and fictional worlds around his own limited, and what now appear to be unfavourable (because of flawed self-justification) premises and convictions. The outside world functions primarily for the poetry, fiction or drama. The autobiographer himself admits with dry humour that this is the case, as he remembers waiting too long at a café for Antonia:

I take it as a personal affront. I like my characters to appear on cue and get intensely irritated when I discover that they have minor parts in somebody else's bad play. (HTME, 358)

Many of Duncan's assertions are based on the subjectively-claimed world of his self-dramatising voice in statements such as 'Though I have given the impression here that I was a philanderer, I was not'. (HTME, 294) The vision of an ideal, unpossessive love in these works is problematic. Being in love, he tries to transcend or attack social boundaries using privatised meanings. Despite its inconsistencies, the technique of privatising meaning correlates to the broader compulsion during the '50s, to recover morality in personal terms. The inconsistencies themselves imply that there is a tension between Duncan's inner world and a socially bounded anxiety regarding his role within the signification of marriage, relationships and women. By incorporating these tensions into his work, Duncan is often able to offer a more radical world-view than one might expect from a writer of his background. Chapter 6 goes on to explore such a possibility.

## *v. Gender and Psychoanalysis*

As has been shown, much of Duncan's work from the '50s and beyond, reveals a troubled theme of sexuality. The theme is, if troubled, pervasive, and it is fruitful to use psychological and psychoanalytical terms of reference in the next two sections. What also makes these terms appropriate is that, as already identified in the play *Stratton*, Duncan was interested in human psychology and the growing trend for psychiatric cure. Weeks notes the new trend of applying psychological ideas to social work and research:

Although this never took hold to the extent that it did in the USA (in the form of ego psychology, with its emphasis on adjusting to the social norms), a modified psychoanalysis became a dominant element in social work during the 1950s. (JW, 235-236)

With an emphasis on social welfare, 'The aim was quite clearly to reconcile perceived sexual and emotional needs with the institutions of monogamous marriage'. (JW, 236) Early Mass Observation surveys and Gorer's samples concluded there was 'A fear of decline of standards' and:

the perceived dangers were to be curiously resolved by an ideology that encouraged sexuality to flourish, but strictly within the confines of a monogamous marriage... . Official sexual morality was in a curious state of tension.<sup>45</sup>

Social attitudes towards sexual morals incorporated a growing emphasis on psychological dynamics when defining behaviour/norms, as behaviour was based around sexual relationships to a greater degree. Duncan's articulation of sexuality in his writing clearly reflects cultural tension between liberation and declining standards. It was during the '60s that his own views on marriage and 'free love' became popular but, by this time, liberation was moving too fast for Duncan's preferences.

His earlier writing on drama and the play *Stratton* prove his interest in psychological motivation for behaviour. His interest continued and peaked in the early '50s at about the same time, in 1952 or 1953, that Rose-Marie first protested openly about his infidelity, this time with Antonia. Duncan describes her reason as being that the other liaisons did not take place at the house (see *HTME*, 304). From this point he encouraged Rose-Marie's and the secretary's bi-sexual activity and tried to engineer a ménage à trois relationship without realising it could potentially marginalise his own masculinity. As an alternative to the autobiographies, which tend in their reminiscences to overlay all with psychological reasoning, it is helpful that Reid remembers the intensified effect of psychiatry on Duncan's world-views by the late '50s. He remembers how Duncan tried to justify the ménage à trois with both Rose-Marie and his secretary:

Ronnie wanted both. He considered either/or, a false convention since it was not what he wanted. He needed to explain his wife's unanticipated rebellion. (AV, 163)

Reid recognises his methods of making behaviour appear moral and logical and suggests they are ingrained as, 'From the beginning Duncan had his own way'. (AV, 163) He refers to Duncan's own acknowledgement of possessiveness when he remembers as a child how he hankered after a meccano set but 'lost interest once he possessed it'. (AV, 164) Reid then proposes that the same applies to women. He could afford to

<sup>45</sup>Weeks, op. cit., p. 239. He cites Geoffrey Gorer's study, *Exploring English Character* (London, Cresset Press, 1955).

lose interest 'for they were attracted to him and he to them'. (AV, 164) He provides an interesting analysis of Duncan himself, stating in summary, that at Cambridge Laura's rejection of him due to her Catholicism thwarted the young Duncan's masculinity. He retaliated to this thwarting by living in 'sin' with Rose-Marie who was a good Catholic girl. Reid refers to *Islands* where these events are described and where Duncan remembers feeling, after sex with Rose-Marie that, 'I was God'. (AMAI, 171)

The analysis pins down Duncan's sexual drive to a sequence of events which is probably much less unusual than many others' reasons for having particular urges. It is not pointless to assume that it was just as conventional of Duncan to have his sense of traditional masculinity borne from early investment in possession and ownership. Fulfilment of need was probably supplied (and maintained) by the boy's mother and sister and its denial revenged by cursing, as he had cursed the fly he trapped under the glass. Because need is linked to a formative sexual experience then sex is also implicated as a means in which Duncan demonstrates his will over others. The conflation of power with sex explains his emotions after sleeping with Rose-Marie and thus the fascination with speaking through, dramatising and humanising the God/Christ figure in his literature.

Duncan's life-writing as well as his fiction, proposes that psychological analysis and disclosure is redemptive: it is supposed to empower the subject. One sees aspects of masculinity coming through certain formal elements of the autobiographical writing, exerting order and control over the words. The personal or writing 'I' also links to the notion of self-consciousness as shaping and distorting. Reid identifies this pattern when he questions Duncan's powers of recall:

Ronald Duncan has an abnormally atrophied memory and an imagination swollen like an old man's prostate gland: he remembers what he felt rather than what caused the feeling (AV, 177)

Gaps or avoidance becomes clear and indicate various repressions and desires. The themes of infidelity and the inauthentic co-exist uncomfortably with our expectations of factual accuracy but such inconsistency admits the complexity of psychological truth. Duncan's adulteries are the main theme of *Obsessed*. Their proclamation suggests that Duncan is highly defensive and feels the need to keep a grip on his chaotic life before it all breaks apart. He asks 'What drives me to write this?' (O, 85) while he denies exhibitionism and self-justification. 'I am too arrogant for that', he decides, 'I suppose I write because it is the only thing I can do: it is my only way to you'. (O, 85) This makes exclusive his position in the text in relation to the object of love as the goal. As autobiographical narrator, he also locates himself as right-minded hero of the piece in contrast to all others, including his friends who act unreasonably,

'They all based their advice and reasoning upon the fallacious and conventional assumption that a man cannot love two women at the same time'. (O, 107)

The autobiographies present the Duncans as a strong-willed yet mutually insecure couple. By *Enemies*, Rose-Marie's growing neglect by her husband provokes frustration and rage. Her jealousy and emotional eruptions are described by Duncan mainly in terms of her inconsistent moods. He begins to characterise Rose-Marie in psychoanalytical terms when he labels her alternating personality either 'Martha' or 'Mary'. He reminds the reader of this again in *Obsessed* where he continues to use the biblical allusion:

Rose Marie was vulnerable because, as you knew, as I know, she is lamed by some deepseated insecurity which, when played upon can make her withdraw even from herself. Her whole personality changes and I had in fact come to call these two personalities by two different names: Mary, the tolerant, giving, happy and immoral girl; Martha the intolerant, withdrawn, unhappy creature trying desperately to conform to women's magazine ethics. (O, 37-38)

Despite the confiding tone, this passage is couched in psychoanalytical logic in order that he avoid his own implication in Rose-Marie's unhappiness. The process of insecurity, withdrawal and personality change is a valid one especially if applied in turn to Duncan himself, who is obviously insecure and has a very variable personality-repertoire. But he does not acknowledge this and remains uninterested in the insecurity itself probably in order for his own motives, when necessary, to remain at the level of unconscious and therefore uncensored compulsion. The wife and secretary characters in *Catalyst* act inconsistently, alternating animosity with affection. At Therese's upset reaction, Charles wonders, 'Why are you going on like this? Only this morning/Darling, you were laughing about my/profane mistresses, as you call them'. (C, 34) Leone begins '[Gaily]: Oh it does doctor... [She suddenly breaks down completely.] 'I'm sorry. Damn!' (C, 48) The female character's unpredictability is intensified by stage directions such as, '[A flash of depression]' and '[recovering her gaiety]'.

The language of psychiatry is used to make Duncan's desire, through repeated affairs, appear necessarily and excitingly unconventional. It should be noted that both Rose-Marie and Maskell endured detrimental treatment at the hands of the 'progressive' patriarchal psychiatric system, which Duncan had suggested for help with their breakdowns (in 1954 and 1961). But Rose-Marie's schizophrenic reactions are labelled additionally and differently by his personal ethics, as 'betrayal' and her jealousy as 'unfaithful'ness, 'not in the conjugal sense, but worse – to the 'immoral' understanding which we had so carefully nurtured between us'. (HTME, 58) The personalised force of his meaning is asserted in statements like, 'True I had been unfaithful as the world measures faith, but that was partially an expression of the depth, the measurement of our affection'. (HTME, 58)



Such statements are also made by the hero-figures in the plays, who are constructed as vulnerable by their honesty or self-interrogation. But misleading statements show where Duncan tries to control the world of the narrative, whereby a confessional tone is supposed to convey sincerity, if not accuracy. This is also a strategy of control for gaining trust from the reader.

The autobiographies contain moments of disarming honesty produced out of retrospective analysis of events, as in the passage below. Here, Duncan sees how he acted badly against his later, better judgement:

And Gretchen was there of course... I myself had been largely instrumental in introducing Rose Marie to Gretchen... the reason, I suppose, that I continued to connive at Gretchen's infatuation for Rose Marie was because it endorsed the license to which I had grown accustomed. No doubt it was all very sophisticated. No doubt. (O, 18)

Also, Charles in *Catalyst*, apologises for his half-baked adulterous love for Leone by blaming the innate traits of his gender and victimhood upon the male psyche: 'But I've been slow, women are always more honest with their feelings than men'. (C, 75) Much of *Obsessed* includes the same (flawed) justifications for failing to reach the ideal of self due to others' failure. Duncan's habit of looking inwards only privatises and problematises the sense of authenticity that he clearly wants to convey.

At other times he appropriates fashionable psychoanalytical ideas to position Rose-Marie beyond such a level of rationalisation. Her resentment of the secretary is not part of her animosity regarding his behaviour but instead a suppression of the love for the secretary which her consciousness disapproves of and projects hate onto:

Her own feelings for the girl were ambivalent and confused: convention told her she should hate her, but that response denied something in her own nature. (HTME, 353)

He has to endorse bisexuality to explain Rose-Marie's ambivalence towards his mistress. In doing so his wife has to be vulnerable, inordinately repressed and easily swayed by 'convention', reasons that enfeeble her while exonerating his own accountability for her behaviour.

Psychological discourse becomes malleable under Duncan's pen as, conversely, the notion of repression is used as a tool for positive argument against those who lack reason because in denial of their real knowledge of the truth:

CHARLES: It's not that I lied  
But that I didn't tell the truth when the truth was too trivial to tell.  
You assumed from the start that Leone didn't attract me;  
I couldn't admit to you what I hadn't even admitted to  
myself. (C, 41)

Therese has revelations of the unconscious motives for her behaviour, 'I've fought against this too. but I never knew what I was/fighting./I wasn't jealous of/ her/I was envious of you'. (C, 78) The autobiographical subject is split between conscious

denials of, 'I am not', references to 'the essential me' (*HTME*, 344) and moments when he looks back and disputes his own past beliefs saying, 'I almost convinced myself that tolerance was connivance' (*HTME*, 303) and, 'In the centre of my childish soul I wanted them all to love me and adore one another - This was my ordeal. Half my life I perceive has been dedicated to this crusade'. (*HTME*, 177) The last statement neutralises the psychological explanation of Rose-Marie's resentment and impels the reader to recognise the strength of Duncan's own contrivances and subjective view of a situation. While the narrator allows himself access to both discourses, his characters are restricted by them.

Duncan's depth of self-appraisal is aligned with the field of psychological deliberation. He writes 'I now became morbidly fascinated by anybody I met who had been divorced'. (*O*, 86) He remembers a scene with Maskell's Irish beau when 'Your ruthlessness, the way you threw his ring across the room, continued to disturb me perhaps longer than it distressed him' (*O*, 148) and:

I knew nothing about you... . Was it because of your Catholic background that I assumed you were a virgin or was it, knowing the utterly insane suggestibility of my mind because you'd made a film called *Virgin Island*? I don't know. (*O*, 25-26)

The mystery of unconscious forces is a topic necessary for him to draw upon to justify his own habitual infidelity. The topic also indicates how much his experiences at the time were being perceived through a psychoanalytical window. The prioritising of emotional life over everyday life actually results in a more flexible autobiographical text than one which includes a mundane detailing of career and other life events.

However, in terms of gender roles, it is feminine mystery that justifies Duncan's lack of understanding of their behaviour. When he hears of a history of mental illness in Maskell's family, he is relieved as it exonerates him as a possible cause for her erratic behaviour, 'I gathered that a grandmother had become insane. I told the doctor; he looked very serious at this information'. (*O*, 152) He goes on to explore their deteriorating relationship and her growing depression:

and in addition to the psychological pressures of our situation, you also had some obscure hormone imbalance... . Your inhibition... , I thought was temporary and due to a cyclical hormone imbalance. (*O*, 160)

This passage is interesting because it displays how Duncan has fallen into a stereotypically masculinist psychological explanation for female irrationality ('some obscure'). Unfortunately its obscurity tends to dispel his acknowledgement of 'our situation', while he does indirectly admit his accountability by mentioning 'pressures'. It is the 'imbalance', however, that finishes her off, or makes it all go wrong. The retrospective 'I thought was temporary', implies that the present narrator has *almost*

realised in hindsight that his perception was faulty, but cannot quite expand his 'self' to go back beyond this very limited analysis. Duncan's assumption of the mystery of femininity leads us to discover how its focus reveals divisions rather than a fulfilment of masculine self-hood for the author.

#### *vi. Repetition of Desire in Art: Structuring the Fantasy*

Further psychoanalytical diagnosis is applicable to other of Duncan's narratives as the discourse most useful for their interpretation. For example, a framework of fantasy structures the plot and action of Duncan's fictional writing, because the way female sensibility supports male desire is foregrounded over a social political context. The plot of *Juan*, for example, finally draws Marcia back into Juan's romance-fantasy world. In *Catalyst* more interestingly, elements of fantasy (see pp. 59 & 62) intertwine with 20th-century references to the character's psychology. The characters all justify their own and each other's behaviour by extensive analysis that is supposed to strip away delusion and establish the deeper truth of the drama. All actions are examined minutely in the spoken narrative but this only makes the developing situation seem more contrived.

Interestingly, contrivance is articulated within the framework of Freud's views on 'phantasy'. Freud explained how the evocation of phantasy emerged from the original instinct for sexual satisfaction. Masturbation is the action 'for obtaining self-gratification at the height of fantasy'.<sup>46</sup> It is easy to compare imagined scenes of phantasy (or fantasy) with the field of drama. Imagined scenes are ritually re-enacted in plays and many of Duncan's dramatic creations present very personalised theatre, because they are authored events, based themselves on wish-fulfilment, evident by the roles the female characters occupy. *Satan*, for example, has a structured fantasy setting, which involves pursuit of a desired object around the primary theme of seduction. The theme of seduction appears as early as *The Rape of Lucretia* and *The Eagle Has Two Heads* though one piece was a commission, the other an adaptation. In 1951, after finishing *Tumbler* and having begun the affair with Anna Proclemer, the story of Don Juan and his seductions must have had an obvious appeal.

Duncan pursued sexual desire and its gratification by his continued indulgence in romantic affairs. Desire engenders fantasy and fantasy is clearly an important part of Duncan's creative drive and of the structure of his literary worlds. The Freudian

<sup>46</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'Hysterical Phantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality', in Vol. 10, *On Psychopathology, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* [1908], trans. & ed. by James Strachey, compiled and ed. by Angela Richards (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1979), p. 89 (pp. 87-94). Hereafter referred to as SF, 1979.

pattern of fantasy cannot be overlooked because of the way it figures in Duncan's writing and follows the same two-fold law. It should be borne in mind that in an imagined fantasy scene, the subject objectifies him/herself by participating in his/her own scene of fantasy, their desire being what encodes the dramatic event as fantasy. Duncan's fictional works tend to prioritise the male hero as romantic poet or writer who operates within a fantasy framework wherein his self-gratification (over a reality principle) is barely disguised. Juan's and Charles's sexual desire dictates the dynamics of those texts. *Kettle of Fish* and *Mandala* contain barely concealed sexual aggression.

Talking to the absent 'you' of Maskell, the narrator of *Obsessed* remembers telling the Harewoods that 'I had fallen in love with you and you were ignoring my existence. They nodded their heads: I thought from sympathy, though perhaps it was boredom'. (O, 13) Duncan gives some pathos to his character by expressing doubt on reflection. But however confessional, this does not allay the impression of sheer arrogance: 'Happily my natural conceit and arrogance came to the rescue. I realised that no lover could come between us, except he who has come between us'. (O, 143) The last part is an earlier reference to 'death' as a lover she flirted with. (O, 11) Here the self who looks back at the younger Duncan, is not reflective enough to neutralise the impression of the arrogant, desiring male agent in the text. The fluctuation of tone when it is achieved produces a self-satirical voice, which doubles the subject as its source. But by saying 'happily' even in retrospect, it ultimately concludes that stubborn self-assurance is what fuelled his pursuits, these being part of the lifestyle Duncan aspired to.

The autobiographical Duncan desires and tests what is possible, but his hypotheses are often proved wrong and he appears fallible, though stubborn. In the drama and fiction one reads instead how desire and its object attempts resolution, idealistically or fantastically, in terms of the plotting and narrative. The unease with which Duncan's writing faced the obvious reality of a situation is reflected in his fondness for melodramatic form and the attacks on realism on the stage. (See Chapter 3, Part I, Section *iv*.) Even the film *Girl on a Motorcycle*, for which he wrote the script, is dotted with psychedelic-style dream sequences. The fantasy pattern also destabilises the boundaries between realities both within and outside the texts. Fantasy is also made apparent by the way it breaks down leaving the hero caught between the two realms. An understanding of the above in conjunction with reading narratives where such elements occur, helps to explain how Duncan's life events are repeated as patterns transcribed within his literature.

In most of Duncan's short stories there is an inclination to the fantastic with Roald Dahl-style twists in the tail. Set just after World War 2, the story *Consanguinity* describes how Angela is courted by a Major Buckle whom she and her brother meet

on the train. Their friendship is depicted as an almost incestuous tripling, 'It was nice to have two men to fuss over again', 'It was, she felt, as if she had two brothers'. (PM, 15) But their intimacy is terminated the day after her wedding night, when Buckle mysteriously disappears. After some inquiry they find that 'Major Buckle was blown to pieces six months ago'. (PM, 21) The recent photographs of the brother and Buckle 'show no trace of any figure, however dim, standing beside him'. (PM, 22) The potential of a perfectly resolved relationship – symbolised by Buckle – is shown to be illusory. A supernatural, rather than any other force, renders the event doubtful in terms of everyday credibility. Duncan depicts the exclusive reality of their three-some as more credible than the shock of the end revelation that has rendered their own pasts questionable. The sudden disclosure of the actual mystery and instability behind events is offered but does not really function as revelation. Instead, a fantasy scene of harmony and its possibility is balanced against its impossibility, whilst neither is diminished.

Outside fiction, fantasy is made a part of Duncan's recall in his life-stories. This is achieved by the way he refuses to accept the reality of major events such as 'The fact that we were to be divorced seemed to me wholly irrelevant'. (O, 69) This refusal signifies a method of authorial control over writing, which is supposed to be dictated to primarily by the truth of external events. However, the imaginary or fictive scene is what takes precedence in his memory associations. He remembers a '30s Deitrich film *The Blue Angel* which has left an indelible impression on him: a professor falls so much in love with a circus girl, that he eventually becomes a clown, 'reduced to a buffoon'. Duncan describes how he used to remember this story during the times 'I traipsed around, following you from film-set to theatre dressing room'. (O, 113) The self-identification through pathos, of the male character, derives from the representation of the woman as elusive, bohemian and cruel.

The narrator also acknowledges the parallel of Maskell's role to Leone's character in *Catalyst*:

Clearly you had succeeded in identifying yourself so completely with your part in the play, that you had become Leone and had ousted Antonia, on whom I had modelled that part. (O, 64)

Duncan projects his own impulses onto her and her role is constructed by and through his writing activities. She is seen as a character whom he can fit into his own future dramas, such as *The Urchin*. At one point he has 'a chance to write something like *The Threepenny Opera*: 'You could play Penny'. (O, 127) She fits in with versatility to his fantasy play. When he is ill, Maskell wears 'a costume from the studio', 'partially like a nun, partially like a nurse'. (O, 101) These examples provide evidence that Duncan's life, as it can be read, was a confusing exchange between his

living and writing selves, in that his life followed his artful fantasies and vice versa. The exchange is acknowledged by Duncan himself, 'I began to perceive that whatever I wrote, I eventually lived'. (HTME, 146) His dramatic characters are often made to comment on this. Angel says to *Satan*, 'That's what life is, a bad play that runs for ever'. (R, 284) The feeling of being a character merely playing a role is ironic because it is voiced by figures speaking from a constructed fiction. They do make the critical assumption that something essentially 'real' is missing from their worlds and that these worlds contain the clichés, plot-twists, formalities and pretences found in bad art. Duncan draws attention to the fact that aspects of his art will contain clichés to prove this point and also to how the characters no longer feel as if they have an alternative script, a freedom which real life would supply.

Duncan promotes the idea of profound events from his life becoming inspirations for, and reflecting and feeding directly into, his art which becomes all the better for it. *Juan's* theme of unfulfilled love 'was in line with my own emotional impulse at the time'. (HTME, 239) The poem/letter beginning, 'Let me ask you one question' (DJ, 45) which Juan sends to Dona Ana, apparently came from a real letter to 'Petra' by Duncan. *Enemies* tells how, in 1956, he takes both Rose-Marie and Antonia to see Diego Fabbri's play about an adulterer which he decides to adapt as *The Philanderer* or *Three Times Two*. Its theme draws close to *Catalyst* which in its turn is a play derived both from Duncan's own experience and his appropriation of the theme and content of Fabbri's play. The core theme of adultery is the denominator here. Duncan's interest – 'I felt deeply sympathetic to this comic character' (HTME, 393) – signifies that he was driven by a need to heroise himself within a scene of seduction, betrayal and discovery and to re-record the event, in order to re-live it or preserve it for himself.

Duncan felt impelled to re-live events by their repetition through art. He 'attended every rehearsal' of *Catalyst*. (O, 12) He repeats the opportunity to gaze upon his now idealised object. Maskell, who takes the role of secretary in *Catalyst*, acts out his theatre of personal fantasy. Outside the play, the actress sustains Duncan's need for a non-compliant object whose ungraspable nature renders her more desirable, 'The offhand way you treated me at those rehearsals, misled me, hurt me and increased my tension'. (O, 12-13) Around such tension the experience of pursuit is continued or continually reproduced. Duncan makes it clear in his life-stories that his own desires must be followed at any cost. It is of use at this point to draw upon Lacanian theory, which considers desire to be the fundamental motivating force for human existence. Desire occurs from the infant's lack of control over its needs; language symbolises our attempt to control through meaning. Language, like the position of the father, is symbolic of what is Other, a structuring principle which

operates as the source of law and access to satisfaction or control of desire. Desire is produced by language because it is always deferred just as meaning is in language. The Other signifies the law of the Father; the subject wishes for 'a Father who can perfectly master his desire' because to control meaning is to control desire, though to achieve control is impossible.<sup>47</sup> As we have seen, Duncan demonstrates the wish to control meaning and the meaning of his desire by changing and re-applying key definitions to behaviour and action in his writing.

Lacan's subject is a unitary agent, but delusionally so, because it looks in the mirror to see itself controlling its source of meaning as a coherent subject. Identification with this 'in-control' subject is to identify with the Other but is also an illusion because the mirror image is falsely coherent. Because only an illusion, our sense of control can never be fully satisfied. For Duncan an achieved goal had to be unsatisfactory in order for it to be renewed. Presented with his desired ideal, Dona Ana, Juan realises 'You leave me nothing to look up to,/Nothing to overcome'. (*DS*, 90) Like language that is borne from desire, desire itself originates from absence (of the mother's body) and is always implied in language which can only ever strike a near-miss at the desired truth. Despite its by-passes, language is idealised and, through taboo, also drives overt desire underground into the unconscious where it is wordless, persistent, and impossible to fulfil. The social implications of the idealised, prohibitive position of language are the necessarily patriarchal organisation of desire and sexuality. Women have no place in this order apart from their relation to masculine-biased meaning. Duncan presents desire and sexuality through control of language which is sometimes male-biased. One sees where his desire feeds into fantasy scenes about women in art, which allow repetition but are also marked by impossibility because of their structuration through language. For example, Maskell becomes a fantasy figure, but this is a sign that she remained outside Duncan's control because of her rejection of him and choice to marry elsewhere.

The idea of the 'pleasure principle' is apposite here in that it is an 'appetite' which works from the sexual instincts and often overcomes the 'reality' principle. Duncan's sexual needs are transferred to the pursuit of women for pleasure. His textual representations of women follow a pleasure principle that outweighs the 'reality principle'.<sup>48</sup> Desire and repetition can be aligned to Freud's idea of the pleasure principle because the latter is a compulsive and recurring process. Freud

<sup>47</sup>See Lacan, op. cit., 'Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire', 1977 (p. 321), pp. 293–325. Here the Other is distinguished as 'the locus of the signifier' (p. 310).

<sup>48</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *On Metapsychology, The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey and Angela Richards, Pelican Freud Library Vol. 11 (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984), p. 271. Hereafter referred to as SF, 1984.

describes how pleasure and pain are reproduced through the 'fort/da' game which signifies the pattern of renunciation as absence. The 'reality principle' is a diverter, which does not abandon the intention of the ultimate object of pleasure but demands a postponement of satisfaction and 'temporary toleration of un-pleasure as a step in the long indirect road to pleasure'. (SF, 1984, 280) Compensation for this trauma happens by the infant 'himself staging the disappearance of the objects within his reach' so his distress is repeated but experienced as a game. This signifies active control and 'an instinct for mastery' at this early stage. (SF, 1984, 285) There is also tragedy denoted in this recreation. Duncan's need for self-gratification also involves the repetition of tragedy and return to painful events. Duncan's writing often presents painful events but does not wallow in tragedy, instead including light-hearted measures to allay deep-seated pessimism. In the same way, the death instinct prompts our survival mechanisms. Pain and pleasure are inextricably linked when the pleasure principle combines with the death drive in the repetitions and mastery of the fort-da game.

Mastery ties in with pleasure for Duncan as each new affair produces a renewed dynamism through which he reviews his creative identity. In *Enemies* he remembers the moment, while Rose-Marie is in the sanatorium, he realises that infidelity is the best method for safeguarding emotion. Again, wandering lost in Bournemouth, he has an epiphanic moment justifying the repetition of infidelity, 'I found the right road and it was along it that I realised consciously that if I was to survive I must not be in future so emotionally dependent on one woman'. (O, 122) But in this emotional justification, the mastery or acknowledgement of the game of pain and pleasure is ultimately bound up with the reality principle which hinders fantasy. Maskell died and Rose-Marie refused to live with him. In one of Duncan's late journal entries, he writes as an aged man, with a rare concession to genuine ignorance or perplexity:

Oh God why am I so obsessed with women? Why am I so distracted, destroyed,  
confounded and confused by them? <sup>49</sup>

The 'reality principle' is figured through these moments of pain and by autobiographical description of external forces beyond the 'mastery' of Duncan's personal life. Difficult work commissions or emotional compromises are diversions that do not abandon the intention of the ultimate object of pleasure but demand a postponement of satisfaction and 'temporary toleration of un-pleasure as a step in the long indirect road to pleasure'. (SF, 1984, 285) As Duncan reaches the point of his first serious affair in *Enemies* he has, in retrospect, detected a negative pattern which leads to un-

<sup>49</sup>Ronald Duncan, *Logbook*, 1971. FL



pleasure, 'My impulse to leave somewhere, to break with somebody was frustrated by the fear that it would be unkind. I began to be consistently unkind to myself'. (HTME, 77)

Duncan's life and writing is characterised by re-enactments of the early loss of his father in that he repeats the scene as one that is both painful and pleasurable. The scene of a triangular domestic set-up occurring in his art and life reflects and repeats the reluctance to leave his mother lost or 'abandoned' by his own 'lost' father. It is easy to conjecture that, connected to the need for love, Duncan's libidinal, unconscious fantasy of the early triangle of adoration of boy by mother and sister is then sublimated and deflected on to artistic constructs. We can only refer to the life as it has been created and constructed by different recollection and texts, not as it was. However, the above conjecture is supported by the autobiographical voice stating 'I have never been able to do without women – I had a mother and a sister, and I was devoted to them'. (O, 78-9) Applied to Rose-Marie and the 'other woman', like the fort-da game, Duncan sabotages his marriage but then finds it hard to let go of or lose his wife, 'I was driven to admit that I wanted Rose-Marie back'. (O, 60) If it is not wife and mistress, mother and sister, it is mother and daughter. In *Rehearsal* the mother becomes the daughter's sexual rival, falsely claiming that 'Trevor has tried to make love to me' but confesses her own fantasy as if it is the truth, 'The first I knew was I felt his breath on my neck', 'Then I pushed him away of course'. (R, 241) The Maughams threaten to leave and 'lose' each other but their emotional preoccupation does not cross beyond the rather incestuous boundaries – or the 'upholstered womb' as Trevor calls it – of the three-way family group. David, the maturer male, is made to face the fact that he has really been in love with his daughter, Theona, who is represented as the 'other' woman and asks him 'Why have you never left her? Because of me?' (R, 204)

Again, highlighting the notion of desire, it is obvious that Duncan's fictional/dramatic characters and himself in the autobiography are predominantly desiring subjects because they remain dissatisfied. Subverting established morality, his drama follows the pleasure principle, where the random and chaotic drives of unchannelled needs seek discharge. These drives are amoral and have not yet defined themselves as virtue or vice. However, the characters are trapped in actions of renunciation and fulfilment and therefore cannot wholly partake in fantasy scenes (unless they are mad like Bratton Douglas). The hero of *The Last Adam*, for example, refuses the apple offered by the seductive new Eve, 'but it was raw'. (LA, 95) Also, at the close of

*Catalyst*, the heroes are frozen in the moment before we assume Leone re-enters to resume the *ménage à trois*.

Duncan's dissatisfied temperament probably contributed greatly to the way he created male characters who projected their desires onto elusive and unrequiting women. He mythologises women, as specifically Other in the narrative. In Lacan's terms the Other is the site of language to which the speaking subject necessarily refers, as it appears to hold the 'truth' of the subject and the power to make good its loss, wherein this other becomes the fantasised place of just such a knowledge or certainty. But unity or truth of the word in language is a mere fantasy. The man's 'desire for the phallus' engenders woman as guarantor of love, 'either as a virgin or a prostitute'.<sup>50</sup> Taking the masculine nature of the phallic signifier as a given, as does Lacan, then the woman inhabits a falsely absolute category. Since the place of the Other is also the place of God, it is the ultimate form of mystification. Woman, whom Duncan represents as Other by her mystery, appears to hold the 'truth' of the subject and the power to make good its loss. Duncan constructs Maskell as the object of truth and purity in a letter to her:

Sweetheart, hold my hand: it is I who am the weaker... . I know that you have something very pure in you; it is holy and it is the little saint in you I need... . You have what I looked for and when I am said to be dead tell them I am looking out of your eyes. (O, 103-4)

His desire to master Maskell's elusive nature is correspondent with his identity as author and the mastery of the act of writing. She is his muse, the guarantor of the certainty of his pencil, his words, though not of herself. Her mystery also sustains his own image of potency in relation to his great love, 'What sort of a film star was this? Who or what were you? I began to sharpen my pencil'. (O, 41)

For Duncan, to be loved or reflected by a woman automatically entails self-recognition for personal reassurance. The letter states 'I am not any more in my self: I am in you'. (O, 103) But he is speaking from a realm of fantasy with each sex signifying completion for the other. However, Lacan asserts that sexuality exists in a realm of instability in the same way as does the actual *non*-guaranteed and arbitrary nature of language. There are signs that expose the fantasy and false omniscience upon which the certainty of completion rests. Ultimately, Duncan's search for authority was too overwhelming for Maskell to uphold, and she refused it, explaining in a letter that extricates her from the affair, 'I need all the bits of myself to myself'.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup>See Lacan, op. cit., 'The Signification of The Phallus', 1977 (p. 290), pp. 281-291.

<sup>51</sup>Maskell to Duncan, 'Saturday' (probably 1961). *FL*

At this point, it is relevant to refer to Irigaray's theory, that woman is usually represented as the negative of the male reflection.<sup>52</sup> To Lacan, a human subject's consciousness is dependent on the sense of cohesion and unity acquired from language-use. Language however is incomplete because it defers meaning. Irigaray draws near to Lacan's theory when she posits that the the smooth, unblemished reflection of the male subject depends upon seeing, as its other, the necessarily incomplete and disfigured reflection of woman in the mirror.<sup>53</sup> The notion of reflection is applicable to Duncan's writing which itself functions from within a patriarchal discourse in the ways uncovered above. His picturing of women as negative and different helps him to reflect upon his own existence.<sup>54</sup> Marcus has concluded that, in Western discourse, self-reflection is autobiographical. Traditionally, then, the narcissistic, reflective nature of autobiography is male terrain, an idea appearing to be confirmed by Duncan's male subjecthood in *Obsessed* where he has Maskell function as female disfigurement in relation to his narration. By his sole use of 'you' in his address to her, it seems as if she continues to be the sole source of meaning to this period of Duncan's life as lived retrospectively. She imposes significance and value onto it:

Such was my disturbed state of mind when I returned to London. You consoled me, you comforted me; (O, 58)

You were always instantaneously sensitive to my moods. (O, 73)

However, because his individual subjectivity – the 'I' – 'is made superior, a sense of her proper definition and coherence is lost. Her character is less clarified than drowned in description, fractured and split apart by Duncan's inclusion of unchronological times, names, places and thoughts, all assembled around her. His own activities are reflected through hers: 'After you left I went home to Mead'; (O, 42) 'So much of our time was spent'; (O, 80) 'You were the untidiest girl I ever met' (O, 82) and 'During this summer of 1960, you went on tour in a play. I didn't like it and you were unhappy in your part. You persuaded me to come up to Leeds'. (O, 114) The 'you' address throughout indicates the author's desire to master her life and his own by privileging the voice and opinions of his own memorial. He romanticises their

<sup>52</sup>Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (NY, Iacatha, Cornell University Press, 1985), wherein castration 'must serve as a reminder of the negative which is attributed to the woman'. (p. 52) By submitting to this 'make-believe', woman acts out 'man's contraphobic projects'. (p. 53)

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, wherein 'The mother – that all-powerful mirror denied and neglected in the self-sufficiency of the (self) thinking subject, her 'body' henceforward specularised through and through'. (p. 183)

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, wherein 'Women are only useful in part, as openings-mirages that reflect this a priori proposition needed for the mind's/his *foundation*'. (p. 212)

intimacy and his understanding of her, but much of the commentary on her is perfunctory in tone and the portrait he paints of her is not satisfactory. Duncan's memoir despite its title *Obsessed*, is not a narrative of penetrative insights into Maskell, the assumed object of the obsession. Duncan's infatuation, of course, only refers to his own subjective associations and obsessional behaviour. The woman is impervious to penetration, feminised and fractured by his infatuation.

As nature is equated with the feminine, so is love with the activity of mirroring, particularly in the *Solitude* poems. In *Solitude* 9 the woman becomes imprinted on the subject's face:

Because my eyes have stared  
So often at you  
People looking at me  
Should see your image impaled upon my face. (*Sol.* 9, 23)

The brief lines are matter of fact, though the speaker's masculine gaze is associated with the violence of impalement as if his nature is reduced to barbarity by her influence. Again woman is reached only through *him* and vice versa. The speaker's gaze is dispersed through an audience – 'people looking' – and use of visual juxtapositioning (her on him), a device that thinly masks the totality of his voice and vision.

There are other ways in which Duncan excludes the female as different, distorted either by her simplicity or indecipherability. Mother and daughter characters in the fiction usually conform to stereotypes of the ridiculous harridan and the sexually voracious. Theona's 'calculating' mother Patricia in *Rehearsal* cannot directly come to terms with her age. Instead she has a dualistic Jekyll and Hyde personality that hurls insults at itself:

[Pause] Pat now, do be honest, tell me, do you think Gina should wear a scarf and maybe a clip. [She puts one on] You see the question is if Gina does wear one it spoils the line of her dress. But if she doesn't, he might mistake her wrinkled neck for a salt-cellar or an ash-tray. (*R*, 206)

A patriarchal view of the otherness of female desire is presented through Patricia's sexuality being made alien to the male characters. Her otherness is reflected by language that is pluralised through the doubled voice. To Trevor, the older woman holds no attraction, she is only 'Like a mother' (*R*, 251) to him. The next stage-direction confirms the image of Patricia as sexless, '[*Her stockings are loose and wrinkled*]'. In other words, the woman must be young and sexually attractive to properly embody Duncan's ideal of motherhood. She must embody the ideal characteristics of both roles if she is to be the perfect woman. Theona denies this saying, 'I'm not his mother' (*R*, 231) but Patricia retorts, 'It's impossible to love a man without being a mother to him'. (*R*, 232) It is, nonetheless, youthful Theona with her motherly potential who attracts Trevor, not Patricia with her girlish traits.

*Abelard* also conveys the idealised image of the lover/mother, the man childlike and dependent as Heloise declares 'When a man cries to a woman/he becomes her child'. (AH, 28)

*Seven* labels Lavinia, a woman of thirty 'a whore', though only 'in a manner of speaking'. (7, 270) Melanie is self-confessedly 'insecure' and 'vain. I'm vain because I'm a woman. And because I'm a woman I can be cruel without reason'. (7, 282) Gerard professes to 'know' Melanie 'for what she is: an attractive, insincere little bitch' (R, 286) while Webb dares not 'look at women as they are' because they are 'Adorable but predatory. Every gesture calculated, even unconsciously'. (R, 303) Such statements assume a feminising principle in terms of personality and behaviour. The female characters' subject-positions are identified with irrational discourse. The woman is polarised into a duality as Duncan seeks authority and irrationality, eroticism and motherly asexuality in women. His opposing needs and dissatisfactions lead to continual agitation regarding the representations of women in his work. As well as Rose-Marie, Maskell is also presented as a split character:

You were a prude in public, a bawd in private. (O, 114)

You became moody, tearful, cold, and then, without apparent cause, suddenly gay and bawdy. I didn't know who you were. (O, 149)

She is presented as unable to submit to reality but as a consequence is subject to Duncan's own reality and imbued with his web of meanings:

And though I'd written the bloody Catalyst, and should have twigged, I didn't see then that you were still playing the play. (O, 19)

Sometimes your acting ability nauseated or frightened me. 'There's a whore inside every woman', I said. (O, 145)

The image of a nun imbued with sexuality is central to *Urchin*, *Abelard* and *Dona Ana*'s characters. In *Urchin*, the cockney woman, O'Kelly, leaves the static safety of a convent to live with a barrow-boy, Sid. Assuming a parallel, her departing words to the statue of Mary are, 'Still I've got somewhere to go which is more than you 'ad, isn't it?' (U, 14) The 'somewhere' turns out to be scene two's location of 'a tenement room in Notting Hill Gate', to which Duncan has applied the established tropes of race and class. The place is associated with un-safety, 'squalor', racial tension, poverty, deterioration and decline. O'Kelly lives there, unmarried, with Rufus, 'A West-Indian, aged 35'. Eventually she is arrested for streetwalking but tells the policeman that she prefers it to working in the gramophone shop where the men 'were all the same', whereas:

O'Kelly: In this trade it's different. Some men will ask you for one thing, some men another. But whatever they ask for, you can't help giving them something of yourself.

And sometimes they're grateful. Sometimes I've known them cry in my arms they're so bloody grateful. (*Pause*). (*U*, 40)

Here Duncan constructs the idea of a meaningful exchange of sexual relations within prostitution that is unrealistic. He is also essentialist by equating male need with infantile, non-sexual, desire while differentiating the female as feeding, sustaining and maternal. Unable to survive by other means, O'Kelly's only alternative is to return to the convent. Upon her return, it is discovered that her cleaning work has been undertaken by an animated Virgin Mary who has deputised for her, during her absence. After taking her overalls back, O'Kelly continues scrubbing the floor as in the first scene, her activity overlooked by the now frozen statue of Mary. Her drudgery, children gone, is associated with purification as well as penance (traditionally, for 'fallen', unmarried mothers). Having the Virgin clean, signifies O'Kelly's own cleanliness and redemption, but her return to the same activity figures an unchanged situation, eternalised by her inability to escape from or finish the cleaning. The meanings generated by the play are the same as those that arise from the negative and problematic notion of prostitution created by a male-biased double standard. As in prostitution, one sees how sexualisation marks O'Kelly's character, even at the point where that sexuality is rigorously stamped out or denied by being made pure.

O'Kelly's morality is linked with sexual morality and explored through an explicit discourse of purity and vice. The discourse is channelled through scenes associated with sexual fantasy because of their stereotypical views of women. Purity, promiscuity and the maternal are eroticised. In a fully quoted letter to Maskell in *Obsessed*, one sees how Duncan's writing requires her to conform to inconsistent roles, 'I enclose some pocket money. Do you want any more?' is paternalistic and infantilises her, while the letter ends with, 'At this moment I am entirely possessed by you, as much as a child in your womb. I promise to lie there quietly in your little belly'. (*O*, 105) In some ways, as the next chapter will reveal, Duncan's intention is to legitimise desire by re-conceptualising and moderating motives within prostitution. What is also apparent is that his desire forces a confrontation of ideal solutions with personal guilt. This is the reason why, rather than envincing solutions through liberation or presenting clarified views, his writing signifies his struggle to change and establish personal meaning within the site of the text.

## *Conclusion*

Duncan's record of his married life and its reproduction through texts like *Catalyst* are written to maintain authority overall. Despite this, sexuality does not become a wholly utopian site because the author is also shown as being subject to desire. The

subject draws attention to its own complexity and divisions. Freud investigated how phantasy may lead to symptoms of over-dominance and delusion. However the imaginative constituent is at play in another way that is analogous to Duncan's creative work. Furthermore Freud states that phantasy can demonstrate a constant switching of associations 'into the field of the contrary meaning'. (SF, 1979, 94) 'Bisexual meaning' diffuses and complicates a one-sided view of the female by the male in Duncan's narratives. In Chapter 6 I shall explore the moments where, underlying the impression of authorisation, the textual subject relinquishes its one-sided position and deconstructs itself. These moments produce temporary shifts of viewpoint that affect the 'other' as female and distort her reflection of the author/narrator's authenticity and coherence.

## 6

# Drama, Desire and the Divided Self

### *Introduction*

Duncan presents his autobiographical works as adjunct to his other creative work, making his personal life public and literary. Most of his work therefore gives the impression of being one long autobiography that functions to confirm the poet's (writing) existence. Even so, there are factors that question the stability of an author who so ubiquitously claims the truth of his own voice. These factors are the points of tension between fact and fiction and such tension is relevant to the notion of authorship.

A further theorisation of life-writing can lead to the conclusion that fiction contains elements of autobiography and vice versa. Marcus proposes, 'If all human conception of the world is creative and aesthetic then it follows that all forms of knowledge also are, in some way, autobiographical'. (LM, 188) Her idea removes knowledge – as an 'objective' and universal human consciousness – into the aesthetic realm of individual creativity. Autobiographical knowledge, which traditionally assumes a metaphysics of authorial presence and credence, is associated with subjectivism, personal vision and the fictional.

On the other hand, if Lejeune's premises (see Chapter 1, p. 54) serve as a satisfactory characterisation of the genre, it is difficult to affirm that such writing can be radical. To detect radical qualities in Duncan's work demands a twofold analysis. The main issue is not only Duncan's inherent conservatism but also the potential for deconstructing that very conservatism (as in Marcus) by looking closely at the processes involved in self-writing.

At first I will discuss how textual authority is destabilised at points where Duncan's work encounters issues of gender difference. Radical aspects of Duncan's work are detectable when the writing itself provides alternative self-representations to the sometimes reactionary omnipotence of authorial presence. The different subject positions in fact destabilise apparent boundaries existing between genres and between male and female definitions of self-hood. There are many examples of personal and masculine passivity and vulnerability which counter the view of Duncan as rigidly masculine and sexist. For example, and as I shall go on to show, a play like *Catalyst* acknowledges the deceptive nature of static definitions of 'female' and 'male' in the way it confronts the issue of bisexuality.



### *i. The Censorship Debate*

Duncan's part in the genesis of the English Stage Company was partly born from the extension of his impulse at the beginning of the '50s (as with the Taw and Torridge Festival) to develop the arts in an impoverished cultural climate. However by 1960, a review of a revival of *Tomb*, opposed Duncan's work to the reigning style of contemporary theatre:

Seeing it now makes me realise how much the London Theatre has changed in 14 years. Nothing could be more unfashionable these days than the style of Mr. Duncan... . He believes in oratory... he doesn't use four letter words but long and often abstract ones.<sup>1</sup>

This is an apt statement as regards the play as a revival but the reviewer uses its anachronisms to demean Duncan's style as a whole. It is true that Duncan found it hard to escape from the mould of poetic dramatist which the media poured him into and, by the mid-'fifties, this sort of press did not help his work, now classed as high-brow and poetic.

Despite his adherence to poetic diction and a politics of individualism, Duncan was open to new experiences, styles and approaches to topics. This is clear from his literary repertoire. It is therefore important to see him to some extent as typical of his time, both writing against and also participating in the 'explosion' of kitchen sink drama in the '50s and '60s. It is surprising to see that signs of radical thought emerge over and against the system into which he is embedded.

Mid-century, the dispute over censorship was less to do with political issues than homosexuality, sexual swearwords and blasphemy. In 1955, Osborne had had cuts imposed on *Personal Enemy* by the Lord Chamberlain. Duncan was also to register in the records of plays banned for inadmissible sexual content during the last century.<sup>2</sup> The depiction of sexuality in his play *Catalyst* must have been perceived as convincing by the Lord Chamberlain because it found itself up against his censorship in 1958. Duncan, therefore, should be acclaimed for his role in the growing debate on censorship during the late '50s and early '60s. Paradoxically the task of the Lord Chamberlain (since 1843) was to license performances but also censor them at the same time. Radio broadcasts were not affected by his censorship, but while Beckett's *Endgame* had been performed in French and been granted a license, it was then banned for performance in English at the same theatre.

<sup>1</sup> Anon., review, *The Daily Mail* (3rd Nov., 1960), np. RDF

<sup>2</sup> Trowbridge, the assistant examiner, recommended *Catalyst*, calling it a 'superb probing of human hearts and of... affection and sexuality in men and women by a true poet with no intention to shock'. See 'Play Submission Form' (14/5/57), LCP. Unfortunately the Lord Chamberlain, Lawrence Lumley, was not prepared to 'alter his policy'. See letter, Trowbridge to the Asst. Comptroller (24/05/57). LCP

Though the Lord Chamberlain was invited to view a performance of *Catalyst* at the Arts on March 25th, 1958, it was not issued a licence until 1963. Though *Anger* had passed with minor comment, in 1960 the cuts ordered for Osborne's *World of Paul Slickey* play were contested and the whole matter threatened to be aired in the press. The Court's existing public profile generated a cult of controversy around its playwrights and Duncan as well as Osborne attained positive publicity by writing challenging plays. A news article in 1958 draws attention to the favourable effect censorship could have:

Banned plays assure the playwright of packed houses at one of these so-called theatre clubs. First counter-blast came from Ronald Duncan whose new play the *Catalyst* was banned last month and goes on shortly at the Arts Theatre Club.<sup>3</sup>

Duncan had submitted his play in May 1957 and correspondence with the Lord Chamberlain regarding its cuts continued from then until November 1958. Duncan wrote to the *Times* that he had:

given considerable thought to the question of censorship, since the Lord Chamberlain did not see fit to grant a licence for *The Catalyst*. It is clear that we still suffer from a Cromwellian hangover... . There is nothing to prevent a company televising the performance and projecting directly into the nursery... . Is it reasonable that a play should be banned because it mentions Lesbianism when the act of Lesbianism is no offence in law?<sup>4</sup>

Duncan's dramatic presentation of his personal affairs had nicely coincided with the topical issue of sex in the theatre. This could offer him an opportunity to further a justification of his work and take part in the intellectual debate on censorship. When *Catalyst* reached production in London it was central to the continuing press-debate over the censor's 'blue pencil'. One journalist believed it:

deals intelligently and unsensationally with love and lesbianism... . Only the puritan few can explain the survival of this complete power over the theatre which the Lord Chamberlain wields from his stronghold in St. James' palace and from which there is no appeal.<sup>5</sup>

In May of that year, the *Daily Telegraph* included a notice about the 'establishment of a committee to study the workings of the present system of theatre censorship'.<sup>6</sup> It details the formation of the new Theatre Censorship Reform Committee and lists Duncan's name amongst those of Alec Guinness, Sean O' Casey, Osborne, and Anthony Asquith. Duncan's own experience of the limitations and advantages of a banned play had encouraged him to become spokesperson for a current and radical campaign.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Williams, 'Theatre Clubs Attacked By Peer', *News Chronicle* (7th Mar., 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Duncan to editor, *Sunday Times* (3rd April, 1958), np. RDF

<sup>5</sup> Anon., 'Is this Blue Pencil Any Use?', *Daily Mail* (25th Mar., 1958), np. RDF

<sup>6</sup> Anon., 'Censorship in Theatre to be Studied', *Daily Telegraph* (2nd May, 1958), np. RDF

A private production of Duncan's banned play on March 25th, 1958, was made possible by use of a club venue. The Arts Theatre was one of the only remaining club venues in the mid-'50s, the decline of others signalling the swing to polite naturalism in theatre. These venues were conveniently ignored by the Chamberlain. *View From The Bridge* (1956), *Tea and Sympathy* (1957) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) were all produced at the New Watergate, another club theatre. It is difficult to reproduce the original impact of *Catalyst* in performance and assess its shock value but an assessment is made possible by textual evidence of its critical reception. The set and manners coded it as a naturalistic play of the period even though today its 'realism' may appear glibly artificial. In Peter Roberts' opinion, the bisexual elements therein elevated and thus up-dated Duncan's 'comédie boulevardière' into 'the curiously exciting experimental world of London's club theatre-land'.<sup>7</sup> Though Duncan did not imply that the characters were to have intercourse at any point, in Act II Leone is made to undress, then change into another garment and 'flaunt herself before THERESE'. (C, 73) On the next page '[They embrace]'. (C, 74) Despite its banned status, there seems to be some disagreement about the play's shock value. The standard view is that homosexuality was kept off-stage during the post-war-years, though it formed a growing part of public debate. Rebellato summarises that:

the vast growth in arrests, the Kinsey findings and the new coverage of homosexual offences in the press mutually fed off each other to create a widespread fear that homosexuality was on the up. (DR, 158)

He goes on to claim that the theatre was actually a 'seductive site' for homosexuality at that time and cites Gielgud's arrest in 1953 as one example of a highly publicised scandal that associated the two. (DR, 162) There were other plays with a homosexual theme which, beyond personal experience, may have affected Duncan's decision to write *Catalyst*. He may have been aware (knowing Lewenstein in 1954) that Lewenstein had sent Genet's *The Maids* for licensing in 1952 and that its lesbian references had to be pared down. Duncan may also have been made aware of the cuts (due to Communist references) imposed on *Mother Courage and Her Children* (whose first production Littlewood brought to the Taw and Torridge Festival in 1955). Until 1966, the representation of Jesus on stage was vetoed. Duncan's adaptation of Puget and Bost's play *A Man named Judas* (performed in Edinburgh, 1956), has Jesus absent for the whole drama. Julien Green's *South* (1955), though tentative about homosexuality, was banned from public performance and the plays

<sup>7</sup> Peter Roberts, review, *Plays and Players* (May, 1958), p. 15.

*Serious Charge* (1955), *One More River* and *Quaint Honour* (1958) concerned accusations of homosexuality. Issues of youth culture and the generation gap in Angus Wilson's *Mulberry Bush* (1955) incorporated a level of controversy and, overall, the contentious nature and production of these works may have influenced Duncan's composition of *Catalyst*.

The overall preoccupation with who is sleeping with whom in *Catalyst* contributes to its tone of risqué modernity. The characters' gay sexual preferences are at first implicitly insinuated, such as when Therese protests, 'Not with Leone! Anyone but her!' (C, 34) and:

CHARLES: You deliberately made her angry. Why?

LEONE: [*Unconsciously touching the belt, and abstractly*]:  
I don't know. I don't know why I did that.  
But I enjoyed it. It was like opening a window.

CHARLES: You bitch!

LEONE: Perhaps I am. [*Indicating the belt.*]: Perhaps Therese is this.  
I adore her when she's angry. I like her for what she is, (C, 43)

also:

THERESE: What a bore it is ... [*A flash of depression*]

LEONE: What, duckie?

THERESE: Nothing... but it does seem unfair. Some men have it both ways. (C, 60)

Emotional repression is highlighted by the characters' indirect language and the moment of confession of lesbian emotion is also one of concealment and refusal (to speak) between the women:

THERESE: You're crying.

LEONE: I always do when--, (C, 74)

and between Therese and Charles:

THERESE: It is I who Leone...

CHARLES: What? You mean?

THERESE: Yes. And Neither of us knew. (C, 77)

The inferences and undetectable nature of gayness challenge the usual assumptions about how to identify these traits. To focus on the women is radical because to do so avoids the more topical narrative of male homosexuality and the stereotyped context wherein it is usually located. The level of ambiguity and the way *Catalyst* does not consummate the lesbian relationship; only its potential, means repression and revelation of homosexuality exist simultaneously. It lends vagueness to meaning which also allows interpretation on the side of licence because of Duncan's evasive rather than clichéd

method of coding. This type of strategy (making meaning hard to pin down) was commonly used in plays dealing with sexual 'deviance', in order to pass the Censor's gaze.

Other plays such as *The Lonesome Road* (Philip King) and *Variation on a Theme* (Rattigan) along with the support of critics in the press such as Tynan, and articles such as Angus Wilson's on morality in the *Daily Mail* (29 August 1957), were all forces which effected a breakthrough in October of 1958. The Chamberlain produced a memorandum on change of policy on homosexual plays, which reformed the policy of 'strict exclusion' and emphasised new consideration of the subject, if treated seriously and if 'necessary to the plot'. It still imposed limits by stating that '*We will not allow embraces between males or practical demonstrations of love*'.<sup>8</sup> The policy signified a focus on male homosexuality that overshadowed the regulation of lesbian behaviour on the stage. Thus *Catalyst's* sexual politics were still a rarity. A rarity also because, along with censorship, one received view of the Court's early policy (in Osborne's opinion) was that it was not to be 'compromised by homosexual frippery'. (DR, 215) It may be rather extreme to assert, as Rebellato does, that 'The dream of directness, of ambiguity, is responding to the fear of a queer community'. (DR, 216) Porter, for example, is outspoken and much less repressed than Leone or Charles. In other words, most intimations of homosexuality in the new wave of British theatre were excised or off-stage. By this token, Therese's horror at being classed as 'a couple of \_\_\_' (C, 79) would signify her transcendence from any gay community politics, like Geoffrey in Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, who is isolated from a homosexual community.

Rebellato's critique is of the kind that identifies any chauvinism in dramatic texts as signifying slyly homosexual references. Porter's diatribes against women have an alignment with homosexual expression. (DR, 219 - 221) *Catalyst's* chauvinistic viewpoints (see the last chapter) do not help its limited, though laudable, economy of homosexuality. Rebellato admits that the rise of even a secret coding of homosexuality in the theatre, in many ways exacerbated fears of it, but the coding's effectiveness in the context of the current controversy about censorship and cultural freedom, also 'effected a step forward for homosexual representation'. (DR, 223) The conditions for the emergence of homosexuality in *Catalyst* come at once from its refusal to categorise it and from the questioning of social convention. Even within the social confines of a marital situation, the conventional masculine metaphors do not engulf the play enough to nullify homosexuality as a possibility.

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Johnson, 'Apart from *Look Back In Anger*, What Else Was Worrying the Lord Chamberlain's Office in 1956?', *British Theatre in the 1950s*, ed. by Dominic Shellard (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 116-135. See Appendix, 'Transcripts of Lord Chamberlain's Memorandum', p. 133.

Abolition of censorship had been fruitlessly proposed in 1948, and then in 1963 the debate intensified, especially with reference to television production that was immune to censorship and less constrained. By 1966, along with many members of the Court's entourage, the Chamberlain's Office was openly accused of extremity and over-zealousness. This was especially after the 1965 performance of Bond's *Saved*, performed in a temporary club framework at the Court to evade the extensive cuts demanded by the censor. The event led the next year to summonses and a three-day hearing against the Court, accused of not being run as a genuine club because it also gave public performances. It was also thanks to the Arts Council's special committee and their recommendations, as well as Michael Foot's Private Member's Bill, that theatre censorship was abolished in the summer of 1968.

All the unrest of the '50s seemed intensified by the next decade. The new Labour government of 1964 faced wide-scale poverty as well as more confidence in ever accelerating technological progress. Youth culture became more radical, heady and optimistic, while its new freedoms were countered by the tense rhetoric of Powell's racism and Mary Whitehouse's censoriousness. By 1965, in a Letter to the Editor, and in a by now familiarly truculent tone, Duncan appears to be much of a conformist as Mrs. Whitehouse:

At the moment in the words of the late Cole Porter, 'anything goes' and the consequence is chaos and confusion in the jungle of novelty. The whole of the artistic world has been debauched by the hogwash of the do-it-yourself-vogue. The piffle of self expression needs replacing by the discipline of self-suppression. It makes for more durable art.<sup>9</sup>

We see the sudden eruption of his early principles of discipline now utilised against all other art. The views here extend the similarities of thought that he, Wilson and Holroyd shared. The eruption is despite the revived *Catalyst* as *Ménage À Trois* having been advertised in London as a 'sensation' and a 'banned' play, two years earlier. Duncan admits that such controversy was favourable for its market value:

But now I was confident that Fabers would go ahead since the play had received so much publicity because it had been banned. (O, 21)

Thus it remains difficult to place Duncan with any clarity into any one position within his culture, at any time. The discovery of anomalies such as the above, prevent this. The anomaly is mainly between his conservative attitudes and when, for example in 1967, we find him defending the rights of artists to supply material to pirate radio stations. In this case it is Radio Caroline for which he wrote a poem, prompting the headline: 'Defiant Poet Risks Jail for Caroline'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Duncan, letter to the editor, *Spectator* (5th March, 1965), np. RDF

<sup>10</sup> In the *Sunday Mirror* (3rd Sept., 1967), np. RDF

In 1969 when its director Jack Cardiff released the 'racy' film, *Girl on A Motorcycle*, despite his commission to write the script, Duncan fought hard to have his name removed from the credits. While he continued to experiment with strategies of erotic writing which had been sensational in the past he refused to accept the liberalisation of culture which rendered them clichéd or, inevitably, more banal.

Duncan had the ability to combine the desire to shock with techniques of sensationalism by using his own kind of artistic licence. I shall go on to show how one can classify him along with other playwrights of quality as resisting categorisation and as writing on the boundary of particular dramatic genres. There is a thread, taut to breaking point, strung between the textual worlds of inner turmoil and three-dimensional reality. It exists because Duncan's ironic, critical stance often required specific reference to the reality/illusion status of drama, language or art whilst sustaining elements of naturalism. There is also tension between the comic and tragic, traditional and experimental forms and it is this very amalgam that produces Duncan's individual style.

## *ii. Different Worlds*

During Duncan's middle years, the themes of his fictional work and plays continued to be centred upon what are inscribed as mortal sins (now incorporating sexual crime or betrayal) and their reinterpretation in a different light. Note Juan's conquests, *Catalyst's* polygamy and the urchin's prostitution. It is characteristic of his adventurousness as a writer that Duncan did not stick undeviatingly to one style or genre, for example, simple historical allegory. He was not afraid to use the modern world as a reference usually in order to break down a sense of tradition before, more often than not, another is established. For example, *Urchin* has O'Kelly return to the convent from the streets of London. *Seven* has the Angel and the Devil flit between Heaven, Hell and fourteen other scenes of contemporary 'worldly' life.

The conscious use of anachronism through time-travel and flashback, while enhancing Duncan's non-naturalistic techniques, also draws attention to the inconsistency of culture, its tradition and corruption, its permanent ideals and changing laws. The irony of Juan's anachronistic position focuses the comedy in the action of *Satan* and his questioning of the future induces an extended analysis of current thought. The characters are often caught up in their own presumptions:

ANTHONY: I thought romantic passion  
Was a thing of the past, (DS, 62)

and:

MARCIA: Today we don't believe in articulating  
All the emotions we may feel. (DS, 72)

The disjunction between Juan's archaic romantic speech and the other characters' behaviour produces many farcical and humorous moments of complete misunderstanding:

[Enter ANTHONY, carrying a wrap.]

Look he carries his shroud, poor ghost.

[JUAN approaches ANTHONY]

MARCIA: I see! You thought...

[She collapses across the tomb in silent, hysterical laughter]. (DS, 82)

As soon as the sequel is written (1953), Juan's incongruity with scenes of 20th-century social 'realism', is depicted through his juxtaposition to the modern society of the play. At the denouement of the first play, Ana's father's statue condemns Juan to a hell of eternally unrequited love, declaring: 'It is that love which is your hell'. (DS, 86) Juan then petrifies into stone. In *Satan* Juan is re-activated after the reprieve insinuated by the end of the last play. His Byronic excesses of speech and behaviour are still there but perceived now as inappropriate, especially by Lionel, to whom Juan protests: '[*throwing sword down angrily*] I don't understand. I/seduce your wife/And you merely offer me a gin and orange'. (DS, 47) He cannot exist as he is in modern society. He has to confront himself if he is to fit into the modern world and risk losing his purpose and identity: 'What evil can I do/If there's nothing to forbid?' (DS, 48)

In *Seven*, a critique of changing times is a conspicuous and recurrent part of the dialogue between characters:

CHRISTOPHER: We've been married a couple of years and in a way we've not even been introduced yet.

ANGEL: A typical modern couple. (7, 278)

MELANIE: People who say sex is all important are making a big mistake... .  
And d'you know what's more important than sex? It's guilt. It's guilt that keeps people together. (7, 279)

The idea of passing time is not laboured, but when used a shrewd vision of modern life is displayed through its clever juxtaposition with incongruous or mythic figures.

In *Urchin*, as with the Emperor's new clothes, the vision of the 'innocent' or alien visitor is made to expose and reveal ironies. The seer characters in *Satan* and *Seven* are able to measure the corruption of the humans they spy on. Their commentary is God-like, but the action proves their ineffectuality. The imaginary borders on taking over from the 'realistic' representation of how things are, in so far as it can critically distance itself from what it watches and thus select and distort. In a sense the voyeur or 'visitor' makes of the others or its environment, a spectacle: a performance that can be momentarily deconstructed. But it is difficult for the



omniscient or innocent to survive untainted by its environment. The visitor is at risk from corruption by the reality outside him/herself:

DON JUAN: Better to die with an illusion  
Than live with a reality one cannot face.  
Quick, quick, for pity's sake release me. (*DS*, 91)

O'Kelly is unique in her incorruptible nature and naiveté regarding the forces of moral welfare:

POLICEMAN:  
Jean, what are you going to do about your kids?  
O'KELLY:  
They're all right playing around. They're happy enough. (*U*, 40)

The policeman wants to take her children away, and can't understand her carefree nature which, along with her street-walking, the authorities in the play label permissive. *Seven's* Satan and Angel are also outsiders and have no credence in the modern world:

SATAN: Our code was a hopeless over-simplification. We ought to scrap it.  
ANGEL: I agree: we may as well close both of our places down. (7, 331)

There is a double level of satire here, of the modern set and the manners which the cosmic bodies appropriate, and also of the appropriators themselves for using its terminology and trying to understand its conventions. Duncan's use of satire is generally double-edged because of how it draws attention to its own use of melodramatic devices. His satire (of conventions or characters) often emerges as a type of parable. What happens in the narrative ultimately works to condemn piousness yet deplores absolute relativity. Usually towards the end Duncan ensures that a character summarises his own apocalyptic conclusions:

TREVOR: Modern man will go berserk in a centrally heated flat. This lightning is our doubt, but it does not illumine, it shows the darkness where we are. We are utterly alone. (*R*, 258)

Satan laments:

For by destroying  
Man's conscience I have taken away the only thing  
Which would make him suffer, as I have suffered. (*DS*, 103)

Note how 'man's' suffering is personalised by the speaker. Comically, Satan takes sole responsibility: suffering is revenge for his own lot. Now he is rendered useless by humanity's subjective consciousness that has banished him. But even as he blames himself, the fabular nature of his character transfers the emphasis onto 'everybody' else. Juan says 'They've freed themselves of the belief in God or you'. (*DS*, 103) Duncan is skilled in making this reasoning part of the point of his drama. The subject is exonerated from personal responsibility which is hidden behind their obligatory complicity in a state of affairs.

Elements of satire often tip over into the humour of farce. Satan's omniscience in Hell is made to look ridiculous:

SATAN: Catalion, you may return to Earth with Don Juan for one year.

CATALION: Thank you Sir. Will there be only four for dinner? (*DS*, 29)

Also, *Seven* anticipates Orton's work with Christopher's macabre suicide by electrocution. But despite many of Duncan's plays being comic and farcical they are not afraid to confront tragedy. As well as psychic dilemmas we see unfair systems, confusion of identity and random injustice contributing to the predicaments of the characters.

In Duncan's theatre, non-naturalistic scenes include devices such as ghosts and statues. The wildly escapist urges of characters like Charles (*Catalyst*) also contribute to the idea that realism bows to the ambiguous and aesthetic forces of Duncan's imagination. Satirical elements create an intellectual ambivalence which is generally reflective of Duncan's literary expression, itself in turn reflective of how the subject is chaotically constructed by his environment (and vice versa). *Catalyst*, as an example of this ambivalence, shows the level to which our 'private' sexuality contradicts our 'public' social life. However, despite the characters' indulgences in fantasy, their conflicts emphasise pessimism and failure more than resolution. Failure, whether it be personal or social, is judged in terms of communication breakdown, lack of spiritual resolution, stable meaning and categories. This breakdown suspends any alternatives (resolutions) within subjectivity but because of this suspension, the precise nature of failure itself is suspended. *Catalyst*, for example, revises the terms and appropriations of marital roles but the ménage à trois also binds with only a very slight shifting of roles. The *idea* of polygamy is what dominates rather than an unlimited free-love exchange of partners. Even by the end, the women are not nicely consolidated into the newly liberal triangular relationship. The third party is not even on stage. Their liberation/redefinition goes so far and no further. It is as if Duncan has disguised himself as an immoralist who wants to liberate culture through radical art; but because it is a disguise there are also paradoxically underlying or co-existent features such as a respect for the representational, traditional references and high art forms and language.

His ambivalence means that, ultimately, the divisions between convention and non-convention, captivity and liberation that we think Duncan wants to propose are in their turn shattered. An example of this appears in *Juan*. Though Juan becomes a harbinger of 'morality' by the intensity of his love and feelings, his role is plotted by his action: strategies of disguise, spying and pursuit, the aim to penetrate, gratify,

seduce and divert the threat of punishment. His insatiability is also a comic feature. His actions are comedic and he gains pathos. It directs the audience to give credence to his actions, in contrast to the 'insanity' of social rituals. As Lahr says:

There is a social truth behind farce's mechanics which connects the stage madness to the schizophrenic hysterias of contemporary life.<sup>11</sup>

We can see his behaviour either as amoral, libertine and penetrative: an unfitting code of conduct for which he is punished, or in terms of boundaries and conventions where his desire is transgressive and his predicament appeals to the audience's sympathy and own rebelliousness.

Duncan, by having Colin's character in *Seven* as an artist, is pushing the issue of the aesthetic realm being more 'real' than ordinary life as lived by these modern couples. When Colin suddenly behaves unrealistically by strangling Lavinia, Satan declares it necessary to speed up the action which would otherwise take years: 'Life is crueller than the theatre'. (7, 327) After seeing Christopher's suicide by electrocution, Satan accuses Angel of having her example of virtue too 'falsely melodramatic'. (R, 331) She replies, 'our patience would not permit naturalism'. (R, 331) Non-naturalistic representation in this drama is explicitly set up as necessary to the action, yet ironically it is treated as something that also needs to be spelt out to the audience.

A number of Duncan's plays present the co-existence of two worlds of meaning. In *Seven*, for example, the virtue of abstinence is officially applied to Christopher's refusal of jealousy and to his lack of appetite which is 'unforgivable'. (R, 308) Consequently his character is shown to be weak with meanness overlying it. Melanie reproaches him with 'No, you love yourself'. (R, 329) The stage action depicts jealousy and promiscuity as signs of passion and love. Satan's world presents 'positive vices' (R, 323), the 'unholy sacrament of marriage' and Satan who declares 'That's not charity that's indifference'. (R, 308) The exchange of definitions is set against the ironic device of swapping the destinations of heaven and hell and making them interchangeable. A play like *Seven* up-dates the aim of *Tomb*: to explore the roots of words and emotions proving what they signify in one context can easily change. There is incongruity between an action and its label, which makes language present a double truth. A word like 'virtue' can grow richer in meaning by stealing it from another, even its opposite, such as 'vice'. Ultimately, in real historic time or through dramatic action, as Duncan hopes to show, the original meaning is conquered through its absorption into others.

In this way, much of Duncan's writing signifies a desire for duality rather than unity. We see a confusion and multiplication of terms rather than their fixing. In

<sup>11</sup> John Lahr, *Astonish Me: Adventures in Contemporary Theater* (New York, Viking, 1973), p. 96.

*Catalyst*, Charles is both husband and wife; the women are both lesbian and heterosexual. As is clear, Duncan liked to have things both ways: having and eating all his cake. This produces equivocation as a property of the literature rather than a centralised authorial dominance. Similarly ironic is the way Duncan amplified his role as writer, and yet his work also addressed the idea of the difficulty of writing and communication.

### *iii. The Voice in Counterpoint*

Duncan's play-texts may appear to contain monologic, choric language because of his inclination towards poetic dramatisation. In fact he shows great skills in irony and counterpointed dialogue. His characters are ignorant or gain knowledge during the play but meanwhile both sides of a situation are presented to the audience by the double knowledge of the play-text itself. A double view of *Juan* is a substantial part of how the hero is characterised. Ana or Marcia, with whom he has the most interaction, is usually the one to point out his inconsistencies:

MARCIA: You're all extremes. Obviously romantic  
And quite obviously immature... .

DON JUAN: That can't be though lack of years.

MARCIA: And naive too. First you're surprised that I didn't kill my husband  
Because you want me;  
Then you are shocked because I say I might divorce him  
because I want you. (*DS*, 87)

The actors' speech exchanges are composed with semantic coherence, presenting reasonable disagreement and fostering empathy with those standing in the way of the hero's progress. Even within the fantasy narrative surrounding Juan's exploits, Duncan's writing shifts in dramatic emphasis from Juan's gratification 'into (in Freud's words) the field of the contrary meaning'. (*SF*, 1979, 94) Shifting meanings relate to ideas of dispersed authority and dialogic exchange in drama: a form where the ethos of individual author-function takes second place to a less specific acceptance of the more democratic popular tradition of the stage.<sup>12</sup> A playwright like Pinter would come nearer than most to representing incompleteness and unevenness of extra-dramatic spoken encounters. Duncan's stage narratives are less spontaneous

<sup>12</sup> 'Dialogic' is used with reference to Bakhtin's view of the socially subversive and interactive exchange of language most aptly embodied by mediaeval parody. Parody's chaotic multi-levelled bilinguality is opposed to dominant, official language forms to which poetry draws close, as it operates in a closed system whose context emphasises its 'unity and hermetic quality'. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Texas, University of Texas, 1981), p. 297. Within an individual utterance, dialogism is created by its inner tension and contestation of other internal voices and dialects. Its opposite, 'monologism' occurs, for example, when a speaker is imprisoned within one set of understandings and is linguistically deaf to the other's response.

because imposed by rules of narrative such as an historical plot, reconstructed in recall, or by situations where characters have time to consider their utterances.

Much of Don Juan's action is slowed down by the requirements of diegesis. Act I, scene 2 and Act III, scene 2 of *Juan* are the only scenes that do not involve expansive argument, with instead many references to immediate action upon the stage. In most other of his plays, Duncan constructs rather static scenes in undramatic locations like drawing rooms, hotel foyers and bedrooms. The double cell location of *Abelard* used throughout the performance is the most extreme example of stasis of set, interaction and movement. Because of this stasis, plays such as *Catalyst*, *Abelard and Heloise*, and *Rehearsal* tend to prioritise words over action. But even so, the word as language has surprisingly more of an active, dialogic function than we might expect from Duncan. There is an impression of activity, which overcomes authoritative and heavily descriptive language with its potential to over-determine all meaning.

In *Catalyst* the dialogic dynamic dominates. One utterance provokes or generates another and carries the action of the play by its force:

THERESE: Why don't you go and see Leone?

CHARLES: [*Not committing himself, hiding his excitement*]: What good would that do?

THERESE: Aren't you worried about her?

CHARLES: Yes of course, but...

THERESE: She might easily do something silly. You know  
How emotional she was.

I don't want a ghost on my hands  
Haven't you any feeling of responsibility?

CHARLES: It's that which I'm trying to avoid.  
But what good would it do? There's no point in starting  
What I cannot finish. A little late to realise that I know... . (C, 57)

In this excerpt from Act II, the power relations have shifted with Therese (after her anger and running from the room in Act I) having to persuade Charles to reconnect with Leone. Charles is hesitant in the face of Therese's common-sense proposal and her appeal to feelings that are obviously inappropriate to the real situation of his attraction to Leone, such as responsibility and pity. Though trying to establish equilibrium, Therese is still assuming Charles's guilt and thoughtlessness. Most of what is said is based on provocation. As a result Charles begins to question and analyse his own motives. The generation of speech here depends on the characters looking inwards rather than referring to outside action which generates a more reflective discourse.

In other scenes, interaction develops through a more obvious series of conflicting moves:

THERESE: Even your affections are shop-soiled, aren't they? I despise  
You for that.

CHARLES: I mean I'm not in love with her.

THERESE: Who said you were?

CHARLES: I was merely anticipating your question.

THERESE: Were you? 'I simply find her most attractive'.

CHARLES: What?

THERESE: I was merely anticipating the answer you'd have given  
If I'd asked that question.

[A long pause.]

Have you? I said: have you?

CHARLES: Yes.

THERESE: When?

CHARLES: Does it matter?

THERESE: Where, I said: Where? (C, 33)

The moves are defensive on Charles's part. He is avoiding Therese's short, repetitive commands which demand explicit information. Therese's 'I was merely' is an ironic imitation of Charles's refined mode of speaking which mocks the effectiveness of his eloquence. The dialogue grows in urgency, their personal opposition consolidated by impatience and by Therese's disputing the purity of Charles's meanings ('shop-soiled'). This type of dialogue is an example of the constant shifting of pace and power relations and enlivens the play. Therese's speech breaks Charles's code of self-justificatory speech (as does Leone) with her own competence which renders Charles's position unstable.

In *Abelard*, language is foregrounded against the single set and simple action. Here the dialogue emphasises spoken action: the actors' bodies are secondary. The emotive tone used carries most of the dramatic meaning:

ABELARD: Oh if only I had been more charitable to myself,  
merciful to myself,  
I might have some pittance left for you  
but now leave me to myself  
and do not ask me to love you;  
That is what I am trying not to do. (AH, 43)

Heloise draws Abelard as proud, cold and cruel and though by letter, he is in external dialogue with her, he is also going through an internal dialogue with himself which is doubtful and torn. Their long philosophical, soul-searching speeches are fraught with circumlocution: through reasoning, digression and threats to end communication, confession and private recollection. This requires a corresponding range of different expressions and tones appropriate to each discourse to enrich what is said. Abelard tries to regulate his own voice and find an identity through the authority of the church. He tells Heloise, 'No. Leave me to search for the gratuity of Him in me'

(AH, 42) and 'Would you thrust your holy habit between God and me'. (AH, 43) It is a discourse encoded by denial but this code is broken by him imagining temptation, with the sexual undertones of 'thrust'. His discourse is counterpointed from within.

The counterpointing is also an effect of the epistolary mode which produces a double voice: an address to self as he/she reads and to the addressee. Below, Heloise challenges Abelard's words, quotes them, brings a sense of irony to the language. Here the playwright draws attention through the characters themselves to the disparity between intention and meanings:

You say 'I will write no more: I know no more'.  
As I read those words the paper fell from my hand.  
Did you mean: you will write no more of your letter?  
Or, what I fear, that you will never write again?  
  
If only you had written: 'I will write no more now',  
Then that word 'now' would have been hallowed. (AH, 36)

This expresses the difficulty of transmission and interpretation of words. It also questions Abelard's authority. Lines like these demonstrate how easily misunderstanding occurs but also the importance of continuing dialogue. Ambiguity does not risk multiplicity nor meaninglessness overall. Instead there is the presentation of language/meaning dramatised into a social context. In a social encounter, meanings are always evolving and open to change. Here we are presented with how Heloise receives meanings. She reads the alternative.

As was the institution of marriage for Duncan, the dialogue he wrote, even in a historically based play like *Abelard*, is often used to show how language becomes adulterated and its meanings corrupted. The characters are caught between two discourses: the religious and romantic. This gives a contemporary feel by jerking us out of a merely sentimental poetic exchange into one that includes conflict, cynicism and a vernacular style. As with propriety, which he abhorred, language was a powerful tool in Duncan's hands and could be similarly transgressed or indeed transgressive of propriety in itself.

#### *iv. Releasing the Female*

Duncan was able to continue and sustain deep attachments with women and was never without their affection. However, the points made in the last chapter indicate that he was never enlightened about true equality. But bearing in mind that he wrote from a standpoint and literary preference grounded among modernist writers, it is in his favour that his works for their time, can be placed at a more estimable position than anticipated along a scale of conservative to liberal modes of thought regarding gender in the '50s and '60s.

Duncan's own remarkable success with women carried over to the themes of work that, from *Juan* on, centred round the traditional philanderer or seducer figure with whom he obviously identified. On average, Duncan wrote or adapted a work about infidelity every two years for a decade. In this section I shall explore how the style of Duncan's writing at points uses techniques that subvert his intentional omniscience and tendency to chauvinism. It will not entail a full psychoanalytical reading of his writing about women, but rather an account of how femininity shifts in the text and between texts. It is possibly this element which invited the following comment on *Satan*:

Keith Mitchell swaggers romantically and boldly through the loquacious part of Don Juan, while Rosalie Crutchley and Rachel Kempson symbolise the feminine world which in the end overwhelms and silences him.<sup>13</sup>

The performance Shulman saw obviously foregrounded the female characters' assurance in relation to Juan's bewilderment. Heloise's reaction to having received no letter is forthright and emotionally convincing:

HELOISE: For three weeks I have waited--  
The first week is all anticipation  
believing each day was more certain  
To bring me your letter  
  
The second week bruised me  
Since I'd heard that you were well  
and realised your silence is deliberate, (AH, 53)

and later:

I am glad that you have not written to me;  
But the truth is: I am no longer in love with you.  
I read that line  
and a part of me cannot believe that I have written it  
But I did write it. (AH, 70-1)

While her thoughts are previously written and thus considered at the same time, the device of having her speak and read her own letters to Abelard, adds urgency to the tone of address. Comments about her own writing and reading – 'I read that line' – interweave with what the audience assume to be already written and transform the simple epistolary discourse into something more complex. There is both confluence and disparity between the verbal and literal assertions. The ritual of their exchange is built up and, within this, Heloise is still enthusiastic, direct and has strong dramatic presence.

By his comment, 'A year later, when writing *Abelard and Heloise* for you', (O, 79) Duncan admits the play's application to Maskell. The published edition of *Abelard* is dedicated to her and she acted Heloise in the play's first run at the Arts in November, 1960. This was the year when she and Duncan set up the short-lived

<sup>13</sup> Review by Milton Shulman, *Evening Standard* (16th May, 1956), np. RDF



Green Cross Society and Maskell visited a nursing home, probably due to stress, in March. Duncan and Rose-Marie were also reconciled into co-habiting again in Devon that summer though his affair with Maskell continued. It was a great strain on all concerned. Apparently they all visited the same psychiatrist in that period, 'We all became very dependent on Rawle'. (O, 137) It may be a sign of Duncan's personal feelings of self-defence and tension that despite the fact that he was serialising the Sillitoe novel that autumn he also began to make concerted public attacks on ESC policies. His motives for undertaking the *Saturday Night*... serialisation may have been economic necessity (travel, divorce lawyers, his children), but one should not discount a willingness to demonstrate literary understanding of this type of work while not committing to its working-class ethos. Conversely, historical plays were a genre which the new wave of dramatists were not afraid to add to their repertoire, for example Osborne's *Luther*.

It is not likely that *Abelard* was written as direct reaction against modern theatre. Duncan was a man of multiple influences and inspirations, with his sources as likely to be from dreams and newborn piglets as from a 1920s film or a suggestion from a friend. The choice of this play, amongst many other complex factors, was likely to have emerged from the natural counteraction of styles he was able to move between. Nevertheless it is probable that his choice of subject was largely based on the contingencies of his own situation at that time. It was a star-crossed lovers' story that had many features applicable to his own personal life.

Duncan discussed Heloise's character with Maskell as he had Dona Ana with Anna Proclemer. He wrote:

Tuesday: Heloise should be: vanity, impatience intellectual arrogance too, withdrawn, imperious... she refused to marry him... she wanted the rest of Paris to see she could hold him without reins as it were... . She had your passionate tenderness.<sup>14</sup>

In one letter, Heloise remembers her 'extreme unwillingness to marry' (AH, 39) Abelard because she found their affair 'more free'. (AH, 38) Unwillingness is also a motif re-produced in the play from what Duncan knows of the original letters. In the letter to Maskell, Duncan applies the motif by association, to her. The association implies that he conflates the fictional woman with his mistress. It is as if his perception of his own life had to be constantly adapted to fit in or blend with his artistic creation. In turn, his fictional characters are often adapted from how he has structured or believes his own experience to be. This is not all fantasy, but also incorporates sharp observation, convincing dialogue and personal response to, for example, unrequited love in his literature.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan to Maskell ('Tuesday'). FL

Heloise and Dona Ana refuse fulfilment yet are still shown to have desire:

DONA ANA: May this remoteness veil my immodesty  
For I will tell you how I love:

For I love you as a woman, and the mouth of that river  
Is the lips of this woman.

*[She kisses him, then stands and moves away.]*

DON JUAN: Ana, come with me.

DONA ANA: No... . (DJ, 50-51)

She also sees through Don Juan's machismo:

Everything you said or did was calculated,  
Calculated to seduce me, (DJ, 62)

thus establishing her disapproval of his calculating behaviour. Confined in her nun's garb, Heloise's desire and sexuality are, nevertheless, undisguised:

And this last week I have spent  
In a fantasy since the fact was too painful to bear. (AH, 53)

Do not forget that though the butcher  
Helped you, he did not help me.  
I am still a woman: your woman. (AH, 67)

Neither woman is a frustrated victim, dominated by her infatuation. Instead, in the end and in the face of the men's procrastination and self-dramatisations, they show insight towards their own and the men's feelings in statements which are discomfiting and deflating to the men. Female self-awareness becomes a form of defiance. Heloise declares: 'I suspect that you ask me to be constant/to my devotions, and not to you,/only because you feel guilty' (45) and that 'I feel no shame'. (AH, 66) One of Ana's last statements to Juan is 'But what you have done/No woman can forgive. You have made me ridiculous'. (DJ, 62)

Having an author, artist or poet as the main character in many of Duncan's texts, tempts a direct parallel of hero with author. However Duncan's treatment of the common theme of betrayal includes accusations and complaints about the heroes. Therese often draws attention to the fatuity of Charles's statements and to the effect they have:

THERESE (to Charles) That's the cruellest thing you've ever said. (C, 32)

Ah! You're speaking for your entire sex. (C, 35)

And you call yourself a man! (C, 54)

Her challenges throw the man's constant self-justifications into doubt and emphasises problem areas for the audience. In *Rehearsal*, the rectitude of the position of the male (and desirability of the role of wife) is a point of dispute by the women:

PATRICIA: But Trevor is different. He's not like your father, he's a man: he knows what he wants and he'll get it.

THEONA: Two thousand pounds a year, eighteen horsepower car, one life assurance, two brats and a villa in Bromley. Oh I forgot; he'll need a wife, one wife.

PATRICIA: And don't you want to be that woman?

THEONA: Not particularly. (R, 233)

Heloise is a strong, independent character created from a historical narrative of letters but in Duncan's play, she speaks for herself as well as to Abelard and from her letters to him. She explains that she 'despised the name of wife' (AH, 40) preferring to be 'more free' (AH, 40) in their relationship. She also states in her letter to Abelard, using the word with different meanings: 'You must call me wife, I am: your wife'. (AH, 30) She both excludes herself from and commands for herself the marital role. In his *Promus* diary, Duncan in hindsight, refers to his disquiet about Maskell at one of their last meetings and his feeling of responsibility for her loss of weight, 'I allowed the fact that she had another husband to stand in my way--'.<sup>15</sup> His unspoken protest is, nevertheless, manifested through the ability to subject or adapt himself to a duality where singularity is the convention.

By the mid-'60s, Duncan appeared less liberated. Despite the fact that his subject matter was topical and diverse, there are images in the story *A Kettle of Fish* of naked, stabled women which establishes rather desperately traditional patriarchal power relations especially from statements about women such as, 'But being a woman, she was patient, knowing that it doesn't matter at all what a man says, it's what he does that is important'. (KF, 44) Duncan's adventurousness was probably worn out by the lack of rewards his own limited emancipation (through adultery) had brought.

From a twenty-first-century position, the sexual content of Duncan's work can be viewed overall as chauvinist and voyeuristic. *Catalyst* and *Satan* are, amongst other things, endorsements of a kind of polygamy and promiscuity that comes to subjugate and victimise women. Along with Lane and Heuter, Reid also accuses Duncan of misogyny, here with reference to 'A Kettle of Fish':

It is astounding that sometimes Duncan can be so sympathetic towards women, then write as a woman hater; but it is proof that he's right when he says that he contains many persons. (AV, 183)

The discovery of chauvinism alongside other texts that mitigate male dominance is typical of Duncan's work. Such contrast circumvents attempts to classify his politics and morality. It is probable that he wrote antithetically to strike a balance between the irreconcilable parts of his thinking. He alternately takes the side of one view or character then abruptly shifts to the other. Culturally, pronounced shifts in attitudes

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Duncan, *Promus* [Diary 1] 1964-1968 (7th Feb., 1968), np. RDE. Hereafter referred to as *P* in the text.

towards sexuality took place in the mid-'50s. Lewis states that phenomena such as Kinsey's Report, Hefner's *Playboy* empire and James Bond films amongst others, produced ambivalent images of femininity that had an effect on social life:

Women felt they were being asked to fulfil two contradictory roles, that of the homemaker and the seductress simultaneously... . Monroe and Bardot could hardly be held up as examples of the joys of fidelity, domesticity and motherhood which were being hymned in the magazines.<sup>16</sup>

The lessening of taboos towards eroticism in cinema was exemplified by the huge box-office success of *And God Created Woman* (1956), starring Brigitte Bardot. But the uncertainties and tensions provoked by wider circulation of the erotic was signalled in Duncan's and others' work of that decade. Through the treatment of women therein, one can see the mutual but uneasy conjoining of contrary ideas: the liberation of the modern woman, the liberal behaviour of the sex-kitten and the woman figured within the convention of wifely domesticity.

Even though there is no abatement of underlying sexism towards the female gender, it is an exception for the male characters to be exempt from reprimand. Straining against the conventionally chauvinist portraits of women are attributes which work to defy their categorisation. This is because Duncan is continually reworking and adapting his own opinions, so they are hard to summarise precisely. What is apparent is that moments of doubt and equivocation are conspicuous in many texts. Equivocation is evidence of something being a problem for Duncan and is aptly illustrated by the pencil incident in the *Catalyst*: Leone has given it to Charles and the beginning of Act II finds him '[down a psychological rabbit-hole... . THERESE... watches him as he meticulously sharpens his pencil]'. (C, 50) Her references to this activity, 'Why do you do it? I said: why do you do it?' (C, 50) echoes her 'Whys' and 'Where? I said: Where?' of the first act, when she is interrogating his adulterous activity. Her irritation signifies she takes his handling of the pencil personally, 'And if you go on pressing me like this I shall break'. (C, 51) But when he uses the pen she has given him, he breaks the nib.

The writing implement, a tool of creativity and identity, transforms itself through simile into a polyvalent symbol. The pencil symbolises fragile femininity (Therese's) or masculine potency (sublimated activity of adulterous intercourse with the giver: Leone). When the pen is broken it signifies Therese's patience being pressed, as in the breaking of her psyche – '[He makes a violent gesture with the pen]' (C, 51) – by his forcefulness. The pencil signifies as both masculine and feminine and is as flexible as the mind that perpetrates a fantasy scene. This mind, Freud says, 'tries to have the feelings both of the man and the woman'. (SF, 1979, 94) Even by indulgence

<sup>16</sup> Peter Lewis, *The Fifties* (London, Heinemann, 1978), p. 62.

in imaginative creation, Duncan's own perspective embodied alternating views on male and female power. Such scenes at once affirm and deny revolutionary change but in doing so still confront issues of gender. Another example of his fluctuating perspective is how 'love' in most of the action of the *Catalyst* is stripped down to its raw function. For Charles, at least, it exists only for self-satisfaction:

I took you as naturally as I might take  
A handful of cherries.  
... In doing that I was being responsible to myself. (C, 46)  
I am very fond of you Leone. (C, 48)

Charles's belief in the unconventional acts as cover for his indecision:

LEONE: You could come with me.  
CHARLES: That would be too conventional. (C, 46)

But Leone calls attention to the hollowness and hypocrisy of his manner of reasoning. She asks 'Did you make all this up then put it into practice?/Or did you find a philosophy to fit your feelings?' (C, 71) This question is posed time and time again and reveals more than one possible ethical position flourishing in Duncan's work. In fact a counter-view to the whole of Juan's ethos is propounded as Marcia challenges his behaviour:

MARCIA: Why ask me, you seem to have all the answers,  
Though yours sound like an apologia for promiscuity. (C, 70)

Her challenging manner presents a female character who is antithetical to other supposedly strong women characters who are idealised. O'Kelly, the urchin, makes a false confession of infidelity to Sid to after hearing of his own affair. When Rufus asks why, she replies:

I loved him. As you know I was faithful  
I loved him enough to pretend to be unfaithful. (U, 31)

Another female character, Lavinia, is unfaithful out of her wish to help her husband financially. Colin is selfish for believing she has 'betrayed everything I loved'. (7, 326) The all-knowing Webb character tells him 'She gave you back everything you ever had'. (7, 327) But, if the man cannot win, then neither is the woman allowed to.

Female imperfection is presented as playing a major part in male infidelity but the sexual nature of woman is also presented as liberating in a play like *Catalyst* by its images of undoing, bursting out and loosening. Therese's hair is up in the last act but in anticipation of Leone's return, '[Now in front of the mirror she takes it down]'. She also '[systematically untidies the desk]', and on arrival, Leone is '[wearing a loose skirt]'. (C, 59) She is also wearing the belt seen at the end of act one when '[She sees Therese's belt and crossing quickly puts it in her bag]'. (C, 49) Later, she unties the

string of a box which contains a dress which she *changes* into for Therese's benefit, '[Leone takes her belt off]'. (C, 72) The hair and the belt all supposedly denote a disentangling of confinements. However, rather than denoting guilt and crime, the confiscation and undoing of the belt signifies a dissolution of enslavement, and transformation into a state of un-dress, costume and flirtation (courtship). We see Leone's urge to uncover herself, '[Once it is on, her embarrassed, frightened mood changes]' (C, 73) as the naked truth is nearly revealed.

There are other points where Duncan constructs woman as irrational or elusive. It is when she is a ghost that Ana's words betray the risk of succumbing to passion, when she pleads:

I loved a man more than I loved God  
Pity me, release me.

[*She disappears. He is left with a handful of dust*]. (D), 71)

She slips from his grasp. Duncan formulates a similar idea of elusiveness around Maskell in one poem. Firstly he makes her unique by naming her which is unusual for him:

Who is she? Her name is Virginia  
But that is not who she is: She is woman  
Anonymous in sleep. (Sol. 13, 59)

Her definition – her being – incorporates the 'essence' of what it 'is' to be 'woman' though Duncan cannot name it. Despite conflating her with essence, she is divided up by his language and given different meanings. She both is and is not Maskell and woman. The speaker's gaze is satisfied and assured by her passivity in sleep, but by being two things simultaneously, she is also pluralised. By closing her eyes she cannot reflect him in herself and is not part of him but bypasses his scrutiny. In Juan's case, he does not repent and loses Ana's presence. Her dissolution (to dust) implies the failure of his omnipotence. However her fate – to go beyond him – is also dependent upon him. *Juan* does not offer straightforward solutions to the questions it raises about male and female sexuality, promiscuity, liberation and repression. What happens to the characters is rather a manifestation of the struggle between solutions and a critique of simple gender-behaviour oppositions.

Though woman may be elusive, her identity is not necessarily dissolved. At times she is liberated by role reversal. In *Catalyst*, for example, Therese brandishes the leather belt after Leone has deliberately angered her. Leone admits she 'enjoyed it' while Charles is mortified and says 'I detest scenes'. (C, 45) Here, the duality of gender roles is acknowledged and endowed with descriptive and narrative value.

It is evident that women exist at the limits of knowledge whenever there are points of confusion between non-possessiveness and whether jealousy is a positive or negative attribute. It seems inconsistent that Evelyn is criticised for her idea that

sexual gratification should be fulfilled and that 'restraint's unnatural'. (DS, 49) Her lack of emotion towards Juan is, he thinks, 'obscene' (DS, 49) and betrays merely a 'desire which is sad'. (DS, 53) However Charles, because he loves above self-gratification, encourages tolerance in *Catalyst* saying 'Why should love be exclusive?' (C, 38) whereas it is again condemned in *Seven* as Melanie leaves, abandoning Christopher, 'Because you love your forgiveness more than you love me'. (7, 315)

The premise drawn from these examples is that infidelity should be encouraged if it involves intensity of emotion rather than indifference. However, what overrides this idea is that a woman must tolerate whatever a man gets up to, but if a man tolerates, he is weak. The plays argue that it is important in a relationship to correctly interpret events. At the same time, judgement and definitions of emotion are easily interchanged and apparently misconstrued but the ensuing confusion helps to complicate the existing, too simple, moral code. Christopher and Lionel are too tolerant and their passivity hinders a true expression of sexuality. Christopher is doomed as he unselfishly martyrs himself to expose his own merit while Lavinia's 'selflessness' is a virtue. The urchin, Lavinia, Leah in *Judas* and Mary in the unpublished television play, *Preface to America* (1959), all give love to men out of pity and so earn God's forgiveness for their prostitution. O'Kelly (*Urchin*) sees sex as a gift. This makes the woman charitable rather than the man promiscuous. Again, sex justifies Duncan's view of virtue and prevents it from becoming priggish and pious. The women give generously without asking anything in exchange, but generosity is imposed on to the practice of prostitution (vice) in order to define it as a virtue.

*Urchin* is a piece which actively (through word as performance,) demonstrates Duncan's skill at presenting paradoxes: a 'virtuous' act can accommodate sexuality. Cancelling out misbehaviour or immorality ultimately excuses male desire. At the same time, women's moral purity is harboured within female vice. Underlying these paradoxes is scepticism about the truth of appearances. The notion of chastity is a symbol of the failure of sexual repression, as the Abbess in *Juan* suggests, commenting 'Nuns can be wanton in their thoughts'. (DJ, 43) As opposed to the simpler mistress-role, the activity of prostitution is made to invoke both awe and guilt. In an interview Duncan said 'I have always been very fond of the female urchin girl who may or may not be a prostitute. I'm not quite sure I can explain this concern'. He only suggests it derives from an early memory but 'always moves me in some way'.<sup>17</sup> The imposition of a dual perception at this point betrays Duncan's contradictory sentiments. He constructs images of wantonness and chastity, both as modes of sensuality.

<sup>17</sup> Wahl, op. cit., No. 20, 1973, p. 167.

Female sexuality is structured through male desire which is intellectualised so his desire is justifiable but intellectualisation gives the woman the chance to argue back. Sexual conquest is intensified and also problematised by female figures who withhold sex. Their self-restraint is seen as commendable. Juan's eventual restraint over his attempted violation of Ana is what makes him virtuous in the conventional sense. 'You know I never touched you' (*DJ*, 62) he protests, but Ana is offended by his intention, 'still you intended' (*DJ*, 62) and attests 'What difference does it make?' (*DJ*, 62) Juan, intellectualising his action, says he cheapened her to dispel his own love. But this irritates Ana who declares 'Oh, what can I believe?' (*DJ*, 62) Because of his initial intentions she has no qualms in pointing out how he has vulgarised her by making her seduction the object of a 'vulgar bet'. Her reactions signify independence and self-assertion.

*Juan* is a play containing opposing viewpoints about the sensuality of women. The Abbess, who plays a choral part, comments that 'Nuns can be wanton/In their thoughts, whores more chaste when they give them-/selves/Not from passion but out of pity'. (*DJ*, 43) Don Luis and Don Juan perceive women as undiscerning and irrational. Their collective biology cancels out autonomy:

DON JUAN: And don't you remember we agreed  
To disregard a woman's claim to have been seduced  
Since they're quite unable to distinguish  
between their own inclinations and our achievements. (*DJ*, 21)

But the same gender grouping determines Ana's opposing uniqueness. She is the character with whom Juan is really in love, 'not with all women but with one woman' which is his secret and his 'handicap'. (*DJ*, 26) This handicap could potentially ruin his reputation as a 'voluptuary'. Ana, unlike the urchin, is chaste. Like Heloise, she both admits and tries to deny her love saying, 'I love you as a river loves the sea', (*DJ*, 50) and 'our sin is to need only each other,/Our punishment will be to be parted'. (*DJ*, 59)

The overlap between chastity and desire, the one disguising the other, means words and action no longer directly impart conventional meanings. What the performers say is given primacy over action until a gesture betrays the words as in *Abelard*. Duncan exploits the indeterminacy of communication to generate different possible meanings and reflect the notion of how spurious our claims to truth can be. The overall moral of *Abelard* finds its dramatic expression only in the hand-stretching gesture which freezes while Abelard '*still reaches*'. (*AH*, 79) The words disclose mutual abnegation, the gesture their desire, but its freezing still denotes non-consummation. Heloise is still unreachable by her own decision. It is possible that Duncan was more sympathetic to the woman than at first seems likely, by virtue of



moments in the text that reveal the disputable nature of the female role and confront its contradictions. Tynan supports this view with reference to *Catalyst*:

But feminine chauvinism soon bites back. The women discover that what keeps them at the hero's side is in fact a mutual lesbian attraction. Henceforth they can use his own logic as a weapon against him.<sup>18</sup>

Sinfield attributes the dynamics of particular post-war cultural and ideological forces to the fact that 'There was a persistent anxiety that husbands were no longer 'real' men'.<sup>19</sup> Charles is presented as non-committed, which is part of the cause of suffering within his marriage. The end of Act II pulls him out of his manipulative role. His assurance collapses and self-reproach turns to bewilderment with statements such as 'What do you want me to do?' (C, 79); 'I see I haven't got a leg to stand on' and 'I'm damned if I know'. (C, 80) Other of Duncan's male heroes are ill-assured of their masculinity. The fact that Abelard has been castrated and now speaks, immobilised on the stage, complicates the idea of the couple representing a 'great' love. Heloise, speaking from her convent as a nun, desexualised by her robes and her age but her words powerfully evoke the difficulty of measurement and the peripheral nature of their sexuality:

HELOISE: I love you: I am glad of your disability  
My uncle (I, too, doubt that claim)  
thought that I would cease to love  
Somebody who could not satisfy desire. (AH, 39)

Abelard sees himself as nothing without his manhood:

Now not only my manhood's gone, but the spirit's spent  
Which once distinguished me.  
Stuck in this posture, am I the man  
To guide you? (AH, 42)

He acknowledges that his identity has been compromised:

The truth is I urged you to take the veil  
only because they had destroyed my manhood, (AH, 60)  
But because I feared  
That one day you might become a bride of man  
Whereas I was only part man. (AH, 60)

Heloise defeats him with her logic although she is not asexual herself, saying, 'Though the butcher/helped you he did not help me./I am still a woman: your woman'. (AH, 67) Thus her sexuality is not eclipsed by conventional masculine acts of desire. She also argues for a sexless, transcending love that will survive the fact of his castration. The familiar refrain of woman being mother to man, the child, is apparent within this transcendence, 'When a man cries to a woman,/Be he father,

<sup>18</sup> Tynan, op. cit., 1963.

<sup>19</sup> Sinfield, op. cit., 1989, p. 208.

brother or lover,/he becomes her child'. (AH, 28) 'They call me mother,/I am:--your mother' (AH, 30) says Heloise. At the same time, the maternal sexless position that their love aspires to is one which has been forced upon them, indicating a confusion and anxiety about what gender relations embody.

Heloise's reluctance to sacrifice her God for Abelard at the end of the play brings the doomed tragedy of their love down to the real contradictions of human emotion. The stage directions after the scene where Heloise ends her letter, 'I no longer need you', are that '[...*It is a conscious sacrifice, a gift of love to him*]'. (AH, 76) One senses the difficulty Duncan had with attempting to depict her words as insincere. If she did not feel the letter's sentiments, she would truly love Abelard and it would not be a sacrifice. Also if this sacrifice is love for him, Abelard has no way of knowing, as we assume she has not yet sent the letter and her own, reaching hand is only visible to the audience. By this point, Abelard realises love must be possessive, 'I felt such hatred for him/who had stolen you from me'. (AH, 78) He examines his own feelings of jealousy for the 'other' man, Jesus, and confesses, 'It is not easy to recognise that we are/what we've despised: In those moments I realised my essential dishonesty' (AH, 78) and 'I used to say that 'Love should not be possessive'. (AH, 79)

Here Abelard retracts his earlier opinions implying a renewed directness and humility. His character is rendered vulnerable in a moment of honesty and stripping of self-deception. Because Duncan's writing has parallels with his personal experience his character's self-criticism is given more weight. *Abelard* was dedicated to Maskell and completed in 1960. In 1959, one of her ultimatums led to a feverish bout of letter-writing on Duncan's part. In *Obsessed* he quotes his own letter and laments 'But no letter came from you'. (O, 105) This echoes Heloise's pessimism in the play, 'How cruel you are/Not to have written./For three weeks I have waited--'. (AH, 53) One should assign some significance to the extensive exchange of letters between Maskell and Duncan. The records show 155 from Duncan to Maskell and 193 from her to him, written from July 1958 to 1961. In the archive there are 88 letters specifically between 1958 and into 1960, to Maskell from Duncan, with 41 undated. There are eighteen letters written specifically between 1958 and 1960 from Maskell and 99 undated.

When apart, their continued affair prompted epistles containing outpourings of feeling, mutual heartbreak, endearments and reassurances. Some parts are echoed in the dramatic correspondence. Duncan writes to Maskell, 'Yes, I believe in God too. You create Him for me - Let love be our dogma and joy our prayer'.<sup>20</sup> Heloise declares 'I will make love my God'. (AH, 48) Duncan's own vulnerability is bound

<sup>20</sup> Duncan to Maskell (16th July, 1958). *FL*

to have fed the moments of less intellectualised and more direct emotion, expressed by both male and female characters in the literature.

The man's arguments are constructively and comically contradicted by the woman especially in the drama, denoting its achievement of dialogic tension. Meanwhile, the man (modern, urban and ineffectual like Charles, or crushed and segregated like Abelard) is unbalanced by her discernment. The discovery of emasculation in some male characters disturbs the way that women appear inevitably located within overly masculine representation in Duncan's writing. His intellectual critical voice is entwined with one that desires the physical and material realms. This desire is re-channelled into need and redefinition of the shifting shape of women in the text.

It is significant that cultural analysis of the '50s especially evinces a plethora of muddled and repudiated gender politics. Duncan's own muddled views corresponded with cultural dynamics of that era but his comments on *Catalyst*, expressed in an interview in the early '70s, show that his views had not clarified with progressive social paradigms. He says 'I may be very wrong about this, but I don't think a woman is basically as polygamous as a man' and then:

To my mind, you see, lesbianism, that is to say the need of one woman for another woman, is in no way dirty.

This shows the crudity of our consciousness and the way we have punished and frustrated a vast number of women – preposterously. With such crudity and cruelty that it's beyond... .

The man who is totally masculine would be an insane bull.

And those fools who pretend that they're all masculine and she is all feminine are bugging it up.<sup>21</sup>

While the first idea denotes biological sex as determining behaviour, the other statements imply that gender roles of feminine and masculine are, at the same time, unfixed. His remarks show that he questions over-adherence to socially constructed sexual roles.

A questioning as well as uncertainty towards sexuality is echoed in the way that Duncan's dramatic characters, Juan for example, want to act like super-heroes while the playtext frequently puts them at risk of castration and ridicule symbolically and textually. Sexuality in *Abelard* and *Catalyst* has all the hallmarks of unrealistic fantasy because of its escapist and masochistic aspects, but the ideas of vitality and passion proposed therein are less simple than that. The ideas are constructed though the differently gendered selves of characters (i.e. Heloise as assertive and sacrificial) who are each experiencing need, insecurity, betrayal and desire. These differences are what thwarts totality or completion of Duncan's ideal of all-redeeming (old fashioned and sexist) love.

<sup>21</sup> Wahl, op. cit., No. 20, 1973, pp. 123 - 125.

## *v. The Subject: Desire and Division*

In the previous chapter Duncan's work was discussed in terms of its subjects being constructed through the fulfilment and renewal of male desire. Desire structures the narratives and its dynamics take place through a pattern of seduction and loss in stories such as *Don Juan*. The patterning is combined with signs of self-doubt and unrealisable gratification. The work can then provide alternative readings of self-representation. To understand how desire can be transgressive it is necessary to return to Lacan's concept of it. Desire is 'that which is borne from the breach between need and demand. Need is the fantasy, demand being the requirement of the absolute nature of the object'.<sup>22</sup> This breach is aptly illustrated through the voice of Bratton, in *The Perfect Mistress*, whose discontent supplies first a need – 'I held onto the table to prevent myself running across the piazza after her' (*PM*, 135) – which then urges a demand, 'I had made my mind up; I would elope with her that evening'. (*PM*, 137) The demand is for a perfect mistress. It is the other first person narrator, the outsider 'I', who recognises that, by the end, instead of a real woman as companion, Bratton is talking to himself, happily ignorant of the breach in reality which makes him delusional and 'solitary'. (*PM*, 143)

Need is the child crying – the inarticulate voice of the flesh – while demand is the articulation of it (the word). Bratton's need cannot 'know' the corporeality which his demands articulate. His demand is that which posits an (invisible) other to talk to. Of need and demand, 'Desire is in and split between both', states Lacan.<sup>23</sup> The emergence of desire is directly related to language. As need has to detour through language (to demand), it cannot be answered directly but only by language. Lacan's theory is that language then signifies desire as lack, this sense coming into being through language. The act of demanding makes it so. Therefore, as soon as language appears, it denotes any fulfilment of desire as impossibility. Desire, or the lack of fulfilment of it, is what oppresses Duncan and increasingly marks his life story. At the end of *Obsessed* Duncan's romance is still as it was at the start: sporadic, 'These visits were brief, and passionate, our partings painful and tearful'. (*O*, 159) Adolescent yearning in *Spot the Lady* is described coldly, with slight disdain, 'For I'd given up hope of her surrender, and was tired of her teasing'. (*PM*, 68) Abelard tries to avoid the event of him and Heloise meeting, as it would risk his acting spontaneously. He has rationalised their need into non-existence but at the same time his words confirm need and speak of his desire while deferring its fulfilment:

<sup>22</sup> Lacan, op. cit., 1977, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

If there were no risk,  
You would have no need,  
Nor would I have that fear which reveals my desire. (AH, 58)

Much of Duncan's writing is marked by negative awareness of desire and its workings. A theme of seduction featuring narrators or characters who speak or repress desire pervades the main part of his narratives. Many of the characters are and remain discontented: a feature that prescribes their loneliness in the world and cynicism about it. Discontent is what makes desire happen and constantly returns to revive it. Juan, particularly, cannot bear a status quo and tells Ana 'No, but you came willingly. That left me/ Nothing to overcome'. (DJ, 58) Even from the cliché of courtship behaviour the idea of desire is worthy of examination because it figures prominently within it as an activity never satisfied: the result and cause of inevitable lack. One reads that Duncan himself needed constant stimulation and was intolerant of peace and consistency. The description of a hotel where he has exiled himself to write associates images of sexuality with horror. At the same time, the place which subjects him to solitude is something desiring and organic:

where loneliness drips from the walls, silence screams from the ceiling and where the  
mean gas fire has a lascivious meter. (O, 93)

*Abelard* also shows the contradictions of abnegation: the grasping and reaching out for love. Though de-sexualised, the reaching-out of hands at the end of Act II, signifies the speakers' physical urges. Abelard's instinctive actions are contrary to his reason (which is recorded in the letters he writes and reads out on stage). What he says afterwards signifies the paradox of articulating real need:

[*Abelard signs the letter, then cries out and throws his pen away.*]

No, tear that letter up.  
Read what I have not written.  
Unread all I have written. (AH, 59)

Instead of resolution the suffering goes on. Just before the final curtain, '[*He thumps the desk with his fist and then his hand reaches out to her..* ]'. (AH, 79)

This implies an important linguistic point which Duncan is also aware of as a writer of poetry: that when one uses the word, one has lost the thing in its uniqueness. Duncan's frequently writes *about* writing. Speech is also self-consciously referred to in dialogue between the dramatic characters:

DAVID: [*Gives up effort*] Does it matter what I say?

PATRICIA: No, it doesn't matter what you say.

DAVID: I suppose sympathy between two people is possible, but conversation is impossible. We achieve nothing but soliloquies. (R, 199)

This has echoes of Eliot and is typical of the 20th-century failure of communication theme seen in Pirandello's and Pinter's work. Here the characters reflect on their own

and others' speech, drawing attention to the struggle for power through verbal conflict:

TREVOR: That's what I said. Why do you goad me to insult you? (R, 208)

PATRICIA: You're suggesting that his trouble is: he married me?

TREVOR: I didn't say so.

PATRICIA: I'm asking you a question. (R, 224)

Inferences and insinuations are emphasised by characters who disguise and defend through ambiguity but also demand clarity of meaning from others. The indeterminacy of many of their utterances pushes the drama along precisely by their misunderstanding and conflict.

After the action of *Juan* we find a growing proclivity in Duncan's play-characters for long, analytical conversation and cerebral discussion. *Seven* is the exception in the way it has more stage activity, frequent, short scenes and set-changes. Communication is generated by means of movement, arrivals, disappearances and props (such as the painting) as well as dialogue. Such stage activity is in contrast to Duncan's other plays after *Satan*, which demonstrated increasingly static action and used minimal sets. In *Abelard* Heloise can't help but continue talking about the eloquence of silence. This is in order to fill the silence and prolong her words which she knows only conceal the impossible expression of love:

HELOISE: I will write no more, beloved, to you today.  
I will write again tomorrow.  
... Now I will sit alone.  
Silence is eloquent  
When no word can express my love. (AH, 40)

In this play, writing is the only dramatic action. The use of language is the realisation of the absence or the lack of the desired one:

ABELARD: The truth is:  
I have not loved you--or only as a man can love,  
And that is not enough!  
The truth is I have no truth.  
Only ash remains. Adieu. (AH, 61)

Desire then figures as an anxiety or angst about the lack of truth which words alone can signify.

Charles spends much of his time in *Catalyst* writing rather than making proactive decisions. Therese accuses Charles of:

Burying yourself in a burrow of paper  
And being frigidly polite.  
As if to punish me for driving her off.  
[He makes a violent gesture with the pen.]  
Now you've broken the nib! (C, 51)

The semantics of Charles's broken pencil denote impotency and stasis as opposed to the implied action of desire and its liberation. Duncan himself realised that writing was a substitute or compensation for unrealised accomplishments. He vows to finish *Rehearsal*, a play in which he has lost interest, in isolation from family and friends:

I felt cornered, condemned to authorship, sentenced to a stretch in an Arundel Tourist House... I scribbled... loathing each word, merely writing to escape from my predicament. (O, 93)

Here, he self-consciously produces the concurrent image of himself writing about himself writing. He seeks to cultivate a subject who is in opposition to his own art but has an inescapable identity with it because compelled to use his life events as its source. In *Promus* he writes about sketching characters for the television play on Columbus, *Torquemada*:

Had to do this because I kept meeting the bloody characters at the turn of the stairs. Writing them will make them lie down. Blast I don't want to write another play. (P, 19th Jan., '64)

Duncan's compulsion is expressed through revulsion and characteristic reluctance towards the act of writing. Writing is described as an act of will over the chaos of art that he is possessed by. The inscriptive activity of writing pulls him away from the chaotic images and emotions he actually experienced as inexpressible. Duncan wrote in *Promus* that, 'To begin with I can't write a sentence now because I am lost. i.e. I don't know anything any more'. (P, 21st Feb., '64) Obviously he is writing as he speaks about not writing and the sense of incoherence ('lost') through ignorance, is invalidated by the academic style of 'i.e.', giving the sentence structure a stricter form. Just after this he remembers Maskell asking him to 'write up our life together?', then decides 'but for the time being I dare not. It would hurt me too much to recall to remember the details I could remember. I can't forget' (P, 21st Feb., '64) and later, 'I mustn't think of it. I must somehow hold it. Perhaps I can if I work and work'. (P, 29th Feb., '64) His refusal to express emotion comes after he has written eighteen A3 sides about their last intimate meetings. His self-reflexivity avoids circularity because the statements actually denote ontological confusion arising from the impossibility of self-inscription.

The problem of subjecthood also appears in *Obsessed*:

For five years I have been trying not to write this. Why do I do so now? Because I have no option. (O, 9)

Reading through these pages I have written, I am nauseated. (O, 163)

Though Duncan wants to construct an autonomous existence for himself beyond 'the writer' he can only do this by referring to his own activity of writing. Because of this, Duncan the subject is only ever existent through the writing and autonomy is impossible.

At this point it is again useful to refer to Lacan. He places his subject's ego at the centre of two poles of awareness: that of recognition of the 'whole' self, as well as awareness that we are partial and alienated. His idea can be related to traditional theories of autobiographical truth that are based on 'wholeness' as a conflation of the real and symbolic spheres (wherein the word stands for the thing). Duncan's writing centralises both these awarenesses. 'These pages I have written' is language that asserts the truth of the proposition but 'reading through' and 'I am nauseated' varies the range of the statement from responsibility to a rejection of responsibility for the language being produced. The narcissistic subject, which Duncan's particular style of autobiographical writing reflects, also entails duality and division. Deconstructive thought supports the notion of our inability to achieve self-presence. This notion, as my study hopes to show, can be drawn upon as a useful reference in the analysis of Duncan's work.

The idea of a divided self applies to the regulation of the subject in autobiographical writing. In most autobiography, the 'I' takes itself as other; that is, as in the 'otherness' of the past self. Distinctively, the 'I' in *Obsessed* is an 'I' which comes into being when it is addressed to the 'you'. It exists in its particular difference to this other who is being addressed. The beginning of the work establishes Duncan's act of looking back and writing as well as making the whole narrative a way of speaking in response, 'So dare I write this and remember? So I will keep my promise. You have been patient with me'. (O, 12) Establishment of the I, resolved to set pen to paper, is a dominant style motif in most of Duncan's prose narratives including short stories and articles. Therein the speaker uses a first-person reflective and retrospective tone. But this is not simply narcissistic (with relation to Lacan's thought) says Folkenflik. Instead, the writing 'I' in autobiographical writing:

manipulates the prestige of the self in relation to the other, it enters the play of desire that constitutes the symbolic order. Here the self as a reference outside the text and the self as representation, constructed within the text, are in rightful tension.<sup>24</sup>

Or as Lane finds with Duncan's poetry, the tensions in those texts indicate that:

It is the writing process itself which most strongly conditions the presence of the writer, not the 'I' as it exists in any other sphere. (DL, 27)

References to the act of writing occur frequently in Duncan's texts and construct an image of paralysis or doubling. When applied to autobiographical inscription in *Obsessed*, it makes for a self which is not *simply* narcissistic. In fact the self can only be uncovered by the process of its writing itself down. This reveals a tension between

<sup>24</sup> Robert Folkenflik, 'The Self as Other' in *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, ed. by Robert Folkenflik (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 234, (pp. 215-234).



the two separate spheres, as the writing (the textually-constructed self) throws the externally-referenced self into question.

If it is to be assumed that autobiography is a genre placed mainly within the cultural mainstream, then work by Duncan that fits into the genre does not present a subversive politics. However, Brownstein, on Benjamin's and Woolf's theoretical-biographical narratives, says their formulation of a particularly radical literary style 'is key to dialectical tendencies which produce and reproduce the margins of difference'.<sup>25</sup> In *Three Guineas* Woolf has the self represent both mastery and vulnerability, which in referring to a model of life experience, produces ambivalence. The self constructed in Duncan's life narratives has the same ambivalence. This ambivalence displaces and resists ideologies of power, authorising subjectivity and personal memory as 'the originary ambivalence of the personal' because:

Autograph is the intentional reproduction of originary ambivalence, recorded in the dimensions of difference, a sensory representation that recapitulates the particular shape and dynamic of originary vulnerability and originary mastery and productivity. Authority is the movable commodity, occurring initially as a function of autograph but with potential for shifting under the dialectical arrangement of biography and history.<sup>26</sup>

#### *vi. Transgressions of the Self*

It is fitting to view Duncan's authorial voice as demonstrating the ambivalence Brownstein identifies. Duncan's authority is in many ways, a 'moveable commodity'. The self is only discovered through its writing of itself and this is the only access one can gain to the presence which is Duncan. It is a self which is aptly perceived as existent on the boundaries, or representative only through 'difference' or 'dynamics'. It has a 'function' but it is a 'shifting' one. Such a perception continues to address, rather than dismiss, an association with autobiographical writing. The subversive nature of this writing is analysed by Haney (1994). He proposes that 'genre' makes its discourse absolute, but it is also dependent on the dissolution of its own discourse. Thus autobiography can be a genre which takes place within a 'creative dissolution of boundaries'.<sup>27</sup> Dissolution is demonstrated in Duncan's self-writing, which posits autobiographical text, but then offers only digression and contradiction to what's posited.

<sup>25</sup> Marylin L. Brownstein, 'Catastrophic Encounters', in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York and London, Routledge, 1996), p. 187 (pp. 185-199).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 190 & 195.

<sup>27</sup> David P. Haney, 'Nuptial Interruptions: Autobiographical Boundaries in Wordsworth's 'Farewell' ', in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. by Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, Gerald Peters (Boston, University of Massachusetts, 1994), p. 245 (pp. 240-265). Hereafter referred to as DH in the text.

For example, Duncan presents writerly authority in his autobiography by prominent use of the retrospective viewpoint demanded by the genre. The 'real' events of his past in *Obsessed* are narrated retrospectively as if many years later. Often vagueness of memory is part of the description, such as in 'For some bizarre reason I can't recall' (O, 33) and 'I can remember nothing of those rehearsals of *The Catalyst* except you'. (O, 12) His desire has enveloped and emphasised the inaccuracy of recall. The comment 'I didn't know who you were. And these pages fail to discover it' (O, 89) prevents the memoir acting as a closure to his memories and so disallows completion of the subject who is remembering.

Duncan draws attention to his own, changed perceptions, 'Wisdom comes with age, and in the spring of 1958 I was only forty three'. (O, 14) His past is not smoothly narrated but fragmented by the ironic viewpoint of the writer. The writer is split against the past-other who was unaware at the time of the repercussions which are now obvious. As in many autobiographies and indeed novels, this knowing/unknowing quality is one the author plays with as part of his narrative style, 'But there wasn't a bloody hope for either of us after that. You knew it. I knew it. But we didn't'. (O, 14) He enjoys constructing a scene framed by a tone of doomed portentousness. But despite the framing, his tone includes enough ambiguity – 'But we didn't' – to disjoint the authority of clairvoyance that his recall enables. Another example is, 'I didn't see then that you were still playing the play. Whether Rose Marie did, I do not know'. (O, 19)

A steady emphasis on personal deficiencies works both for and against Duncan's self-presence. There is still the stubborn bull-headed tone which Duncan sometimes catches himself for in retrospect. As an alternative to divorce for Maskell, he suggests 'bigamy?' 'No!' You screamed angry at my facetiousness'. (O, 44) He presents his past self with one that slips in and out of the present tense as he, with sometimes anguished commentary, re-lives an experience, 'The mention of a ridiculous parsley cutter touched me deeply. That was typical of her' (O, 51) and 'I am quite unable now to describe the emotional and mental distress I experienced at this time'. (O, 58) With this reconstruction comes reflection and narrative which is still very much angled towards an audience, whether it is Maskell or the anonymous reader. Comments like 'that was spiteful of me wasn't it?' (O, 13) celebrate the heightened consciousness of the speaker and maintain contact-points with the reader. With autobiography, and as found in the diaries, the writer reads the self while writing so he/she functions within the dual consciousness of both present and past tenses. The words Duncan writes about him-'self' to himself (or to Maskell or to anyone who would read it subsequently) reflect a duality that means he can never express his emotion authentically. Comments like 'I can't write any of this today'

(O, 35) show how he is trapped in the writing. The focus on the activity of writing itself illustrates how self-presence in the text is mere illusion.

The duality and constructed nature of autobiographical self-hood makes a text such as *Obsessed* into an intense investigation of the form of the narrator's own, as well as Maskell's, presence in written memory. Freud agrees that the gaze is a male pastime, connected to anal desire or the sadistic need to master the object.<sup>28</sup> To look at the woman resists the Oedipal fear of castration or blindness and to do so requires her silence. However in Duncan's case, the more the remembering writer writes, the more blind he becomes:

Parting from you had stunned me. It now thundered in my head; it rained behind my eyes ... . So I tried to feel the relief of a decision. I couldn't find any. (O, 62)

The impression of inadequate sensibility or blurred vision is achieved by numerous comments contributing to a tone of self-doubt throughout the text:

I knew nothing about women. (O, 71)

But what had made you cry? (O, 134)

I didn't know who you were. I told you so. (O, 149)

There are more direct assertions of blindness or ignorance repeated in the grieving passages of *Promus*:

I curse myself for my blindness here. (P, 7th Feb., '68)

I don't know anything anymore. (P, 8th Feb., '68)

The pity is this will always be a scar on the window I see through: it will forever fracture my vision, prevent me from seeing straight. (P, 9th Feb., '68)

Rather than mastery, short-sightedness as regards the other (Maskell) is inevitable despite the level of interrogation which is usually stopped short by a new digression. Duncan utilises digression or mystification to prevent having to face fully himself or the truth of the situation. The fact of his artistic dedication is sometimes de-legitimised by descriptions of working very chaotically, under duress. However, to trace Duncan's literary output in any one year makes it clear that he also worked very capably. Reid remembers when Eastwood visits in 1958, needing changes to the opera *Christopher Sly*, and 'Ronnie would disappear for ten or fifteen minutes and then return with verse that solved the problem precisely'. (AV, 140)

The possibility of embellishment and an abundance of irony are common features of Duncan's writing which produce an inauthentic or unreliable authorial

voice. The inauthentic is a theme that emerges from the discourse of theatricality in *Rehearsal* and also from the compositional context of *Catalyst*. Duncan's partiality to watching others re-live scenes from his own life is clear as Maskell acts a puppet role in the play of his own experience. He goes to watch her perform in it over and over again, 'I didn't know which act you were playing, or care whose words you were speaking. I was content to watch you moving across the stage'. (O, 12) To him she is pure spectacle. The experience, along with other fictional scenes he creates, sustains a sense of the theatrical rather than a totally naturalistic depiction of events.

In *Rehearsal*, the family spends most of its time looking in mirrors, watching each other act and spying through doors, '[Enter PATRICIA. *She stands, unobserved by the door watching their rehearsal*]'. (R, 217) Patricia re-enacts the alleged assault, while David who was actually absent prompts her:

THEONA How do you know where she was sitting?

DAVID: I do, Theona. And you were reading a magazine, weren't you? This magazine? [*He hands it to her*]

PATRICIA: [*Taking it and moving across to the chair*] Yes, I was sitting over here. I didn't hear him come in – you know how silently he walks...

[*TREVOR appears from the garden. he stands in the door unobserved by the others*]. (R, 253)

David's assumptions allow him a superior vision while both characters unconsciously become narrators of events happening in real-time (Trevor entering, unheard) as well as the past of the scene. Omniscience through re-enactment is a feature of *Seven* where Satan and Angel frame the action with their commentary. They comment upon themselves as secondary characters in a restaurant in Act II:

ANGEL: And what happens to me if I'm picked up sitting here alone?

SATAN: Just bless him my dear. [*He goes over to Lavinia's table and sits down (as himself)*] May I order you a drink? (7, 317)

This signifies a confusion of the levels of enactment of reality. Such moments blur the distinctions between real life and theatre, roles and essentiality. The more confusing it is to control the parameters of these elements, the easier it becomes to deceive the watchers and make excuses about what has not *really* happened or was *not* seen. Confusion and deception are prominent codes in Duncan's dramatic composition. Catalion disguises himself as a gypsy, Juan a beggar; Ana 'unobserved' hears of Juan's wager to seduce a novice; as a ghost, she appears in Act III only to vanish. The hotel scene in *Satan* presents characters brilliant in their superficiality, talking at cross-purposes. Illusion and deception are what, in Juan's view, endows modern life with its secondary quality:

It is not that literature imitates life now  
But life is all pastiche of literature.  
They're like bull-frogs quoting bull-frogs. (DS, 53-4)

Literature is downgraded to a 'false' position even in the first premise, because imitative. Juan inverts the terms of life and literature and life, now a pastiche, is levelled to the same false position. The two are interchangeable and thus confused. His 'bull frogs' remark renounces the real world as a primary representation of everyday life as opposed to the fictional. He therefore exposes the fictional basis of his own creation. Duncan often writes self-consciously from a position that assumes and realises the irony of the fictional status of the ordinary world. Reality is as much a linguistic construct as art, or a bull-frog quoting a bull-frog.

Duncan also constantly transforms the factual basis of his own historical and private situation into transcendent art. There are many references to life imitating bad art, situations being not unique but inscribed or clichéd. Charles asks 'why is one's life always like a novelette?/A bad novelette?' (C, 34) and in *Obsessed* Duncan points out 'I had, I suppose, written *The Catalyst* only to become *The Catalyst*'. (O, 134) While re-enacting his art in his life and vice versa, Duncan partakes in re-inscription but by unveiling what is habitual and automatised, he posits that perception can be renewed by pointing out the interchange between the literary system (art) and what is external to it (life).

Rather than merely repeating himself, Duncan questions and shifts the boundaries between life and art through devices that draw attention to their parallels (like characterising Maskell primarily as an actress). Another device is switching between different subjectivities/points of view and undermining his own omniscience. Duncan's plots are based on a confusion of principals or terms: heaven and hell, Satan and God, vice and virtue, etc. Characters' roles then become confused. In *Rehearsal*, for example, the characters are shown to be terribly repressed and divided. Patricia complains to her husband that Trevor's shirtlessness is 'a nauseating piece of exhibitionism' (R, 239) yet to Trevor himself, she is flirtatious and says 'You've got such sensitive hands'. (R, 244) Such divided self-images indicate Duncan's own confusion about who he is and how he should act. His autobiographies depict constant oscillation between the roles of hack-writer, dramatist-poet and scientist as well as husband and lover. Even from such a mass of archival testimony it becomes clear that the self is not located for any length of time in one paper, place or available role.

Duncan writes frequently of adultery and of polygamy which becomes a method for reaching a spiritual state of all-giving love in *Juan* and *Catalyst*. In the latter, the symmetrical nature of marriage is rendered awkward and irregular but the

triangle of adultery, harmonious. Boundaries are shifted to widen the bonds of symmetry into a more complex geometrical web. *Obsessed* includes frequent comments on the absurdity of particular social taboos. To defend his own case, Duncan cites a friend who has three wives under Islamic law:

Oddly enough, he was never arrested for bigamy, though English Law doesn't exempt Mohammedans of the Edgware Road where he resided. (O, 107)

Polygamy is upheld as legitimate a structure as monogamy because both can be defined as conditions of marriage. Charles spends the whole of *Catalyst* undoing the mutual bond of monogamy to defend his own transgressive behaviour. He wants to pass through the fixed legal boundaries of marriage: the boundary of the self as defined by marriage is too limited and inaccurate. Even Therese says 'Anyhow, what do these labels mean? None of us is whole'. (C, 81)

In *Catalyst*, Duncan posits adultery as if it should redefine human relations in reference to marriage but he cannot do away with marriage completely. He highlights the differences between and co-dependence of both situations. By changing the meanings of both so neither is rejected fully, the boundary-line between the two states: fidelity and non-fidelity, is made prominent. Depicting variations on relationships urges the audience to reassess legitimate and illegitimate behaviour within marriage. But by keeping it all within the marriage scene in the play, Duncan makes marital law contain the 'outside' of lawlessness. Roles are redefined within the conventional boundaries and in doing so, transform the conventional:

CHARLES: A year ago we were just a conventional couple... .

THERESE: We still are. We've merely changed the convention. (C, 8)

Despite playing out scenes of lawlessness, deceiving one's wife is shown to conflict with the lawless subject's own self-knowledge and causes friction and tension. In *Obsessed*, there are occasional lapses in Duncan's defensive narrative:

Perhaps I hadn't the strength to fight any more. Perhaps I knew that I couldn't face the unhappiness I had caused you. (O, 62)

There is a sense of life being made more uncomfortable by deceptions despite the bravado of admitting them. The ring Maskell buys Duncan means, 'having to wear it when I was with you, then remembering to remove it, like the links and the tie, before I went to see Rose Marie'. (O, 117) There are many episodes of such tension. The emotional disquiet and self-deception revealed to the reader gives a sense of authenticity due to how the subject confronts itself in these episodes. At the same time, the self as other, split between appearance and knowing, also becomes part of a fiction: a display or exhibitionist performance.

### vii. *Negotiating Duncan's Writing: Between Autobiography and Fiction*

While much of Duncan's writing fits into an autobiographical mode, it also allows constant negotiation with the fictional to take place within it. In connection, a feature of his writing is how he sets scientific (historical factual) representations against literary/fictional ones. Take for example his reflections on living in London with Briony but estranged from Rose-Marie in 1958:

Strangely enough, one of my happiest interludes now occurred. Happiness is not the right word; I was miserable throughout it. But the memory of the misery has faded, the recollection of the closeness I found with Briony remains. (O, 64)

Duncan immediately contests the oversimplification of his own statement. Analysing as he goes, he is aware of the precarious nature of his own memory. The 'interlude of happiness' functions both as accurate and as a creatively reconstructed event.

Within other genres, Duncan's writing hovers between a use of language which is referential and one that is non-referential to his own self-experience. *Man* combines objective reasoning and personal experience with discourses that are both scientific and creative/literary. There are frequent changes of frame, for example in 'Canto 14', where the voice shifts between detailed information that constructs an image of the evolving universe, the intervention of the first person and a present consciousness:

No longer a matter of conjecture  
All the known organic building blocks now produced in vitro.  
It took me a thousand million years to move my lips from the rock, twice that time  
before my lips were formed  
How old are you? (*Man II*, '14', 28)

The speaking voice takes responsibility for the interweaving of poetic phrasing:

the light entered its inheritance,  
Walking with white feet over the silent waters,  
... No this won't do at all. Not at all. This sort of rhetoric  
might pass for poetry or something like poetry,  
Not for sense. My image of a molten earth  
with an atmosphere of ammonia methane and steam  
Unlikely. (*Man II*, '15', 30)

Omniscience is constructed but around a voice that questions and confesses its ignorance due to the limitations of individual perception. It draws attention to the distinction between poetic style based on personal perception and objective impartial knowledge. The former destabilises the process of rationalisation. But the very appearance of the subject means it claims the status of primary articulator in the poem. Introducing the Cambrian period in 'Canto 19' the voice admits 'I am not describing the period,/but myself'. (*Man II*, '19', 63) This conflates the authority of scientific writing with the writer who writes it. At the same time, the voice takes on

identities of caveman, the whole consciousness of mankind ('we'), Primo Levi (in 'Canto 54'), and the anecdotal, autobiographical Duncan-poet. The Duncan-poet is an unknowing pupil who also describes a guide who, in this Canto, is Herman Bondi (a real life friend and tutor to Duncan) whose character is 'standing in for Virgil'. (*Man I*, '12', 80) The guide leads the poet towards objective, scientific knowledge: 'First my patient lucid guide led me to Newton'. (*Man I*, '12', 81) But the reader is constantly returned to the autobiographical 'I'-presence, a figure who is constantly made vulnerable by personal experience:

Discouraged, I returned to Russell Square.  
There Eliot, who'd never approved of my journey, said:  
'But your job is to write another Abelard'. (*Man I*, '12', 81)

The poem itself cannot wholly sacrifice possession of personal experience which erupts into lines such as 'Then my Urchin killed herself. I had had enough'. (*Man I*, '12', 82) In this passage, the identity between the narrator and Duncan, the author of *Abelard*, is foregrounded as is the problematic position of the subject who is divided: between his literary vocation, the expectations of others and the 'journey' towards rational consciousness.

The intellectual journey is romanticised into a mythical quest wherein Duncan contrasts himself to literary figures or draws himself as a third-person:

Orpheo had two advantages: he knew where Eurydice was;  
He knew where he was himself; his search difficult,  
Hypothetically possible... .

Unlike Webster, Duncan became obsessed with shape:  
he sought the form beneath the formless... . (*Man I*, '12', 82)

The different levels of personality make the poem waver between different laws of time, space and place and therefore, authority in the text is questioned rather than established. Language, as referential to personal experience, is destabilised. The voice of scientific reason and the autobiographical experience are both apparent and antagonistic within and towards the poem itself.

Duncan's autobiographical writing is marked by an ambivalent respect for generic boundaries. *Promus* uses a specific writing-site: the diary record. The site is somewhat self-protected with its supposed self-address and tendency to 'private' musing, 'Perhaps love is need? I don't know'. (*P*, 8th Feb., '64) Privatisation is enhanced by the fullness of the 'no holds barred' account of his and Maskell's relationship. The poetic interior is opposed to the worldliness of the outside in 'Let no prying eyes who read these pages conclude that...'. (*P*, 8th Feb., '64)

But such a statement conveys the private writer's narcissistic expectations of a public readership. The line between private and public and between the confessional



and contrived begins to blur. Many of Duncan's narratives are heavily based upon distinct recollection, flashback and recall. But though this is the natural style of autobiographical memoir one begins to suspect a disparity between the amount of quotation given and what he really remembers. Here, Duncan recalls one of his and Maskell's many partings:

'Don't stand there' you said, 'get in. Have you been waiting there all evening?'  
'No. Dammit. This undoes me. I had made up my mind never to see you again'. (O, 63)

Dialogue is used to heighten the realism of the captured moment, bringing enlivenment and the interchange of direct speech to the scene of narration. The authority of accurate recall this demands gives a reading that is more characteristic of conventional fiction. When Marcus analyses the autobiographical impulse, she says that we are born telling a story. Our narratives of 'reality' are based upon the same form as fiction or any other narrative. (LM, 248) We learn to invent our own lives firstly to appease the family: a method of privatising the domestic realm as distinct from the outside 'factual' world. This relates to Duncan's confessional style and how he constructs his life-story to appease those closest to him in his domestic realm.

Therefore a structural link can be made between Duncan's personal experience and other, even fictional, lives and their written representations. A trait of Duncan's writing is how it privatises the external into the domestic. His own experience is reminiscent of a fictional representation created by himself, possibly based upon another past personal experience that inspired him in the first place, to write these lines:

Of course I speak to her. I do that often. I'm reminded of some lines of Don Juan,  
Would that I could kneel to Him  
With the same ease I can kneel to her. (P, 8th Feb., '64)

The enmeshing of different experiential representations in his work creates a tension that insists upon the intertextuality of experience and representation. This interchange takes precedence over the ultimate authority of the individual writer. Even autobiography, rather than creating a 'true' portrait and despite Duncan's intention of revelation, does not dispel the possibility of exaggeration, or fraudulent or embellished versions of 'truth' (perhaps due to copyright problems and other pressures of the market-place). Even though the autobiographical impulse and desire for anonymity are not naturally co-existent qualities in a writer it cannot be discounted that an author's signature can still be disclaimed. A title page does not guarantee an author of the same name: pseudonyms and ghost writers have been utilised for autobiographical work. However an emphasis on fictionality is not to denigrate all Duncan's memories to false ones. It would not be worthwhile to assume so with this type of inductive research and its sources. It is too simple to view all Duncan's memoirs and

other works as fictional, therefore unknowable and simply as a collection of creative performances.

A rejection of the above view does not leave as the only other option an autobiographical text that claims its status by supplying proof of referentiality. But if one were to follow Lejeune, one would expect autobiography to decree that its memoir be true, even if false. Signification of truth occurs if the reader assumes the identical status of author, narrator and hero.<sup>29</sup> As an autobiography, *Obsessed* declares its autobiographical status as embodiment of its author and in doing so, rejects any claims to fiction. The cover has as subtitle, 'A third volume of autobiography'. References and connotations in the first passage demand the identity of subject and object, writer and narrator with, 'I don't want to write this. For five years I have been trying not to write this'. (O, 9) and 'Then you turned to a side table and reached for a book, the second volume of my autobiography'. (O, 9) One should then accept that Duncan, narrating, really remembers his own past experience of specific conversations with various people, word for word. But such acceptance becomes ineffectual if, as Bruner states, it is applied to any alleged declaration of truth. If such reconstruction or even equivalent versions of events are acceptable, the reader is then able to find any type of writing autobiographical:

but there is a 'readerly' side to the matter in that any text can be read as revelatory of the author as long as it can be interpreted as fulfilling the intention or inadvertently, the conditions imposed on speech acts of self-revelation.<sup>30</sup>

He follows De Man's notion of autobiography being a 'figure of reading'.<sup>31</sup> This lessens the weight of authorial intentionality but still leaves us the personalised reasoning behind expressions of thought, emotions or philosophy in Duncan's prose and poetry. These compel the reader to refer the statements to his personal experience, especially when they break in to and refer to the writing process itself:

I can now write 'I/This pain is me. (*Man III*, '32', 119)

Reading through these pages I have written... . (O, 164)

The infusion of personal references into Duncan's work leads us to question simple classifications of autobiographical writing. Somewhat vulgarised and popular, autobiography is assumed to have a sounder connection to the expression of human interiority than other genres. However, it is of more value to recognise that auto-

<sup>29</sup> Lejeune (1988) is one of a number of theorists of autobiography, including Gusdorf (1956), Misch (1950), Bruss (1976) and Dilthey (1976) who lay out strict rules that define the discourse as a genre dependent on infallible criteria such as the real existence of the singular individual who writes it.

<sup>30</sup> Jerome Bruner, 'The Autobiographical Process' in Folkenflik, op. cit., p. 42 (pp. 38-56).

<sup>31</sup> Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement' in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (NY, Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 70 (pp. 67-81).

biography is a genre associated with its own decline. Haney speaks of genre as a transgressive form of classification, and similarly, Marcus describes the only useful definition of it as 'the pivotal point of intersection between the individual work and literary history'. (LM, 229) This notion of a 'point of intersection' fits with that of the boundary-existence where much of Duncan's writing can be placed. More destabilisingly, autobiography has links to other non-fictional literature such as conversion narratives, biography, history, letter collections and editions. So, within the genre, the only relevant truth is the 'truth to the present of writing'. (LM, 240)

Haney says that the line that separates the written text from the life 'cannot be contained within the autobiography'. (DH, 242) He situates it 'elsewhere'. If the imaginary transformation of life to poetry can be detected in the work, then the life outside the poem enters the space of the poem to a position within it, as an *event*. This event would be the point where Marcus says that 'Autobiography imports alterity into the self by the act of objectivism which engenders it'. (LM, 203) In *Obsessed* the event of alterity occurs when, in spite of claims for its status, the relationship between fact and fiction is blurred by, for example, the mode of address of 'And because I promised you that I would write it'. (O, 9) The divide between the author, narrator and character is problematised by transference through a first and third person in the text. The act of objectivism has split the voice further – into three – just like Duncan's marriage. If one refers back to my investigation of Duncan's early diary-writing in Chapter 1, the idea of alterity or division explored therein can also be applied to the unpublished *Promus* diary, also written to himself. *Promus* was then used as draft material for the end-product text: *Obsessed*.

While having to accept the unreliable nature of Duncan's mass of self-portrayal, the auto/biographical truth-factor can be amended further by Bruner's idea of 'negotiability' and elements cited in Elbaz's 'dynamic' model.<sup>32</sup> These are my references for a more practical consideration of the genre: a genre which much of Duncan's self-writing fits into. Elbaz distinguishes 'dynamic' and 'typological' approaches to the genre.<sup>33</sup> Traditional claims for unity, identity, reality, empirical and given truth, are typological, whereas the dynamic model uses an aesthetics of reception. Here the reader expects the author's claims of a valid report, to have a truth-value. Elbaz sees these rules not as quiescent but as changing in form.<sup>34</sup> Reading Duncan's autobiog-

<sup>32</sup> Bruner in Folkenflik, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of The Self: A Critical Study of the Autobiographic Discourse* (London, Croom Helm, 1988), pp. 1-9.

<sup>34</sup> Elbaz's use of the dynamic model of autobiography is opposed to the linear: the conventional, individual life with the personality of the writer at the epicentre, based on verifiable fact/reality. New criteria should be considered, namely, whether the reader is receiving the narrative as truth or not. The reader's perception of truth can be based on what they see as validated by law.

raphies inspires the dynamic approach because it encourages the reader's critically dynamic interpretation and attention to the boundaries of the genre itself.

Bruner formulates the idea of a readerly bias as one borne out by the idea of 'verisimilitude'. This approach has the reader interpret signs within writing of its content being *very probably true*, in that a statement cannot be refuted in a consensus or public system of verification. Here fiction as well as non-fiction can subtly trace the workings of the author. These workings are based on a reading of what makes textual authority, as well as discovering textual allegories of the real and how it is shaped. One finds interesting representations of authority and the real to exist in Duncan's dramas and autobiographical writing. The representations of authority are 'negotiable'.<sup>35</sup> Factors such as mimesis, diegesis and didacticism all work to make some scenes more negotiable than others. When Duncan writes simply, sometimes drawing attention to his own faulty memory or vulnerability, the scenes constructed appear more negotiable than others that are used to justify a past episode of bad behaviour, 'I write this in that hut... This hut has been a refuge' (O, 107) gives more of a sense of conviction and reference to truth of the act of writing than other scenes. Some others remain simplistic with an abbreviated sentence structure that warrants more descriptive analysis than is given. Duncan tells of an argument, prompted by Maskell having been 'unfaithful':

A letter you had sent me had given a different version, but I didn't want to hear the details. I left the cottage and walked without any sense of where I was going. (O, 116)

Musing at Kensington Gardens, he invests the sight of a dead fish floating in the pond with heavy significance, then he wanders back to Carmel Court where:

You were sitting up in bed hugging Pedro, nursing your black eye, I told you about the fish; you didn't believe me; nor did I. (O, 117)

Here there is less concern for trivia, the voice is clipped, using brief considered statements to intensify its impact. This narrative is disengaged from the other, uninterested in Maskell's viewpoint or her representational likeness and thus appears insensitive as well as omnipotent – omnipotent because the 'you' avoids the naming of Maskell as an independent character; her existence in the text is dependant upon his consciousness.

While we may wish for a fuller narrative, at other times one sees an all-inclusive, sometimes pompous, incorporation of innocuous detail:

Janet Kidd is my oldest friend. We had been seventeen together. She is Beaverbrook's daughter. We had met in 1936, canvassing for Sir Ernest Petter in the St. George's Division when he had been defeated by Duff-Cooper. (O, 119)

<sup>35</sup> Bruner in Folkenflik, op. cit., p. 48.

Duncan uses an old narrative technique (used for example by Defoe) to tempt the reader's belief by chronologising and mapping a wide range of events and impulses overlaid by inconsequential material. The seduction also occurs in the incidence of nuance in the commentary wherein minor details are obviously inserted for titillation:

And though you always carried a rosary with you, there was one occasion, wasn't there, when you used it, but not for prayer. Having wrapped it round, you couldn't get it off.  
(O, 114)

However, *Obsessed* also questions the past's power to make one's own experience become as objective as history. The very juxtaposition of differing narrative voices and time-scales show how hard it is to channel experience directly into writing. This impression is given in conjunction with the narrator's jigsaw-like self-portrait. One subject speaks with potency, dependent on disclosure and presentation of truth to fact: 'Why do I disclose our precious intimacy and privacy? I write only for you, for us. I will censor nothing'. (O, 115) But another subject hovers on the side of the evasive, spurious and offensive. Comments about himself such as 'In a moment of rare honesty...' (O, 108) have the function of giving the subject an ironic distance from the past, performing self. Due to this irony, one discovers both involuntary disclosure of self and conscious self-display as disguise.

*Obsessed*, *in toto* discloses huge compositional tension. It is evident from the 'insert' notations in the draft: *The Precarious Garden*, that previously published articles (stuck-in pages of torn-out print) are included next to diary transcriptions of *Diary of A Poem* (the journal Duncan kept while writing *Man*, its 1964-1968 volume entitled *Promus*). The first part of *The Precarious Garden* became *Obsessed*: a text emended into seamless narrative without date-headings. This accounts for the awkward stylistic transitions between sections of the published work. *Obsessed* makes itself incomplete in these ways. Masking truth with selectivity, huge sections are left out even from the draft, and both are written from more than one time zone.

Duncan links sudden shifts in narrative with statements like 'Only once did I catch you being insincere' (O, 82) which give the impression of associative thought. While the general chronology of remembrance is linear, there is a cyclical or associative narrative movement that mixes together the past with retrospective vision from the future. The time when Duncan searches for his missing wife is remembered sequentially using the past tense, 'I parked, staggered out and rang the bell' while also giving the impression of immediacy with 'It was now nine o'clock'. (O, 70)

A frequent signal of a shift in the narrative is reference to his conscious act of remembering in, for example, 'I remember I used to be left too much alone'. (O, 72) The authorial act of changing the narrative signifies a point where Duncan is to illustrate a state of mind or point of view through example. The exemplary event is

prioritised over culminative compilations of facts or presentations of vividly remembered settings. He moves from one event to 'About this time, I...'. (O, 70) He ponders the new incident from the writing present – 'I don't think you ever knew of this visit' – but the new thought, of his hurtful duplicity to Maskell, triggers another example of anguish when 'the most painful moment' (O, 72) occurs at Christmas, which he then describes.

As discussed in previous chapters, Duncan's self-accounting is closer to the truth of private conviction or uniquely subjective truth than to facticity. These truths come from imaginative recreation through recall as well as passages of revelation, re-examination and self-analysis. However such writing can imaginatively re-create the present of the author-'I' writing about the past 'I/he'. If the activity of writing itself is foregrounded, rather than the writer's lived past, autobiography becomes symptomatic of the difficulty rather than transparency of presentation of self. *Obsessed* is a text that draws attention to the fact that there is no stable position from which one can recall and narrate the past as an accurate entity. The very idea of authorial embodiment tends to shift into its opposite. Watson (1993) deconstructs the idea of the author's 'self-communion' in autobiography, self-communion being a notion that supports authorial presence. For Watson the tension between the 'I' and third person persona upsets the 'equilibrium of the textual self-portrait and integrated personality' which is instead 'subverted and revised' and in place of positing equilibrium, the writer can:

contrast his speaking positions as subject and commentator on the history of other subject inscriptions. So, the writing is located in the virtual space of a metaphysics of presence, inscribed upon its own impossibility.<sup>36</sup>

Watson's concept of 'virtual space' accompanies the same subversive textual conditions as boundary existence. It reduces the autobiographical voice to a written performance; an effect. This is decentering but does not totally reject the reference to realism and representation. Haney says it is possible to identify the voice of a poet as it exists in a poem but only at the boundary-point of the text. The voice is an element that he classifies as autobiographical because it articulates the poem and its link between the poet and the reader:

the autobiographical self is positively constituted by its shifting horizons, the horizons of, for example, the relation to the life after the poem and to its constitutive web of language and other selves. (DH, 244)

<sup>36</sup> Julia Watson, 'Towards an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography', in *ibid.*, Folkenflik (pp. 57-79), pp. 64.

## *Conclusion*

'Positive constitution' is a feature of many of Duncan's works, whose voices blur the distinctions between poetic art and autobiography. The difficulty of distinction between the two preserves the question of the self who writes the works, though this self also defies classification. We can view Duncan as a compulsive fiction writer who dramatised all his autobiographical work and his own life and loves into a complex though living drama. At the same time he can be seen as a relentless autobiographer who could not help but base all his creations around his own ego, using or pastiching the lives of others and his own, for the material of his fiction. Both accounts are valid views of Duncan and are views that, as a consequence of their mutuality, determine his work as contravening traditional genre-boundaries. As a consequence of such contravention, and despite the co-existent accounts of the subject, Duncan also manages to elude both readings. This is because his works hold a delicate balance between selected documentary evidence and imaginative re-creation. The intricacy of the position between fact and fiction wherein his work is found can only be said to reflect the contradictions/duality of his everyday life.

## Conclusion

### *i. The Dying Fall*

From the 1960s until his death in 1982, Duncan experienced increasing solitude and introspection. After Maskell's death in 1968 he spent more time in his hut on the North Devon Coast working on *Man*, which was published in all its five parts by the mid-'70s. His translation of Martin Walser's play *The Rabbit Race* had caused controversy in 1963 (the year of the Profumo scandal) due to its commentary on Nazism, but as the '60s elapsed he was occupied by more selective and unfashionable enterprises such as the publication of Gaudier Breszka's prints and research attempting to dispute the validity of Shakespeare's plays – by implication, unexpectedly questioning literary authority. Duncan still pursued and hoped to publish on the dispute in the early '80s.

Duncan's main bone of contention with the ESC was that they did not endorse his own emerging anti-democratic beliefs. He eventually removed himself from the increasingly class-conscious theatre of the '60s, as his own class commentary appeared outmoded and erroneous. Insecurity, paranoia and hostility to others reached its peak and endured for the rest of his life. However, we never see him succumb wholly to despair and he keeps on writing.

For Britain, the mid-'60s and beyond presented greater cultural disturbances and sensations from the Beatles to protests against the Vietnam War, from assassinations and the Moon-landing to psychedelia and the drug-culture. Duncan, however, was writing increasingly conservative stories, articles and plays that moderated action and speech into dramatic monologues. He continued to work on his memoirs – by 1976, the third and still as yet unpublished fourth parts of *Obsessed* (or *The Precarious Garden*) were amassed for publication – and on short stories as well as scientific research for *Man*. By the late '70s, while Millet and Greer were gaining grace, Duncan's memoir of his friendship with Britten was his main undertaking, alongside works barely concealing their malevolence towards women, old associates or culture in general (*Girl Friday*, *The Red Virus*, *The Anaconda*, the *Paprika* poems). Duncan was also composing 'Opinion' articles for the *Telegraph's* Sunday magazine and editing a series of anti-Marxist essays with Colin Wilson – *Marx Refuted* – for which Margaret Thatcher and Mosely were both approached as contributors.

At the beginning of the '80s, Duncan's growing distaste for majority opinion and values is, ironically, denoted by his work on coffee-table editions of disproved



social and scientific commentaries: *Lying Truths*, *Critics Gaffes* and *The Encyclopedia of Ignorance*. His *For the Few* poems and intensive production of fairy stories also imply a withdrawal of his engagement with current issues for creative inspiration. By 1979, the years spent in his chilly cliff-top retreat had taken their toll. Sporadic bad health had deteriorated into pneumonia and he had begun to spend winters abroad. Poems such as *The Anatomy of Death* and *The Testament* signify that Duncan's adversarial mood now stretched to challenging his own mortality. Yet his desire for fame in posterity automatically entailed a greater awareness of death. Such desire and awareness is signified in his autobiographies and by the existence of his archive, as well as the Literary Foundation Duncan established himself in 1973. The Foundation encourages artists and research in the arts generally while it also professes to 'keep its founder's name alive'.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, the archive, now established as representative of its founder's existence, can also be perceived as a shrine to his death. It displays the aspiration to live on but also a consciousness of the impossibility of being able to.

## ii. Theoretical Conclusions

My research on Duncan began with a discernment of the above. Working from an idea of posthumous inscription, I have been able to reassess the author's position in relation to autobiographical and biographical issues. What has predominated throughout a study of Duncan's life-writing has been its incorporation of the author's impulse to *meet his own end in writing* (to be complete and whole) while, at the same time, its *refusal* to meet it (through splitting). Addressing autobiography as a genre allows one to perceive within it the subject's refusal to die but its attempt to return from death, as the desire for an ideal return to self. I have examined how Duncan's preoccupation with perfection and eternal, universal themes attempts to perpetuate modes of authority, his name and self-hood, in writing.

My association of Duncan's literature with progressive ideas of the self and the subject has been possible through theorisation (using Lacan and psychoanalytical theory) and subsequent association of self-hood with language. The association may be clarified by elucidating how autobiographical writing becomes a quest for the *Name* in that it tries to stand for or sum up the whole person which that name is meant to signify. The name on the book-cover tries to symbolise a whole person by itself but, if it could, autobiography would be neither necessary or possible because the very use of the name would stand for all of us and *be* us. So, using one's name as

<sup>1</sup>Pamphlet, 'The Ronald Duncan Literary Foundation'. RDF

a title-page signature is to use something one has already lost. As Derrida points out, writing of the proper name in his *Memoirs of Paul De Man*, the name is inevitably connected to the subject's death as it stands for that which will survive us.<sup>2</sup>

This idea also links to Lacan's theory of language which replaces and reflects our human attempts to present ourselves wholly and authentically. For De Man, autobiography symbolises the epitaph as 'an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech.'<sup>3</sup> Epitaphs represent the dead proclaiming their last words from the tombstone. Indeed, the Duncan archives contain numerous scraps of paper drafting his obituary and a series of poems about his enemies in mocking, epitaph form. The notion of achieving fame in posterity was an obvious preoccupation of Duncan's writing with the contents of the archive showing that many things were probably hoarded self-consciously – such as poems written on handkerchiefs and notes scrawled on the backs of menus.

The failure to write one's own death as closure, or the positing of a reply in autobiography, in fact defers the threatened 'death of the author' and opens up a discourse of identity. It is this discourse that has proved troubled in Duncan's writing as it is one which seeks to locate and historicise itself. The subject then signifies as both alive and dead at the same time. While avoiding death, it still has to return from it but through many different forms and points in time. By disclosing the autobiographical impulse, the author touches death, admits mortality and opens the door to new personalities.

Transference and inscription of life or 'self' into text may appear steeped in contradiction and paradox, but it is these very features which characterise Duncan's work. His written legacy, from the diary of his community farm to the autobiographies, is a testimony to the ironies of his constant battle with the issue of inscribing his own identity both as a creative writer and also as a human being. For him, as I have demonstrated, the two were co-extensive. Following a dynamic notion of self-construction and deconstruction in Duncan's writing has enabled his work to be radically re-located within contemporary literary discourse.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs for Paul De Man* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement' in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 75-76.

### *iii. The Last Word*

Duncan was not a poet of great enduring skill, and in many ways his romanticism let him down. The too-diverse span of his writing and sometimes distasteful ideologies do not detract from his capacity to collaborate fruitfully with others, albeit to work hardest when in solitude, while the energy of creating excitement and struggle in his life spilled over into the work. His penchant for revision and re-working did produce some refined work, and where the result is concision rather than affectation here are indisputable artistic achievements.

Also, because Duncan's style is varied and diffuse, it does not imply that he has no style. Instead, one finds that his writing always contains signs of an intense yet perplexing personality. The characters are produced from an awareness and context of social change, though often through invective against modernity and its youth. An overview leads to an identification of negative elements of second-hand style and appropriation (even of his own work), but also to the conclusion that he was able to combine these different elements with other diverse areas of thought and insights and synthesise them into an original body of work.

# Chronology

- Father**     b. Reginald John Dunkelsbühler, Frankfurt. To London as a child, then Cambridge to study Agriculture at the Gwebi Experimental Station nr. Salisbury, S. Africa.
- Mother**    b. Ethel Cannon, England. To Convent school.
- 1913**        Reginald and Ethel marry.
- 1914**        6th August, Ronald born: Mashonaland, Salisbury, Rhodesia. R & mother leave for England (never sees father again)- father soon interned as alien.
- 1915**        Father's family allow Ethel £25 a month, they live at no. 9. Chelsham Rd., Clapham London. Sister Bianca ('Bunny') born, London.
- 1918**        11th Nov., Armistice Day. Father, whilst helping with influenza epidemic amongst tribes, volunteers to help whilst in prison camp, is infected and dies. Aged 4, 'Life fulfilled' by fishing trip at Taunton: 'I have gone through life sublimely confident that wherever I flung my hook an obliging fish would swallow it'. (AMAI, 21)
- 1919**        Meets neighbour 'Mr. Beale'. Goes to prep. school, Manor House, Clapham.
- 1920**        First visit to Welcombe in Devon, on holiday.
- 1925**        Sent to public school at Bridlington on East coast of Yorkshire.
- 1926**        Hears Schubert in musical comedy based on his life called *Lilac Time*.
- 1928**        Aged 14-school trip to Paris, begins writing poetry. 'Uncle Vicky' (Prince Victor of Cooch-Bihar with claim to Bijni Rajr) returns to England.
- 1930**        About 16-asked to leave school after accusing housemaster of assault-spends some months in London. Reads Freud. Ill with bronchitis.
- 1931**        Learns of inheritance from great-grandfather on father's side. He and Bunny left large sum. Receives posthumous letter from father. April-leaves for Institut Dr. Schmidt, St. Gallen, Switzerland (Bunny to college at Teufen). Soon withdrawn due to financial crisis in England. To Africa on S. S. Umtali - Cape Town, Durban, Jo-burg-stays with remote cousins, gets drunk, gives seat to black woman on a tram & is thrown off: 'I took an instant dislike to the whole of South Africa'. (AMAI, 53) To Frankfurt, Jo-burg, finds father's paupers grave. Is given father's documents. Salisbury, then boat at Beira, E. Africa. Zanzibar, Dar-es-Salaam, Mozambique, Mombasa, Port Sudan. Returns to England.
- 1932**        Aged 18, private tutor nr. Cambridge. Reads Jonson, Donne, Pope, Rochester. Is a vegetarian. Returns to Welcombe. Rents derelict cottage at Southhole. Learns of loss of grandfather's inheritance.
- 1933**        To Cambridge - Downing College. Studies English. Involved with Festival Theatre where Terence Grey directs Odets, Cocteau, Brecht. Meets 'Laura'.
- 1935**        (2nd yr. at Cambridge), films *Zanzibar*. Meets Nigel Spottiswoode.
- 1936**        Film: *Psychology*. Friends encourage R to write miners of Rhondda Valley a *March*, music by Alan Bush. Attends March in London. Graduates with BA in English. July-leaves for Yorkshire coalfields-to Holmwood, nr. Chesterfield. Flat in Brixton. Involved with '30's politics: 'I could find no sympathy with the Communist Party and its violence, or the Socialist Party and its Victorian ideology.' (AMAI, 128). Joins Peace Pledge Union. Writes *The Complete Pacifist* pamphlet. Rhondda Valley strike. Talks to miners' wives, arrested for vagrancy. Writes to Pound. Concept of *Townsmen*. Reply from Gandhi r.e. pamphlet. Arranges visit to Wardha. To Paris with Britten and Henry Boys. R to Marseilles-boat to Bombay, via Genoa, Port Said, Aden.

- 1937 Meets Gandhi at Wardha. To the ashram, Segoan. Reads *Gita*. To Calcutta, then visits poet Tagore, then Bombay, Port Said-Cairo. Drives across desert. Boat to Marseilles-train to Rapallo. Meets Pound. Given letters of intro. to Cocteau & Leger. Rents cottage in Contignac. Returns London. Meets Rose Marie Hansom. Writes *Birth*. To Devon cottage with R-M & Spottiswoode. Contributes *Adelphi*. Takes Bayswater flat, London. (Mother also moves house). Writing *The Unburied Dead*. Eliot asks him to contribute to *Criterion*. To Devon with John Reid. 'Uncle' Viccy killed by car. Buys Mead at Welcombe. Sheppard dies. Memorial concert planned. *The Pacifist March* (Britten). Never performed. Orchestral score 'lost'. Paris-meets Stravinsky, Brancusi, Cocteau, Leger. Elopes to West Mill with R-M.
- 1938 1st *Townsman*. Paris & Rapallo with R-M. Meet Olga Rudge. Stay at Contignac. Munich Crisis (Mar.). Return to West Mill. Meet Gerald Brenan-Autumn. Meets EP in London. Writes *Manifesto* for The Rexist Party by The Bishop of Marsland. Prints copies. Pubs. 'Our Strategy In War'. Finishes *The Unburied Dead*. To Fez with RMD & Bunny.
- 1939 *Pimp, Skunk & Profiteer* and *Ora Pro Nobis*. Britain in State of Emergency. 'I decided to found a community, an order based on agriculture' (AMAI, 211) at West Mill & Gooseham Hall. Sept.-Britain at War.
- 1941 Marries R-M. Roger born later. Writing *Postcards to Pulcinella*. Prints 'A Short History of Texas' in *Townsman*.
- 1942 'Husbandry' Notes for *New English Weekly*. Community disperses. Briony born. Britten returns to England from USA works on last scene of *Grimes* (and *Tomb*) with Duncan in Devon.
- 1943 Arrested for fuel-stealing. Writes *The Ballad of Stratton Gaol*. RMD expecting Roger. Born Bude. Collapse of community farm. Still printing. *Grimes* completed. Meets Marion Stein. Meets Gabriel Pascal.
- 1944 Tribunal for conscientious objection. Begins *Masque*. Also ed. for the (now) *Scythe*.
- 1945 End of war. R-M's health failing-to Sanatorium. Duncan lives in London (St. John's Wood). Appointment-features dept. Works on *Tarquinius* later *Rape of Lucretia*. *Mea Culpa* written. *This Way to the Tomb!* completed. Performed at Mercury Theatre. Margery Vosper as agent. Idea of 'Abelard and Heloise' story as opera.
- 1946 Arts Council established. Duncan works for Beaverbrook (*Evening Standard*). Lives with 'Queen Victoria'. Meets Epstein. Translates *Eagle* for Cocteau. To Paris, meets Cocteau & Berard. Epstein bust completed. R-M at sanatorium. To Berlin with R. March for *Tomb*. Sees Brecht's *Der Hofmeister*. Pound sends R part of Pisan canto. Commission by Pascal to translate *The Birth of Love*. Begins 'Jan's Journal' (*Evening Standard*). 'Petra' infatuation. *The Rape of Lucretia* performed, Glyndebourne. Obey contests. Writes for *Cavalcade* & *West Country* magazines on brewing & farming. Writing to Gerald Brenan. *The Eagle Has Two Heads* performed, Haymarket.
- 1947 To Switzerland. Writing *Stratton*. R-M recovers. Tobacco growing. Film criticism and 'In The Country' column (*Evening Standard*). *Home Made Home* pub.
- 1948 Meets George Harewood. Writing *Stratton* or *From Father to Son*. *Amo Ergo Sum* for Harewood's wedding. *Selected Poems of Ben Jonson*. Rochester edition. *Jan's Journal* pub.
- 1949 'Memoir' of Eliot & Pound. *Jonson* pub. Completes *Saint Spiv*. Tynan reads it. Takes Orme Lane flat. *Stratton* perf., Brighton (& Mercury, 1950).
- 1950 Translates Cocteau's *Diary of A Film (La Belle et le Bete)*. Writing *Our Lady's Tumbler*. To Rome to see *Lucretia*. Meets Anna Proclemer. Trip to Palma with R-M. Meets Robert Graves. Madrid: sees Zorilia's *Don Juan*. To Paris. *Saint Spiv* at Watergate as *Nothing Up My Sleeve*. Begins own *Don Juan*. Begins *Christopher Sly* opera with Arthur Oldham. *Mongrel* poems.
- 1951 'Libretti' articles. Stays with Kennedy-Cox for *Our Lady's Tumbler*, Salisbury Cathedral. Anna to London. *Selected Writings of Gandhi*. *Tobacco Cultivation in England* pub.
- 1952 Drama criticism (*Eve. Standard*). To Bochum, Dusseldorf for German *Stratton*. R-M & R to Rome. Visits Rapallo. Oldham pulls out of *Sly*. Antonia to Devon as secretary. Finishing *Don Juan*. *Jan at The Blue Fox*, *The Last Adam*, pub. Working on Pope's *Letters*. Stays at Orme Lane. To New York for election coverage for *Evening Standard*.

- Visits Pound in Washington. Begins plans for Taw and Torridge Festival. Begins *The Death of Satan*.
- 1953 1st Taw and Torridge Festival, Devon. Topolski designs set of *Juan*. Meets Oscar Lewenstein, Devon. *Christopher Sly*'s score taken up by Tom Eastwood. To Salzburg, then Edinburgh Festival. Visits Wyndham Lewis. Begins work on poem *Judas*. Kennedy-Cox involvement re. perf. of *Don Juan* for appropriate theatre. 1st impulse towards ESC plans. *Where I Live* pub. Article: 'When Women Rule The World' (*Daily Sketch*). Weekly column 'Diary of A Tramp' (*Punch*). Asked by Muggeridge to compile the *Punch Revue*.
- 1954 To Austria. R-M in clinic, *Satan* perf., 2nd Devon Festival. Continues ESC plans. *Don Juan & Jan's Journal* pub. New stage company officialised.
- 1955 Writing to artists for *Punch Revue*. Plans for ESC at Kingsway. Puts on *Punch Revue* with Lewenstein. Antonia still in Devon. Writing *Playback & Solitudes*. ESC meetings begin. Taw and Torridge Festival. *A Man Called Judas* perf. R undergoing psychoanalysis. Working on *The Portrait* (resumed as *Seven Deadly Virtues* in '61). To Spain. Completes *St. Peter*.
- 1956 R, R-M & A to Paris. See Fabbri's *Le Seducteur*. Decides to adapt. Commission, *The Janitor*. Works on *The Catalyst/The Philanderer*. The Royal Court opens its 1st season. Incl. *Look Back in Anger*, *The Mulberry Bush* and *Juan & Satan* (prod. by Devine). 4th Taw and Torridge Festival. Revising *Catalyst*.
- 1957 Antonia leaves Devon. Giraudoux's *Apollo* commission. Letters to Colin Wilson. Finishes complete *Judas* poem and the *Catalyst*. Submits script to Lord Chamberlain (stamped Nov. 1958). At Orme Lane. *Apollo De Bellac* pub. and perf., RC. Novel version of *St. Spiv*. Piper to illustrate *Judas*. Corresp. with Eliot re. *Solitudes*.
- 1958 Now aged 43. Monica/Gretchen staying in Devon. Defence of Pound in article: 'Guilty?' Virginia Maskell cast, rehearsals begin for *Catalyst* at Arts Theatre. Censorship controversy, Maskell to Mead. Works on Pound release petition. R-M disapproval begins. Writing *The Pilgrim Fathers/Preface to America*. Lives Dolphin Sq. Arrangement of *Solitudes* for pub. 1st divorce petition from R-M.
- 1959 Maskell ultimatum. R-M in Weymouth flat. Continued divorce proceedings. Eastwood still on *Sly*. *The Rebel* conceived for BBC radio. Writing *St. Spiv* musical. Begins *The Urchin*. Maskell's garden idea and International Green Cross campaign.
- 1960 *Judas* pub. R in London flat. VM visits nursing home. Working on *Abelard and Heloise*. R, R-M & VM all go to psychiatrist. *Solitudes and Other Poems* pub. (Faber). Writing *The Rehearsal* (perf. as *Still Life* 1970. *Abelard* perf., Arts. 'Wilde' serialisation (*Evening Standard*). *Christopher Sly* perf., RC, Sunday night production. Complaint memo & attack of ESC policies. To Brittany with R-M. Adapts *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Sillitoe).
- 1961 *Abelard* published (Faber). Visits Pound, Rapallo.. *Abelard* perf., Arts Theatre, attacked there. Writing *Seven*. Family conflict re. divorce. Begins *Islands*. VM engaged. Monica/Gretchen leaves Devon.
- 1962 To Rome, then Madrid, *Catalyst* fully licensed. Begins research for *Man*. 'Intimate Portrait' of Harewood. *Folksongs* book with Marion Stein. Sends Begins research on Shakespeare/ Bacon authorship. Adapting Marcel Achard's *Jean de la Lune* as the *Comedy of Lovers*. 1st volume of autobiography proofed as *The Importance of Being*.
- 1963 Translating Walser's *The Rabbit Race*. *Menage A Trois* (*Catalyst*) perf., Lyric. *Rabbit Race* at Edinburgh festival, censorship controversy. Idea for pub. of Gaudier prints. To Rome, then Venice. Estrangement from Eliot re. indiscreet Pound refs. in *Islands*. Browne reads *Judas*, St. Paul's Cathedral.
- 1964 50 years old. Finishes 1st draft, *The Rebel*. Publication of *Islands*. To Copenhagen with R-M. *The Perfect Mistress* story. To Kenya. *Solitudes* perf., Edinburgh Festival - Julian Bream. OBAFG perf., Exeter. *Devon Folksong* pub. UK. Refusals for revivals and production of R's plays begin.
- 1965 To Vienna for *Catalyst*. Publishers discussing volume 2 of autobiography. Gaskill's criticism of R's plays. Deeper into scientific research. *Catalyst* perf., Austria. To Vienna for *Satan*.

- 1966 Lectures in Berne on science and poetic theory. Discussing cosmology with Herman Bondi. Article: *Why This Guilt About Ownership?* Writing *Promus* (64-67) diary. Prosecution of Bond's *Saved*. Writing play *The Gift*. Working on proofs of *Enemies*. Begins film-script of *Girl on A Motorcycle* (Jack Cardiff). *Devon and Cornwall* pub. Translating Sartre's *The Trojan Women*. Resignation from the ESC. *Trojan* perf., Edinburgh Festival. Cuts to the *Rebel*. The *Precarious Garden* (inc. *Enemies*) now in typescript form. To Paris.
- 1967 Finishes *Girl on A...* Amassing the *Precarious Garden*. Now it includes unpublished *Obsessed* part. Delays in proofs of vol. 2: *Enemies*. To Delhi, after Vancouver. Completing *Man* (Pts 1, 2, & 3) Finalising *Rebel*. Article: *Freedom from Material Objects*. VM writes poem: 'I've opted out of life.'
- 1968 VM's suicide. *Enemies* in proof. Works on vol. 3, & 4 draft autobiography up to 1968 (now amassed from *Promus* journals). Finishes story, *Mandala*. Continuing *Man*. *Rebel* filmed. Begins Britten memoir. *Girl on A Motorcycle* prod. Letter from Mary Pound re. RD 'upsetting people'. *Enemies* published.
- 1969 Working on *Man* Pt. 4. *Rebel* aired, BBC. *The Perfect Mistress* stories pub. Begins *A Kettle of Fish* stories. Claims against *Girl on A Motorcycle*. *Unpopular Poems* pub.
- 1970 Intense work on *Man*. Working on 'Virginia book', *Obsessed*. Begins *Lenin* screenplay. The *Rehearsal* as *Still Life* filmed for BBC. Collating *Collected Plays*. *Man* Pt. 1. pub. Working on fairy stories, *Mr & Mrs Mouse*. Writing *Paprikas*. Encouraged to begin play on Gandhi (Pyrelal).
- 1971 To Mombasa. Writing *Man*, Pt. 4. Research for *Lenin*. *Man* Pt. 2 pub. *Collected Plays* & *A Kettle of Fish* stories pub.
- 1972 William Wahl interviews R in Devon. Adapting Lazare Koberinsky's *Sloshed*. Writes numerous opinionated articles. Works on *Man* Pt. 5. *Gandhi: Selected Writings* pub. Pound dies. R appears on Westward television Arts programme.
- 1973 Teaches Tufts drama classes. Then to Barbados. Begins *Encyclopaedia of Ignorance* research. Finalises *The Precarious Garden*, vols. 3 & 4 of autobiography. *Dante* pub. *Man* Pt. 3 pub.
- 1974 Works on *Encyclopaedia* and *The Will* story. *Man* Pts 4 & 5 pub.
- 1975 Works on *Encyclopaedia*. Writes intro. to *Facets of Crime* stories. Contributes 'Opinion' articles to *Telegraph* Sunday Magazine.
- 1976 *Working With Britten* proofed. Writes *The Ward* poem with R-M illustrations. More *Paprikas*. Finishes *Sloshed*.
- 1977 Alters/adapts Wilde's *Requiescat*. *Mr & Mrs Mouse* pub. Revisions to *Lenin*. Writing own epitaphs. Britten dies. Writing *A Tale of Tails* fairy stories. *Encyclopaedia of Ignorance* pub. *For The Few* pub. *Obsessed* (vol. 3 of *The Precarious Garden* autobiography) pub.
- 1978 Alterations to *Britten* memoir required. Begins collating *Selected Poems*. Works on *The Hammer* and *The Pickle/Lying Truths*. More conservative articles printed. *Selected Poems* pub.
- 1979 Writing *Girl Friday* and *The Jungle*. Interviews Harewood in Barbados for his autobiography. Idea for *Marx Refuted* book. More frequently ill.
- 1980 Begins *Schubert* play. Continues contributing 'Opinion' articles (*Telegraph*). Collating *Biased Opinions* essays. To California. Compiling *Marx Refuted* with Colin Wilson. Writes *An Interview With God*. Idea for *Critics' Gaffes* book. *Schubert* perf., London.
- 1981 Abroad for winter. *Britten* memoir pub., Reworks 'Pound memoir'. *Schubert* perf., Nottingham. Finishes *Lenin*. *A Tale of Tails* pub. Collating *Collected Poems*. Begins *The Encyclopaedia of Medical Ignorance*. *Lying Truths* pub., US. Continues writing 'Opinion' articles for *Telegraph*.
- 1982 *Critics' Gaffes* pub. *Collected Poems* pub. Continues work on *Marx Refuted*. Preparing book based on interviews with Herman Bondi. Writes *The Testament* poem. Becomes increasingly ill. Dies in June.

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