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The Spiritual Work of Art in the Poetry of Robert Duncan

Abstract: In this essay I argue Hegelian phenomenology helps us to see that language can be a form of postmodern spirituality. I aim to contextualize postmodern poetry in a dialogue between spirituality and art that, I suggest, we can join Hegel in viewing as older than Christianity. Both *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Robert Duncan's postmodernism show us that language is a spiritual means for transcendence of the self. In the first section of the essay I look at how Duncan used syntactic choices in the writing of poems as the occasion for self-transformation, contrasting the models of poetic structure in two of his books of the 1960s, *The Opening of the Field* (1960) and *Bending the Bow* (1968), on the basis of what these two different structural models foreground about Duncan's syntactic decisions. In the second section of the essay, I analyze Hegel's phenomenological narrative of the hymn, focusing on his discussion of the role that language plays in this dimension of spiritual life. In the concluding section, I return to Robert Duncan's later poetry, arguing that Hegel's conception of the hymn can help us to see that Duncan moved in his creative work from using syntax as a means for self-transformation to turning to it as a resource for self-transcendence.

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Postmodern poetry in English decisively changed how poets engage with self-expression in the twenty-first century. Postmoderns showed that lyric writing which refuses the concept of selfhood—and related ideas like authenticity and integrity—can articulate innovative, improvisatory modes of consciousness, creating obviously original states of thinking. The poetry of nonself expression, if I may offer that term for it, has thoroughly transformed fashion in poetry.

Charles Olson was the acknowledged leader of this movement. One of its initial and enduring luminaries is Robert Duncan. He is an interestingly problematic figure in and for this tradition, however, because of his association of form with the desire for self-transformation and self-transcendence. Unlike Olson, Duncan thought of poetic form as a means for ecstatic self-transcendence. In this essay, I propose that Duncan's postmodernity shows the continuing relevance of Hegelian thought to twenty-first-century poetics. Specifically, I argue that the concept of

language Hegel develops in his discussion of the hymn in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) can help readers to see the spiritual dimensions of Duncan's explorations of the experience of nonself expression.

By offering in *Phenomenology of Spirit* a phenomenological narrative in which spirit is expressed through various forms of selfhood, Hegel can make a contribution to our understanding of postmodern poetry in particular and what has been called the postmodern condition more generally. Specifically, postmodern skepticism about the coherence of the self is anticipated by Hegel, and he responds to this skepticism with an idea that must also find its place in a sufficiently diverse story of postmodernism. In his narrative, the self is ultimately transcended in the experience of the spiritual work of art. Hegelian phenomenology reveals that language can be a form of postmodern spirituality.

The antipathy to religious faith that runs through one strand of modernism stands between Hegel's Christian phenomenology and postmodernism. By telling the story of Duncan's spiritual postmodernism in a phenomenological way, I do not mean to ignore this crucial difference. Rather, I aim to contextualize postmodern poetry in a dialogue between spirituality and art that, I suggest, we can join Hegel in viewing as older than Christianity. Both *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Duncan's postmodernism show us that language is a spiritual means for transcendence of the self.

It is important to articulate from the start why I choose a passage of Hegel's *Phenomenology* which is merely a point of development in his narrative of spirit and not the ultimate destination (which is absolute knowledge, philosophically attained). After his discussion of the hymn as a spiritual work Hegel goes on to discuss spirit as expressed through revealed religion and then philosophy. But for a story of the development of a postmodern poet like Duncan, religion and philosophy are not available as models for the kind of self-transcendence that poetic form offers. Informed by a postmodern skepticism with respect to the grand narratives about salvation that support Christianity, Duncan makes poems instead of making prayers. And his attention to poetic form—which I will discuss in what follows—makes the abstraction of philosophy less of a resource than an obstacle.

What draws me to Hegel's description of the hymn is also a particular dimension of his larger discussion of the role of language in the phenomenology of spirit. The spiritual work of art is the last point in Hegel's narrative at which language per se is essential to the development of spirit. And so it is the furthest point that language can be taken in a spiritual poetics. Seeing the similarities between Duncan's poetics and Hegel's analysis of what is spiritual in the work of language can allow us to see how much of phenomenology is still available to a postmodern poetic consciousness.

Duncan's Self-Transformations

As an example of Duncan's early organization of the relations among poetry, selfhood and desire, take a work of the early 1950s, "Source," a prose poem in which he comes to language through the metaphor of a stream and traces its urge toward oceanic melding with a sense of the split in language between the reflection of the mind and the unceasing currents of experience:

When I was about twelve—I suppose about the age of Narcissus—I fell in love with a mountain stream. There, most intensely for a summer, staring into its limpid cold rush, I knew the fullest pain of longing. To be of it, entirely, to be out of my being and enter the Other clear impossible element. The imagination, old shape-shifter, stretch itself painfully to comprehend the beloved form.... I write this only to explain some of the old ache of longing that revives when I apprehend again the currents of language—rushing upon their way, or in pools, vacant energies below meaning, hidden to our purposes. Often, reading or writing, the fullest pain returns, and I see or hear or almost know a pure element of clearness, an utter movement, an absolute rush along its own way, that makes of even the words under my pen a foreign element that I may crave—as for kingdom or salvation or freedom—but never know. (*Selected Poems*, 52–53)

The view of the role of selfhood in poetics expressed by this poem is not a fascination with the work's possibilities for channeling descriptive elegance into insight—the fashion of its time. The narcissism this poem confesses is not pathologized, either, because it is transitional—it has to do with the poem's capacity to lead the self to dissolve into the transpersonal energies available in language through the materializing force of that self's desiring. The "fullest pain" Duncan knows in writing is a longing for the element resting in the "currents of language," surfaces that reflect their escape from him in the moment that they reflect his presence. Making poems takes him to a domain of ecstatic experience where he is aware that the condition of his access to this foreign "absolute" is the form-giving work of writing.

I want in this section of the essay to look at how Duncan came to think of his own syntactic choices in the writing of the poem as the occasion for self-transformation, contrasting the models of poetic structure in two of his books of the 1960s, *The Opening of the Field* (1960) and *Bending the Bow* (1968), on the basis of what these two different structural models foreground about Duncan's syntactic decisions. Two poetic projects—*The Structure of Rime* and *Passages*, respectively—inform these two books, the first of which involves a labor to fulfill an ideal of grammaticality through the poem, and the second of which seeks to undo that expectation of grammaticality in the service of semantic excess. Both of these

books also have near their beginnings a relatively formally simple, first-person, beautiful lyric poem. In these acutely personal poems, I will argue, we can see Duncan's yearning self-transformation most intensely expressed in the terms of his underlying strategies for framing his syntactic choices. So looking at a commonality between these poems should give us a point of contrast with the first person lyric of his 1985 work *Ground War: Before the War*, "Interrupted Forms," in which the consequences of his re-conceptualization of the relation of syntax to poetic structure are striking, and self-transcendence rather than self-transformation seems to be the aim.

The Opening of the Field, the poems of which were written between 1953 and 1959, is the first of Duncan's works to show the influence of Charles Olson's idea of open field composition, an aesthetic he came to know in the course of his teaching at Black Mountain College in 1955. In this respect, the first poem of the volume, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," is distinctive because it was written two years before Duncan went to Black Mountain, and so bears none of the marks of Olson's influence that the subsequent poems of the volume do. Yet already one gets from this poem a powerful sense of the yearning for transformation that informs Duncan's writing, and of the role of poetic structure in leading him to it. For Duncan describes the field in which the poem will occur as

an eternal pasture folded in all thought...
Wherefrom fall all architectures I am
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved
whose flowers are flames lit to the lady. (4, 8-10)

Invoking the beloved lady, the celestial rose and the three-line stanza of the *Paradiso*, Duncan signals from the outset the "likenesses" his poem will share with Dante's spiritual journey. So it is with this structural invocation that his volume as a series of poems steps forward, compelled by both the passion of the Christian visionary and the direction of his will, the ecstatic dissolution of a self drawn slowly into articulation.

But, as in "Source," it seems here that only the processes of writing make possible such transformation. In this respect, the escape-through-return enacted by "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" is a transforming discovery for Duncan, because it allows him to search through the "architecture" of language to the source of such freedom—a liberty imagined as a parental permission to join other children in play. As the first five lines put this:

OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO A MEADOW

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

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought (1-4)

The poem is dressed up in the world of childhood: the “scene made-up” of the meadow, the pert naming of what is and is not “mine,” and, in following lines, the “Queen Under the Hill” of nursery rhyme and the “children’s game / of ring a round of roses told” (7, 17-18). Duncan is searching in the real field of the poem’s language for permission corresponding to the one that set a boy free, in his recollected childhood, to an actual meadow. And it is in the “secret” of the “children’s game” at the center and circumference of this poem that he finds it:

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

whose secret we see in a children’s game
of ring a round of roses told. (14-18)

This cluster of images of evening-time release recall the children at recess in the ring, the fields of gazing grain and the setting sun in the third stanza of Emily Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death—.” And perhaps Dickinson’s ghostly presence in these words brings Duncan’s poem to its pivotal moment more quickly than he would have reached it otherwise. But, perhaps more importantly, back of Duncan’s poem—perhaps behind Dickinson’s poem as well—is another lyric, “Ring around the Rosy” of the fourteenth century, with its frightened and frightening circular energies of falling and rising again. The “secret” shared by the grass blowing east—as if mowed down by the setting sun—and the ring of falling and rising children is the hopeful knowledge of the impermanence of death, the intuited promise of eternal return. Having come to this secret through the incantatory language that brought him to the meadow, such recognition lets Duncan speak the poem’s final transformation in the cadence of certainty:

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

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is. (19-23)

One elegance of this graceful poem is that we do not immediately hear how its last five lines return its first five: the first four lines of each sequence begin with the same words, revisiting the earlier phrases, and the corresponding lines' meanings are intimate reflections of each other. In the circular course of this poem, only the register of its speech has changed, risen to a new degree of knowing: a "scene made-up" has become "a given property," the "made place" has become the knowledge "that certain bounds hold against chaos," the "eternal pasture folded" has become the "everlasting omen of what is." The tones of law, philosophy and theology have replaced child-like talk. This poem has gone to school—the school of meditation on the eternal secrets of the world as they are revealed in song. Even in its strangest rhyme, in which the "s"-close of "chaos" and the stressed short-"i" of "permission" join to make its last "is," the poem works to take shape from its language's materials, the foreign element through which it rises and falls.

This spontaneous dynamic of transformation takes place within a formal structure, however, which sets a definite parameter around the syntactic shape that final sentence can take. The way that each of the first words of the last five lines echo the first words of the corresponding lines at the beginning of the poem—the first four literally ("often," "as if it," "that," "that is") and the fifth effectively ("an eternal" becomes "everlasting")—controls the sentence that may emerge. Rich as it is with its own sonic and connotative life, the last sentence of this poem happens on the template of lines that the opening of the poem has set for it.

By finding in the beginning of each line a guideline around which to have the sentence move, Duncan puts the tercet-base of the poem in the service of his aim for a transforming wrestling match with the ideal of the sentence that he calls, in the next poem of the book, "angelic Syntax" (11). It is this engagement with the numinous sentence of the laws of grammar that shapes the thirteen-part sequence of the book, *The Structure of Rime*, the first poem of which begins:

I ask the unyielding Sentence that shows Itself forth in the
language as I make it,

Speak! For I name myself your master, who come to
serve.

Writing is first a search in obedience. (1-5)

The deepest appeal of this "search in obedience," passage after passage in *The Structure of Rime* series suggests, is that it will give Duncan the occasion to meld into the foreign element of language. Take as an example, later in the first of the series, the fantasy of religious melding that continues the metaphor of Jacob's wrestling match with the angel and shoots it through with allusions to the ground this encounter has in writing:

O Lasting Sentence,
 sentence after sentence I make in your image. In the feet that
 measure the dance of my pages I hear cosmic intoxications of the
 man I will be. (30–33)

Only in the thrill of escape into writing can Duncan's own feet meld with an idea of prosodic feet and disappear into the pages of his book. In his subjection to the sentence of syntax Duncan glimpses and occasionally realizes a transformation of himself through the perpetual, indeed everlasting, motion of language.

Standing behind the multitude of poetic structures in *The Opening of the Field*, then—prose poems, ballads, open field compositions—is an ideal of the sentence into whose unfolding shape Duncan's consciousness can meld. One underlying standard of formal completeness that underwrites many of the poems in the book is that they find their end in a sentence like the last one in "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," where the linking of words together seems to be caused as much by the forces set loose within the poem as by Duncan's own intentions. Consider as an example the various energies held in the closing lines of the last poem in the book, "Food for Fire, Food for Thought," a piece in which Duncan's search in obedience grows out of the statement that "Language obeyd flares tongues in obscure matter":

We are close enough to childhood, so easily purged
 of whatever we thought we were to be,

flamey threads of firstness go out from your touch.

Flickers of unlikely heat
 at the edge of our belief bud forth. (32–36)

These lines seem to name the experience of open field composition, finding in liminal space, the edge of the known, the surprising energy that drives a poem forward, named not as the "fire" of the title of the poem, as what consumes and illuminates, but only as what we discover at its periphery: flickers of light, rushes of heat. We no sooner come into the proximity of fire as an image—perhaps the archetypal symbol of the permanence of change—than it seems to become a new flower, budding away from us and its own center. Yet what is elusive and suggestive as an image is made immediate by the returning sounds of the line. The long "e"s at the end of "unlikely" and in "heat" make one feel the warm constriction in the glottis in the only sound which briefly interrupts them, the fricative "h" of heat. And the two lines are also joined in metrical parallel for the first seven beats: they make a heptasyllabic couplet, the meter of "childhood" and nursery rhymes,

ending on the slant-rhyme “heat” and “belief.” Heard this way, the second line has as a coda two one-syllable words, each of which begins with a labial consonant (“b” and “f”) and ends with sounds in which the articulation of the breath has moved back to the tongue (“d” and “th”). This shift from the lips to the tongue enacts a repetition of the way that the tongue and the breath themselves, in the course of speaking poetry, shape the sounds we make—words open through the lips and bud forth from the edge of the tongue, the warm wavering of breath. As each of its words follows the one before it, this sentence moves its vision out of the writing mind and into the speaking mouth. The language of this passage has remained open to a shifting, evanescent image that seems to grow of out the description preceding it, and the progression of its sounds have made it live in the body.

As I interpret the notion of structural completeness that shapes most of the poems in *The Opening of the Field*, what makes each poem whole is Duncan’s having found a sentence that enacts the fulfillment of both a syntactic parameter and a desire for transformation. The poems move forward toward an ideal of completion in which the sentence enacts a transformation—whether lexically, as in “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow,” or phonetically, as in “Food for Fire, Food for Thought.” The role of structural parameters in achieving this transformation, by means of establishing repeated key-words in a five-line sentence or by means of an underlying heptasyllabic rhyme, is to guide the sentence into that expressive shape. In Duncan’s analogy for syntax, in “The Law I Love is Major Mover,” with the angel Jacob wrestled who gave him both a limp and a new name, syntax is most clearly seen as it works in shaping the volume’s sufficiently “strong sentence,” at once an energy to be restrained and a vehicle of transformation.

This much I take to have been the role of syntax in defining the structural completeness of the poems of *The Opening of the Field*. Over the course of the 1960s, Duncan continued to write poems in *The Structure of Rime* series, and numbers twenty-two through twenty-six appeared in his 1968 *Bending the Bow*. But over those years, too, Duncan’s celebration of heterogeneity and flux had intensified and come to inflect his poetics in an increasingly noticeable way, a shift in values which he acknowledged in the very first words of that volume’s preface: “We enter again and again the last days of our own history, for everywhere living productive forms in the evolution of forms fail, weaken, or grow monstrous, destroying the terms of their existence” (i). Duncan’s sense of the poet’s participation in the life of his language is as present as it was in “Source,” but this perspective is now shaded with a complementary interest in the decadence or unmaking of forms. And this field of interest has become the domain of a second ongoing series, *Passages*, which with its 30 sections in the book counterbalances the exploration of the sentence in *The Structure of Rime*. The relation of poetry writing to nonself

reading of the sentence by continuing to link phrases to the isolated “here” that is the last plausible word in a sentence punctuated as this one is. In this passage the pivotal, isolated word “here” is both where “we Her people are” and where the “Eternal lamps” are lit, but it is also the word at which one sentence splits irremediably into two. The word is the last in one sentence and the first in another, and so it sends its syntactical influences to “resonate where they will,” at once forward into how we read the words to come and backwards in our attempt to square what we have already heard with present phrases.

Duncan’s urge to find a phrase that will re-organize all of the meanings implicit in its connections to the language around it seems most striking, in my view, not in the *Passages* sequence, but in a poem in some ways most like “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow,” a first-person lyric written in 1964, “My Mother Would Be a Falconress.” Originally a part of a text called “A Lammas Tiding,” which remains in *Bending the Bow* as a preface to the poem, “My Mother Would Be a Falconress” elaborates a dream in which Duncan was visited by a hawk, narrating over fourteen stanzas a vision of his own unsuccessful attempt as a gerfalcon to fly free of his mother’s wrist. The first three stanzas of the searching poem read:

MY MOTHER WOULD BE A FALCONRESS

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

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

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

Again and again in this poem narration in the stanzas takes the same shape, moving through the description of flight and then falling into the language of constraint. And each of the first twelve stanzas, all between three and eight lines

long, re-enacts this drama of failed escape in its language until, in the thirteenth stanza, the frame of reference for the story is suddenly changed:

My mother would be a falconress,
and even now, years after this,
when the wounds I left her had surely heald,
and the woman is dead... (63–66)

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

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

I would be a falcon and go free.
I tread her wrist and wear the hood,
talking to myself, and would draw blood. (67–71)

A dramatic phrase of four words—“the woman is dead”—has cut the poem loose from its repetitive patterns of flight and constraint, closing this poem in words that make a striking transformation of the problematic phrase with which the poem began. From the perspective of Duncan’s urge for the transformative phrase, *my mother would be a falconress* and *the woman is dead* have three telling similarities: they are sentences with a single subject and a two-part verb phrase, the subject of both sentences is woman, and the verb of both sentences is a form of “to be.” In a sense, the poem charts Duncan’s own working toward the ability to get past the invented word “falconress” of the first sentence to speak the wish or recognition of the second, to go from the conditional or habitual past tense of “would” into “is” and at the same time introduce with shocking directness the combination of femininity and mortality that has lurked behind its dream-figure from the start.

Comparing this first-person visionary lyrical poem to the similar one of eleven years earlier, “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow,” it seems clear that Duncan’s interest in writing to a moment of self-transformation remains. But the same shift in strategies for coming to this expressive moment of change that led him away from the *Structure of Rime* series and toward *Passages* can be seen at work in this later poem too. The change in Duncan’s aim for this first-person poem is that he wants to use the structure of the poem to direct syntax in the service of expressing a transformed repetition. For whereas in the earlier poem the repetition of first words in a structure of lines led to a final sentence whose lexical changes within an established syntax embody an ideal of maturation into freedom, in this later poem the structure of stanzas which narrate a repeating

process of flight and constraint leads to a reworking of the phrase that had set the poem in motion. A network of relations is transformed by the phrase that emerges into the poem because the emergent phrase is itself a transformed repetition of an earlier phrase, a change that the stanza-structure of the poem invites and that becomes, as Duncan had suggested in his preface to the book, a “figure we had not seen in which the joining is clear where we are” (x). As Duncan’s continuing to compile grammatically irreconcilable phrases after the “here” in “Tribal Memories” established a plurality of sentences toward which the poem was moving, and so complicated the relations among phrases around it, the shift from “mother” to “the woman,” from habitual past to present, and from the invented word “falconsess” to the blunt “dead” disrupts the arc-shaped energies of the previous stanzas, making clear in a closing figure the poem’s lengthy revelation of the depths of its grief and rage.

Hegel’s Hymn

These structural strategies for following syntactic parameters into language that could express some transformation in the self came into his poetics even as Duncan was becoming increasingly restless with the relation of selfhood to poetry. One relatively neglected creation of his next period of increasing dissatisfaction with the experience of the self, the notion of interrupted forms, I will discuss at the end of the essay. But before getting there, I want to offer Hegel’s exploration of the language of self-transcendence from the beginning of the seventh chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—the hymn. This notion of the hymn is germane to Duncan’s work, not only because the presiding influence of the *Passages* poems came from Julian’s *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*, but because religious and liturgical analogies became recurrent in Duncan’s writings on poetics in the second half of the 1960’s, and often appeared in contexts where his urge for self-transcendence in poetry was most clearly stated. “The most real is given and we have fallen away,” he wrote in the 1964 essay “Towards an Open Universe,” “but the most real is in the falling revealing itself in what is happening. Between the god *in* the story and the god *of* the story, the form, the realization of what is happening, stirs the poet” (81). Writing is an occasion for merger with the divine through surrender of personal intention, Duncan had come fiercely to believe. By 1968, he could put the same point in *The Truth and Life of Myth* with undisguised zeal: “the poet understands the truth of the anguish of Christ’s passion as a truth of poetic form” (76).

Hegel’s discussion of conscience in the third and final section of the sixth chapter of the *Phenomenology* culminates in a scene he describes as the breaking

of the hard heart. It is a moment of personal transformation, in his rendering, as the mind which has listened to the conscience of another confess chooses not to hear as a beautiful soul, one who contrasts the beauty of his own soul with the penitent's wickedness, but rather to acknowledge that the selfishness of the other is also within himself. As three times before in Hegel's narrative, this emergence of identity where there had been difference is ultimately manifest in language, as the inward unity of two distinct forms of selfishness is expressed in what he calls the "reconciling *Yea*" (409). In this paradoxical utterance of identification with an alien selfishness, Hegel's narration of the development of the self through three phases of reconstruction has literally gone as far as it can. For what has been transformed in the recognition of another's confession as an aspect of oneself is not simply one's idea of what is significant about oneself but rather one's very notion of the constraints of selfhood. This moment of mutual speaking of an affirming, reconciling word becomes no longer a moment of self-transformation but rather of self-transcendence, in which the dialectic can no longer take otherness into the circumference of the self but through which consciousness seems to reach past selfhood to its creative source. As Hegel puts this:

The reconciling *Yea*, in which the two 'I's let go their antithetical *existence*, is the *existence* of the 'I' which has expanded into a duality, and therein remains identical with itself, and, in its complete externalization and opposite, possesses the certainty of itself: it is God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge. (409; original italics)

This externalization through words of an intuited identity with an antithetical form of selfhood—effectively through speech making the desire of another one's own—is not only the omega in spirit's secular development but, in Hegel's view, the alpha of a religious consciousness, the language of an immediate knowledge of God.

The shift from looking at the forms of selfhood progressively expanded by grappling with and incorporating otherness to exploring forms of consciousness larger than any individual self—the shift from the sixth chapter, "Spirit," to the seventh chapter, "Religion"—comes three quarters of the way through Hegel's book. He is moving toward the pinnacle of his dialectic of consciousness in what he calls in the eighth chapter "Absolute Knowledge," a mode of thinking in which there can be no more dialectical steps because there is no longer any distinction between the knower and the object of knowledge. This shift from spirit to religion leaves no further development for the self, since Hegel understands religion as a phase in which consciousness only owns selfhood through its connection to a creative power which resides in an object of its thought. Religion is a perpetually

foreign realm to the self because it is a realm of understanding in which the self recognizes in the objects it perceives emblems of the force which created it and the world around it:

The self-knowing Spirit is, in religion, immediately its own pure self-consciousness. Those forms of it which have been considered [in the sixth chapter], viz. the true Spirit, the self-alienated Spirit, and the Spirit that is certain of itself, together constitute Spirit in its *consciousness* which, confronting its *world*, does not recognize itself therein. But in conscience it brings itself, as well as its objective world in general, into subjection, as also its picture-thinking [i.e. mental representations] and its specific Notions, and is now a self-consciousness that communes with its own self. In this, Spirit conceived as object, has for itself the significance of being the universal Spirit that contains within itself all essence and all actuality; yet it is not in the form of free actuality or the apparent independence of Nature. (411; original italics)

In its reconciling yea, consciousness has found a voice which can speak not in contrast with the objective world but through it, conveying a force that leads this consciousness to seek out objects in which to find the ultimate creative source of that word reflected.

The arguments which follow from this description of religion offer a handful of ways in which language works in the service of this objectified source of inner reality—the oracle, the epic, comedy and tragedy—each of which involves an externalization that carries the narrative of spirit further than we will track it. But there is in the first moment of language in the realm of religion a particularly archaic kind of objectified self-transcendence which resonates with Duncan's poetics. Hegel calls this transcendent voice the language of the hymn.

Most important for recognizing how the hymn is to be distinguished from the language of the phases of the self discussed in the preceding sections of Hegel's work is to understand where it emerges in the course of the development of the religious consciousness. For the hymn is a model of speech whose emergence is initially described in terms of the progression of religious fascinations from nature to art:

The first reality of Spirit is the Notion of religion itself, or religion as *immediate*, and therefore Natural Religion. In this, Spirit knows itself as its object in a natural or immediate shape. The second reality, however, is necessarily that in which Spirit knows itself in the shape of a *superceded* natural existence, or of the self. This, therefore, is the Religion of Art; for the shape raises itself to the form of the self through the creative activity of consciousness whereby this beholds in its object its act or the self. (416; original italics)

The worship of art, in Hegel's view, is a more profound understanding of the source of the self than the worship of nature because only in art can the self's independence from the non-sentient matter in which it lives be reflected back to it. Only in those forms of religious consciousness that contemplate objects the mind has mediated can the intelligence that created the self be found and worshipped.

In Hegel's view, the shift away from a religion of nature to a religion of art begins with depictions of animals and graduates into the making of statues of gods. These progressions move consciousness in the direction of finding before it the transcendent source of its own selfhood, and yet, Hegel notes repeatedly, what these human-made representations of the human shape cannot reflect back is the particularity, the individuality, of the mind which would worship them because the maker of these artworks will never find in them the source of his creativity, his innermost self, reflected back to him. However much self-transcendence is fostered by the worship of a sculptural totem of the human form, what still cannot be dissolved in this contemplation is the worshipper's inwardness, which does not find reflected there the source of its own urge for self-expression.

Hegel argues throughout the *Phenomenology* that the only vehicle through which the self's particularity can become the source of a new depth of identification is language. The analogous moment of this rescue of the dialectic by language in the seventh chapter, however, is complicated by the crucially non-human source of the inwardness to be expressed, a wrinkle which inflects and resolves itself in Hegel's narration of how the mute statue leads to the hymn. At first, in Hegel's view, the statue becomes religiously central but still leaves a margin of alienation where the inexpressive separateness of its physical body leaves nothing for the expressive dimensions of the psyche which created it to identify with:

The artist, then, learns in his work that he did not produce a being *like himself*. From it, it is true, there comes back to him a consciousness in the sense that an admiring crowd reveres it as the Spirit which is their own essence. But this inspiration, since it returns to him his self-consciousness only as admiration, is rather a confession to the artist that the inspired work is not on the same level as himself[.] (429; original italics)

Only at this point of intensified awareness of the aspect of selfhood which still cannot be found in the transcendent object does language become the appropriate medium of the religious consciousness, satisfying a particular demand for an externalization of the most deeply inward:

The work of art therefore demands another element of its existence, the god another mode of coming forth than this, in which, out of the depths of his creative night, he descends into the opposite, into externality, into the

determination of the Thing which lacks self-consciousness. This higher element is Language—an outer reality that is immediately self-conscious existence. Just as the *individual* self-consciousness is *immediately* present in language, so it is also immediately present as a *universal* infection; the complete separation into independent selves is at the same time the fluidity and the universally communicated unity of the many selves; language is the soul existing as soul. (429–430; original italics)

Language has become the medium in which the essence of the soul can be manifest, because through words that force which has created the self steps “out of the depths of his creative night” and becomes expressive of precisely the kind of particularity it created when it made the artist’s mind.

Hegel shifts paradigms for religious art from the statute to the hymn, then, in order to convey what it means for the creative self to come into contact with its creator by merging in a moment of expression. When a god takes language for his shape, the very act by which he created the human individual, long cloaked by worship of mute forms, re-enters time. By joining in speaking the hymn’s patterns of words that have been inspired by a transcendent force, the individual self becomes reconceived as the self-consciousness of a god:

The god, therefore, who has language for the element of his shape is the work of art that is in its own self inspired, that possesses immediately in its outer existence the pure activity which, when it existed as a Thing, was in contrast to it. In other words, self-consciousness, in the objectification of its essence, abides immediately with itself. Abiding thus with itself in its essence, it is *pure thought*, or the devotion whose *inwardness* in the hymn has at the same time an *outer* existence. (430; original italics)

From here, in Hegel’s narration, there can be no return to the kinds of self-consciousness he had discussed in the sixth chapter, all of which depended on understanding oneself in terms of new and exemplary principles. The self has been dissolved into a more-than-human field, has merged with a force far beyond itself, and has spoken with its transcendent voice.

Hegel calls the understanding from which one speaks the hymn devotion, and hears in it the access of consciousness to the ground of being. Such a kind of speech is the first of a progression of kinds of religious language in the seventh chapter, each of which depends on an enlarging identification with some source of consciousness outside the self. As the first language of self-transcendence, the hymn is an event of passionate absorption in which the separation between self-consciousness and consciousness of the world disappears. The hymn is the language of a world in which desire is redundant. For the same merger by which

individuation has been overcome leads the devout consciousness to the recognition that it speaks with the voice of a mind for which all phenomena are a manifestation of its internal life.

Syntax and Self-Transcendence

I want in the closing pages of this essay to argue that the break from a language of self-transformation to a language of self-transcendence in the beginning of the seventh chapter of the *Phenomenology* parallels a shift in Robert Duncan's poetics in the late 1960s. The point I want to establish here is that after the publication of *The Bending of the Bow* Duncan began to ask syntax to work not in the service of satisfying a desire for transformation but to help him speak from a place transcending desire, to help him write from beyond selfhood. In Duncan's notion of interrupted forms, a conception of poetics born out of a 1973 poem by that name, one can see the emergence of such a new notion of poetic structure—for the purpose of the structure of "Interrupted Forms" is not to lead syntax to the realization of a transforming sentence or phrase but rather to show how underlying Duncan's self-expression in language is the creative force of grammatical expectation, the latent power of syntax that makes meaning possible. Like Hegel's notion of a self-transcending identification with the source of all being in the devout speaking of the hymn, the first person of Duncan's "Interrupted Forms" speaks from beyond the self because his words are no longer controlled by any demand he could make on syntax to help him explore the truth of himself. Rather the structure of the poem positions the voice which speaks inside of it so that its language seems controlled by the autonomous force with which language incessantly and inevitably makes, unmakes and re-makes meaning. Such a discovery about the power of poetic structure to re-frame the experience of syntax is what I mean to explore in what is left of this essay.

Shortly after the publication of *The Bending of the Bow*, and partly in response to what he took to be a vicious attack by the renowned critic M.L. Rosenthal, Duncan declared that he would not publish another book of poems for the next fifteen years. He kept his word. But over that same span he continued to write poems in sequences, many of which were ultimately published in his subsequent 1985 book, *Ground Work: Before the War*. Diverse as his output over this period was—including new poems in both the *Structure of Rime* and the *Passages* sequences—Duncan considered his most experimental, forward-looking work over that period to constitute a break away from his earlier notion of poetic structure and toward what he understood as a discrete new idea about poetics. In a 1974 reading of his long sequence "The Dante Études," already more than half a decade

into his self-imposed exile from publication, Duncan described the current thrust of his poetics this way: “Everything I’ve been writing since *Bending the Bow* has been essentially ‘interrupted forms’” (1974).

The poem that gives this line of exploration its name comes not from “The Dante Études,” however, but a frontispiece to a 1973 sequence, “Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn’s *Moly*.” It is a distinctive poem in a number of ways. As Gunn himself remarks in a 1979 essay about Duncan’s poetry, “Interrupted Forms” is particularly noteworthy for the way “the energy of the poem hovers between hesitations, much as a ghost hovers between being and non-being” (134). The poem, moreover, sits in a striking continuity with “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow” and “My Mother Would Be a Falconress” because of the way that hovering energy plays through a steady first-person perspective. But most noteworthy about this poem in the context of Duncan’s developing poetics is the way its structure is designed not to harness the syntactic energies within the work to self-transformation but rather to let them refuse the writing mind’s introspective purposes, to cut against the measures of line, sentence and paragraph by which Duncan sought in earlier first-person poems to rein in syntactic energy for the enactment of self-transformation.

As Gunn’s brief description makes clear, “Interrupted Forms” is a love poem, and perhaps an elegy, lonesome, passed through by a ghost. Yet most provocative about the work is the way the relation between the poem’s syntax and its formal structures repeatedly express our own sense as listeners of our apparently instinctual commitment to grammatical relations among words. For the shape of the poem, a sequence of sentences running across lines which are held into two fifteen-line verse paragraphs, promises an experience of grammatical coherence that its run-on sentences frustrate—a frustration from which its line breaks misleadingly hint at relief. The poem starts:

Long slumbering, often coming forward,
haunting the house I am the house I live in
resembles so, does he recall me or I
recall him? (1–4)

Understanding what Duncan’s question is asking requires taking measure of these lines’ ductile intelligence. The second line embeds one modifying phrase within the third modifying phrase of a sentence which has yet to come to its subject (as it turns out, “the house I live in” modifies “the house I am,” which is itself an element of the third participial phrase which begins “haunting,” which modifies in turn a subject we don’t know yet, “he”). But because Duncan has suppressed the relative pronoun “which” between “the house I am” and “the house I live in,” the mind, resting at the break at the end of the second line to sort out a sen-

tence of overtaking complexity, tries to make a subject of the second consecutive noun phrase, “the house I live in,” imagining a caesura where there is not one, between the second line’s “am” and “the.” The beginning of the third line eliminates this as a possible reading, completing the sense of the third modifying phrase and then beginning main clause of the sentence, the question: “does he recall me or I”?

At this point we have been caught by the momentum of the poem’s syntax feeling perhaps too-willfully invested in grammaticality, and then let a little off the hook. But one puzzle has been replaced with another. The subject of this question must be “he,” and cannot be the other subject pronoun, “I,” because “or” cannot permit the two subjects to share the predicate in parallel construction, since they require different forms of the verb “to do.” Only the third person form of the verb, “does,” is here. So “me” or “I” must both be objects of the verb “recall,” not as pronouns but as actual objects. An important new use of syntax for Duncan is expressed in this impossible choice: the promise of coherence made by this poem’s paragraph shape has us so trusting that it will be intelligible that we must treat words not as elements in a grammatical code but as unsatisfying substitutes for the man this poem seeks. And in this context the fourth line, the conclusion to the sentence, resolves nothing except our sense that the whole construction is, as we have begun to suspect with uneasy assent, ungrammatical.

The beginning of the seventh chapter of the *Phenomenology* can help us to see how placing line breaks within a verse-paragraph structure so as to tantalize a reader with his own grammatical expectations could be a breakthrough for Duncan. For he has stopped asking syntax to guide him to a self-expressive and self-transformative utterance—as he had in two of his most powerful first-person poems—and instead he has begun to imagine a poem’s shape around the question of how he might best exemplify the way that syntax inevitably creates meaning. The first-person of this poem speaks in a way analogous to the devout speaker in Hegel’s notion of the hymn because his words get their meaning not from what they express about Duncan’s psyche but because of the latent powers of meaning-making in the language to which he has surrendered himself. His voice is identified not simply with the grammatically incoherent confessions that the words of the poem convey but, more profoundly, with the transpersonal processes of meaningfulness that guide this searchingly expressive speech.

The difficulties of “Interrupted Forms” catch the mind assuming and then hoping that its words capture reality, an assumption invited by the shape of the poem and frustrated by the ruptures of its syntax. Duncan draws out our experience of our own investment in sense to make us aware of the extent to which language speaks through us. The poem offers a form of self-transcend-

dence that is only available because of the way its words transgress its structural assurance of coherence. The penultimate sentence of the poem reads:

In dreams
 insubstantially you have come before my eyes'
 expectations, and, even in waking,
 taking of the field of sight fleetingly
 stronger than what my eyes see,
 the thought of you thought has eyes to see
 has eyes to meet your answering eyes
 thought raises. (16–23)

There is simply no way to turn this into a grammatical statement. We can make it to the line “the thought of you thought has eyes to see / has eyes to meet” before losing any thread, abandoned among its echoes. And Duncan seems to want to force our attention to this moment where grammaticality collapses, since giving “the thought of you thought” its own eyes to see turns the event of imagining the beloved into a moment in which his otherness resists being absorbed into thought, slipping away from its status as an abstraction from an abstraction and becoming instead an agent, defined by its own visual relation to the world. And indeed this thought, Duncan continues, “has eyes to meet your answering eyes / thought raises.” This two-word last line leaves us looking back into the phrase that precedes it for an object. To raise, unlike to rise, is a transitive verb. But grammatically there is no object readily available. There are only “eyes to meet your answering eyes,” a vividly descriptive phrase whose syntactical isolation captures the loneliness it names in a way that is apt for this love elegy and powerfully new for the poetic tradition out of which this poem is writing. And so Duncan’s later poetic thought raises that which it can perpetually never find, speaking a hymn to the sentence so implicit in syntax as to be beyond desiring.

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