CHAPTER 1

Decision at the Apogee: Robert Duncan's Anarchist Critique of Denise Levertov

Robert J. Bertholf

I

From their first letters in 1953 through the ones in 1969, both Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov were attuned to one another as poets and as close friends; their conversations at times sound like lovers talking. They engaged each other on many levels in their discussions of art and style, domestic arrangements, the books they were reading, the exhibitions they went to see, and the people they knew. They were both dedicated to poetry and worked hard with one another to define "the poet." The nature of the poem and its poetics appeared throughout the intense discussions over the period when both poets published defining books of poems—Levertov, *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1960) and Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* (1960). At one point, Duncan disagreed with Levertov's decision to divide a manuscript into two parts, one part published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti as *Here and Now*, and the second part by Jonathan Williams as *Overland to the Islands*, but that issue was set aside in favor of the larger issues of the poetics and form in poetry. Duncan's reaction to Hayden Carruth in his article "A Critical Difference of View" (L 729–33) and then Levertov's reaction to Duncan, however, contained forebodings of an es-

trangement in the stern positions each established. Levertov delayed writing from October 1969 to late February 1970, and in the letter of 22 February she criticized sharply Duncan's attack on Carruth. Discussions of the life of the poem gave way to personal and emotional positions about friends as well as national political issues. At the same time, the war in Vietnam became a much larger national issue. That war and then the poets' responses to the war, perhaps, were national issues too large, too overwhelming to be comprehended by either personal affection or an encompassing poetics. All the discussions of possible poetries, notes on books and people, statements of principle, the lineation of affection and the aura of admiration come together, focused or infected, determined or misshapen by the personal and political reactions to the war in Vietnam. A fracture was inevitable.

Duncan's attack on Carruth's views of William Carlos Williams's three-part line and then his later attack on Levertov's poems are both startling; they bring to the surface some of Duncan's deeply engrained political and social views, and drive them forward armed with frequent reference to a poetics. From the late 1930s onward, Duncan was against war as a solution for society's diseases. He was aware of the arguments for pacifism, as well as the frequent comparisons between Fascism and Democracy.[1] Soon after World War II, he met up with William Everson at Pond Farm, Mary and Hamilton Tyler's farm near Guerneville, California. Everson had spent time during the war at the prison camp for conscientious objectors at Waldport, Oregon. In World War II Duncan made a claim to be a conscientious objector, but that claim was rejected. He was drafted and served in the U.S. Army for three months, mainly at Fort Knox; he wrote about his experience in the poem "A Spring Memorandum: Fort Knox." His poem "An Essay at War" about the Korean War and "Up Rising" about the war in Vietnam firmly established his antiwar positions as well as the strength of his convictions. He was passionately against the policies of President Johnson and passionately against the war. The theme of war permeates his late poetry, in *Ground Work: Before the War* and *Ground Work II: In the Dark*. In other discussions, he called himself an "anarchist poet." Underneath his poetics was an understanding of anarchist thinking that he acquired in the 1940s. When the correspondence between Duncan and Levertov registered the tensions of sincere disagree-

1. See, for example, Savage, Woodcock, Comfort, and Orwell, "Pacifism and the War: A Controversy"; or Calhoun, "The Political Relevance of Conscientious Objection."

ment, Duncan mentions Vanzetti, and then calls up the embedded anarchist principles as the basis for his critique of Levertov's poems about the war. Citing the telling passages from earlier letters will make it easier to discuss the anarchist principles, which show up in the letters from October 1971:

(Letter 374, 28 July 1966)

That God's intent in Purgatory is to liberate the individual volition is a lasting concept of the good on Dante's part. Vanzetti's *voluntarism* ultimately the nature of political good lies in our imagination of how to extend this volition in a wider and deeper range of the communal good: i.e. the concord of individual volitions. (L 542)

(Letter 386, 15 February 1967)

As too in the variable meters of Williams or the free meters [when they are most meaningful, having to do with that same volition of reality that Vanzetti means in his voluntarism] we strive for, we strive for meaning in the very beat. (L 568)

(Letter 424, 25 March 1969)

An answer that was not "revolution" was Vanzetti's voluntary state. Volition cannot commit itself to a future agreement or covenant anymore than it can bind itself to the past covenants; for it must spring afresh from the message of the here and now. When I first heard the Trotskyite slogan of "Perpetual Revolution" I thought it meant this volition ever ready to spring afresh, to strike out for freedom even from the parties that carried the name on their banners. (L 629–30)

(Letter 426, 1 May 1969)

Mostly I do not advance beyond the confines of my outrage at the war. . . . And my spirit leaps up at Whitman's each man his own law; which is also Vanzetti's: the volitional politic is NOT a movement, not, I am sure, in this light, a commitment but a freedom. (L 632–33)

In his own letters between 1921 and 1927, Vanzetti became more sophisticated in his thinking as his ability to write in English improved. Discussions and assertions of human freedom and liberty permeated his letters, and in fact were the foundation of his idea of volition, the freedom to make a choice, and then the perseverance to maintain the decision. "I was prompted by my nature to an ideal of freedom and of justice to all," he writes, "and this is the worst of the crime to my enemies" (Frankfurter and Jackson 196). He also mentions Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's idea of "vol-

unteerism": "There is but one system, one philosophy through which I can explain to myself the causes of this universal tragedy and the possible remedies, which of course, should be prompted by the human volunteerism: It is the *Philosophy of the Miseria* by Proudhon" (Frankfurter and Jackson 231). At another point he writes: "But I wholly share of your confidence in Co-operatives, and, what is more, in real co-operatives, free initiative, both individual and collective. Mutual aid and co-operation and co-operatives shall be the very base of a completely new social system, or else, nothing is accomplished" (Frankfurter and Jackson 143). Cooperation and mutual aid among workers and groups of workers are integral parts of the vision of Vanzetti that Duncan brings over into his letters to Denise Levertov. Vanzetti was a volunteer for a direction, not a conscript or a person swept up in a huge emotional reaction to a situation. He joined what course of action he chose by free will. "Anarchy, the anarchists alone" he wrote, "could break these deadly cycles" of history and dominating governments to bring on "the greatest emancipation of the history" (Frankfurter and Jackson 309). Vanzetti's crusade for freedom became, for Duncan, a model for the power of volition.

That the individual is free to act as long as his actions do not impinge on the freedom to act of other people is a basic principle of the anarchist position. As George Woodcock says in his book *Anarchy or Chaos*:

> It [this book] is based on the assumption that the most desirable human good is the social and economic freedom of the individual human being, and its theme is a society in which men will have liberty and space to develop their personalities and to advance in a world where there exist no longer the bonds of poverty and coercion, towards the complete man of the visionaries. (6)

The second principle is that essential freedom means living in a society without government. Structured government is corrupt, an institution based on the greed for power to maintain itself, mainly coercing people and taking away their individual freedoms. Vanzetti wrote, "I do not believe in the government, any of them, since to me they can only differ in names from one another, and because we have witnessed the utter failure of both the social-democrat governments in Germany, and the Bolshevik government in Russia" (Frankfurter and Jackson 143). Government, along with every economic monopoly, every other coercive structure, should be done away with, and replaced with a mutually cooperating association of

groups which make agreements with one another to supply the needs of people to get along in life. Rudolf Rocker begins his book *Anarcho-Syndicalism* with the following statement about the state-manipulated economic system:

> Anarchism is a definite intellectual current in the life of our times, whose adherents advocate the abolition of economic monopolies and of all political and social coercive institutions within society. In place of the present capitalistic economic order Anarchists would have a free association of all productive forces based upon co-operative labour, which would have as its sole purpose the satisfying of the necessary requirements of every member of society, and would no longer have in view the special interest of privileged minorities within the social union. (9)

These are the two principles of anarchist thought that appealed to Duncan, plus a third: the necessity to destroy present social and economic systems in order to create new kinds of organization in which the freedom and integrity of the individual will flourish. As Herbert Read states it in *Poetry and Anarchism*:

> To make life, to insure progress, to create interest and vividness, it is necessary to break form, to distort pattern, to change the nature of our civilization. In order to create it is necessary to destroy; and the agent of destruction in society is the poet. I believe that the poet is necessarily an anarchist, and that he must oppose all organized conceptions of the State, not only those which we inherit from the past, but equally those which are imposed on people in the name of the future. (15)

The principle is very close to Coleridge's definition of the secondary imagination in *Biographia Literaria*: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" (167). The vitality of the imagination breaks down existing ways of seeing, projecting the forms of poems, and of organizing societies, and creates new ways of seeing, projecting poetic forms and organizing societies. Emerson's essay "The Poet," and his idea of the secret intelligence of the poet, are direct sources for Duncan's thinking, as are the processes of destruction/creation inside the activities of the Romantic imagination that Herbert Read has taken over into his political thought. But the discussion comes down to the place of volition, individual choice in thought and action in the community of others also acting individually, and then to the distinction of people acting cooperatively for the common good and people acting uniformly under the coercion of a movement or a government.

Duncan's political views and how he acquired them have not been much discussed. Because his political positions break through into his poetic attacks on Carruth and Levertov, setting out the sources and growth of his political ideas will help elucidate his long and sometimes dense letters to Levertov in October and November 1971. The following sketch of his contacts with anarchist thought will make the point that the references to Vanzetti and his position about Levertov's poetry are neither random nor whimsical, but were actually life-long concerns, principles of his poetics and his politics.

II

As an undergraduate student at Berkeley, Duncan became aware of the debate between the Stalinists and the Trotskyites. Though he was politically innocent, he was nonetheless attracted to Virginia Admiral, a young woman from Chicago who took the Trotskyite position seriously, and to Pauline Kael who was politically very active long before her career as a movie critic. He also met Hamilton Tyler, a man who had fought on the side of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and was an anarchist, as well as Lily and Mary Fabilli. Lily left school to become a labor organizer in Carmel, but from the start held political views close to the anarchist position, and Mary achieved a position as a poet and for a time was the wife of William Everson. Duncan was a member of the Young People's Socialist League and attended its meetings. By the spring of 1937, Duncan was writing to James Peter Cooney, editor of the journal *The Phoenix*. Cooney was a follower of D. H. Lawrence and an anarchist. He had farms in western Massachusetts and Georgia, farmed with horses, grew his own food, and tried to live independently from the contemporary economy. He and his wife Blanche published the *Phoenix* as a labor of love and an ideological necessity, as well as an homage to D. H. Lawrence's views of love and life. The couple welcomed Duncan when he came to stay to recover from his adventures in New York or Provincetown at their farm near North Adams, Massachusetts. Duncan published early poems in *The Phoenix*— "The Gestation," "The Protestants (Canto One)" (1939); and "We Have Forgotten Venus" and "Persephone" (1940).[2]

2. Blanche Cooney published a book, *In My Own Sweet Time: An Autobiography*, in which she remembers her life with James Peter Cooney. Duncan was a welcome guest in the Cooneys' household.

In the fall of 1938, Duncan left Berkeley and went to Black Mountain College, where he had been admitted as a student. In 1955, just after visiting Charles Olson at Black Mountain for one night, he recalled the first visit to the college:

> I had not been there since sometime in 1938 when, having written from Berkeley I received an acceptance as a student and, as I remember, a part scholarship, and, precariously, set out, arriving there late one night, only to be turned away after the following day, firmly, with the notification by the instructor who had welcomed me that I was found to be emotionally unfit. Was it after the heated argument I got into the morning of that day concerning the Spanish Civil War? In my anarchist convictions, the Madrid government seemd to me much the enemy as Franco was.[3]

Duncan lived in Philadelphia, Annapolis, New York, and finally from September to December 1939 he lived with Connie and Jeff Rall at 75 Bedford Street, in New York City. Jeff Rall was a unionist, and he kept a library of anarchist literature that was available to the young Robert Duncan. He shows up in Duncan's poem "Under Ground":

> There may be
> here at the center of a chamber cut out
> of context
> cenotaph for Jeff Rall who
> in youth fell
> at Dunkirk, because war was more real
> than Blenheim's
> in the Village. . . . (OF 80)

Unknown to Duncan at the time, Rall was not killed at Dunkirk, and at the time of the publishing of *The Opening of the Field* was living in a small town south of Vancouver, British Columbia. He worked on a barge in the inland waterway. He wrote to Duncan after seeing his name in the *Industrial Worker*. Duncan wrote to him and in fact visited him in July 1961 and again during the Vancouver Poetry Conference, August 1963. In letter 144, 16 October 1959, Duncan quotes a long passage from a letter from Rall, in which he states his position firmly: "I'm still an anarchist, and belong to a small Libertarian League. I also write regularly for the *Industrial Worker*" (L 216). Duncan was loyal to old friends, and his friendship with Jeff Rall was based entirely on the anarchist attitude. The letter from Rall, Duncan

3. Duncan, "Black Mountain College," March 1955, Robert Duncan Papers.

writes, "has brought new confidence forward in me to revive the full force of what I desired to be as a writer when anarchism was an allegiance to a reality in daily life itself" (L 217).

In New York, Duncan met up again with Virginia Admiral, his friend from Berkeley, who knew Holley Cantine and Dachine Rainer, both anarchists who wrote for journals like *Now* and *Retort*. Everyone read the *Partisan Review*, which was the central literary journal for political discussions mainly about the fights between the Stalinists and the Trotskyites, antiwar movements, unionism, and anarchist views. Dwight Macdonald was an editor and through his efforts the debate between the Stalinist view and the Trotskyite view was much discussed until about 1944 when there was a distinct shift away from the communist view because of the sense that the revolution had been, in itself, a failure that generated another rigid bureaucracy to replace the one that it overthrew. The harshness of the Moscow trials alienated humanistic sympathies, and drove the discussion back to the values of democracy as a defense against both Fascism and Communism.[4] In 1944, Macdonald left *Partisan Review* to start the magazine *Politics*, where Duncan published his famous essay "The Homosexual in Society" (1944). Duncan met Jackson MacLow at an anarchist meeting, September 1943, and that meeting began a political association between the two poets that lasted for many years.

When he went to Florida to see Laura Riding, and when he worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant in Provincetown, he wrote to Pauline Kael, who had moved from Berkeley to New York City. These letters, as well as one to Dwight Macdonald, are long and passionate, and establish the basis of Duncan's political thinking.

(Duncan to Pauline Kael, 24 June–5 July 1944)

There will be a long period this afternoon (some two or three hours) when the dishes will fall off; the cook goes to sleep; Jennie who cuts the pies, ladles out the olives and tomato-juice, will sit down to chat with the cook's boy; and I will have a thing or two to say about Read's "Cult of Leadership," Ciliga's *Russian Enigma*, and some notes after reading this English pamphlet *Trade Unionism or Syndical-*

4. Duncan was aware of the controversy. See Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*; Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*; Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*; Macdonald, "The Future of Democratic Values"; Rosenberg, "Myth and History"; Calhoun, "Can Democracy Be Socialized."

ism—notes suggested more by my own reflections than by those of the pamphlet which seems rather thin.[5]

I continue to feel that anarcho syndicalism is a sound approach to a free society but I must say it is in spite of what arguments and definitions this anarchist mag *Now* brings to bear. Herbert Read's "Cult of Leadership" is the unhappy result of so much misreading, abuse of the simplest common sense and marriage of irreconcilable elements that my tongue is quite tied in knots with fury. Step by step one has to go over the devils' network, untie fury's tongue. Read's support of anarchism reads like Darwin's *Origin of the Species* might have read had he referrd to the *doctrine of the divinity of Christ* and to Thomas Aquinas for proof and definition.[6]

(Duncan to Dwight Macdonald, 28 June 1944)

Ciliga's book ought to be prescribed reading for every minority Trotskyite and leftwards. Right of that point, that is for those who are genuine Bolsheviks it would only make them mad.

The accounts of Russian-Stalinist cruelties and injustices are incredible. They don't seem to make the main issue any clearer—it is quite explicit it seems to me already in Ciliga's historical account and his own political reflections. The unbelievable numbers of people killed, exported and enslaved is just that: unbelievable. It makes the book hard to accept. Altho I always knew that in Russia man had become "society's" slave that it is actually true—and true as dismally and on the gigantic scale which Ciliga indicates is—incomprehensible.[7]

(Duncan to Pauline Kael, 10 July 1944)

I started reading the Kropotkin again and got into bed reading Kropotkin and got up in the morning walking to work reading Kropotkin—against his confusions on the nature of arts—there are such basic principles of human behavior, ethical and social understanding at last found expressed that I have been beside myself with joy. The selections from his last work *Ethics* written after he was 75 quicken my pulse and set a new wave of ideas, of projected action into motion. Wld. you find out if the following books are available—I will also write Macdonald and ask—

Ethics—Origin and Development	L. McVeagh, New York, 1924 350 pages
Mutual Aid—A factor in Evolution	Heinemann, London, 1902, 348 pages
Fields, Factories and Workshops	Putnams, 1913, 477 pages

5. Read, "The Cult of Leadership"; Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*; Brown, *Trade Unionism or Syndicalism*.

6. Robert Duncan and Pauline Kael, Correspondence.

7. Dwight Macdonald Archive.

There are other letters to both Pauline Kael and Dwight Macdonald. While he was living in Provincetown with Leslie Sherman, the two hitch-hiked to Macdonald's summer house on Long Island to carry on the political discussions. Duncan wanted to start a group of people to comment on Macdonald's political positions in *Politics*, and so he wrote to Holley Cantine, Hamilton Taylor, and James Peter Cooney. The group never got started. Duncan wrote to Macdonald on 15 May 1944: "I am sending you the enclosed poem not merely because I have liked these first issues of POLITICS immensely; but it is in the context of the judgment that POLITICS presupposes that I feel the poem can most fairly appear." Macdonald did not accept the poem, but he did accept and print the essay "The Homosexual in Society."

Duncan's essay is only partially a statement about his homosexuality. In the preface to the essay, written fifteen years after its first publication, Duncan wrote:

> My view was that minority associations and identifications were an evil wherever they supersede allegiance to and share in the creation of a human community good—the recognition of fellow-manhood. . . . I was trying to rid myself of one persona in order to give birth to another, and at the same time to communicate the process and relate it to what I called "society," a public responsibility. (SP 38–9)

A person has the personal freedom, the volition of free will, to make choices and to live by those choices as long as the choices do not prevent another person from making choices. The freedom of the individual to act on his own is the paramount assumption in the essay. Then the choices destroy one way of seeing and acting as they create other ways, thus asserting the same process of destruction/creation enjoyed by artists and poets as an activating motive for the individual. Social pressures are as oppressive to individual freedom as governmental regulations, so the freed individual must struggle to establish and maintain the position against great pressures. Duncan also wrote against the homosexual cult, specifically the group led by Parker Tyler and Charles Henri Ford and based in the offices of *View*, a magazine published in New York that advocated the interrelationships between poetry and the arts as an advocate for avant-garde movements. The cult of the homosexual was a cause, a group with a passionate involvement in its own idea, not a political movement, but a segregating organization that isolated the individual from society, and finally denied the individual

freedom in the passion of the group. Duncan was always against the coercion of group action, or a movement with a cause, as fiercely as he was an advocate for individual volition and cooperative groups.

At the conclusion of the essay Duncan asserts his "devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations," which is also an assertion of a basic anarchist position. In his "Reflections 1959" he quotes from the same letter by Jeff Rall that he quotes in the letter to Levertov, as if to confirm Rall's devotion to human freedom and his own to Rall and the anarchist views which informed their friendship. He continues:

> To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance. To hold this devotion every written word, every spoken word, every action, every purpose must be examined and considered. The old fears, the old specialties will be there, mocking and tempting; the old protective associations will be there, offering for a surrender of one's humanity congratulation upon one's special nature and value. It must be always recognized that the others, those who have surrendered their humanity, are not less than oneself. It must be always remembered that one's own honesty, one's battle against the inhumanity of his own group (be it against patriotism, against bigotry, against—in this special case—the homosexual cult) is a battle that cannot be won in the immediate scene. The forces of inhumanity are overwhelming, but only one's continued opposition can make any other order possible, will give an added strength for all those who desire freedom and equality to break at last those fetters that seem now so unbreakable. (SP 47–48)

To assert the integrity of his position, the homosexual should renounce allegiances to any groups that threaten his individuality and assume the responsibility for his own volition; he should live openly in society.

When Duncan returned to the West in 1945, he lived with Hamilton and Mary Tyler in Guerneville, California, on their chicken farm. He went from the Cooneys' to the Tylers', both farms of old friends with anarchist views. Duncan wrote to Pauline Kael on 10 July 1944:

> In the same mail I received a copy of the Kropotkin selections which I orderd from *politics*; Leslie orderd the Ciliga book. Macdonald says that the Ciliga is running out—there are very few copies left. I am going to order one for Ham Tyler. It is, I think I have stressd before, a book we have all been waiting patiently for; Russia seen by a man who combines an honesty and integrity governd by a thorough political understanding. Compare the man's tone with Trotsky's.

Hamilton Tyler influenced Duncan's thinking about politics and a lifestyle which supported an anarchist position, so there is a strong allegiance that brought Duncan to Tyler's farm in 1945. In Berkeley and then San Francisco there were anarchist groups, the most famous of which was the Friday-evening discussions at Kenneth Rexroth's house. George Leite's literary magazine in Berkeley, *Circle*, had an anarchist focus. In its first issue the San Francisco journal *Ark* (1947) featured George Woodcock's essay "What Is Anarchism" and Duncan's article "Reviewing *View*: An Attack." Duncan published the first version of his poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" in the second issue of *Ark II/Moby I*. Of all these goings-on, Rexroth's evening discussions kept Duncan in touch with current anarchist thinking.

As an anarchist, Duncan believed in the authority of the individual to act with and make decisions freely without compromising individuality. He also believed in mutual aid, cooperation among people and groups of people. As a poet he believed also in the company of poets working together as a contemporary group for a common cause—Creeley, Duncan, Olson, Levertov, and projective forms, for example—and he believed in a company of poets in a tradition as Ezra Pound had found in his book *The Spirit of Romance*. In Pound's and in Duncan's views the volition of the individual, as poet and anarchist, is fulfilled when an imaginative activity of one poet cooperates or corresponds with the equally valid imaginative activity of another poet. Duncan has multiple views here that he calls "pluralism." The enemy to equal imaginative actions is uniformity, a mass reaction caused by coercion, and the loss, therefore, of individual will.

III

Duncan's letters to Denise Levertov now have a context for discussion. However, one other point needs to be put in place. Levertov wrote a short note to Duncan on 29 October 1969, and then waited until 22 February 1970 to write again about Duncan's article "A Critical Difference of View." She sent a short note dated 4 April 1970 in reply to Duncan's response, spent the summer in Europe, and then wrote again on 26 October 1970. So by the time Duncan wrote the first letter critical of her poetry, Levertov had not written a substantial letter to Duncan since 22 February

1970. After the attack on Carruth, her own concerns of family, her own health, the reaction to the war, and her own poetry have supplanted the urgency of the correspondence with Duncan.

Duncan begins his letter of 16 October with a reference to Yeats's *Autobiographies*—"All creation is from conflict" (L 663)—as a way of casting the present conflict into an abstracted system of the interaction of contraries, as he had done in his essay "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," and as he had done in his letters of disagreement with Robin Blaser over the Nerval translations. He moves immediately to the image of Levertov as Kali dancing in her red skirt, which appeared in the poem "Santa Cruz Propositions," and then makes the point that she was "possessed by the demonic spirit of the mass" (L 663). Herbert Read makes the point in his essay "Cult of Leadership" that joining a party (in this case the Nazi Party) relinquished the freedom of the individual and made the joiner a part of the mass movement of passion, individuality abandoned. Duncan made a similar point in "The Homosexual in Society" about joining a homosexual cult. In the subsequent letter to Levertov, Duncan again maintains that because she has given up her individuality to the cause, she has betrayed the position of the artist; she accepts the mass position, the passionate appeal, and no longer imagines or projects the very nature of the work, the evil, she is protesting—"The urgency that demands the poet to reveal what is back of the political slogans and persuasions" (L 666). And while both poets would agree that the powerful greed of the government was causing terrible tribulation, death, and slaughter on the people of Vietnam, Duncan would maintain that in joining the movement Levertov was helping to create another bureaucracy strong enough to confront the present government; that the direct result would not be the destruction of one form of government and economic system but the replacement of it with the same kind of government and economic system. This was the same argument that Vanzetti used, and that Dwight Macdonald also used in his *Partisan Review* article "War and the Intellectuals," in denouncing the October Revolution in Russia for installing a despotic, coercive government to replace the one it destroyed. That was the point Duncan had made earlier in countering Levertov's involvement with the People's Park movement in Berkeley. By joining the cause she joined an organization that was as corrupt and coercive as the one she thought she was protesting. She had mis-

understood the multiple uses of power; and he accuses her of the "failure to project anywhere the force of Revolution, or Rebellion" (L 664).

She is left then with "empty and vain slogans because those who use them are destitute of any imagination of or feeling of what such greed, racism or imperialism is like. The poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it" (L 669). Duncan made the same point in recounting an anarchist meeting when he spoke out for the freedom of the individual to act: "To imagine what the good is and to imagine what evil is, what goods there are and what evils: this is releasing to our powers, it helps us prepare for actual works—and we're often mistaken in our imaginations" (L 275). In Levertov's case, moralizing and commentary interrupt the process of destruction/creation, and "the poems have been removed from the field they belong to poetically" (L 664), and "form as the direct vehicle and medium of content" (L 668) has been negated. The failure of the creative process and the failure of the imagination then lead to the failure of language, as the poet is outside the poems commenting on them, not inside the imagination of the poem projecting form in active language outward. By joining the movement and taking up the language of the movement, Duncan says, Levertov gave up her individual volition—the ability, then, to imagine evil—and took herself out of the actual process of destruction leading to creation. She was lost in a search for an authority to counter the governmental authority without destroying it. And finally, she betrayed the role of the artist. She exposes not the revelation of content, but "a moralizing reproof" (L 667) of the American government.

He is especially harsh in his statements about her involvement with the People's Park movement in Berkeley, which he understands—without having been there, Levertov notes—as one group of coerced people struggling against another group of coerced people without the assertion of any individual freedom. "I find that I am outraged not only by the hypocrites and self-deluded, but by the innocent. Those who think they can *merely* make a green place as a claim on University property. Well, yes. Their ignorance *is* outrageous. It requires so much willing refusal of facts" (L 673). Duncan's judgment is harsh, but it rests on actual anarchist principles.

He concludes that his views are not ideological, but rather are based on the readings he did in anarchist literature from 1939 onward; however, he has reshaped his views in this discussion of a "pluralism" into a literary

argument that insists upon the imaginative integrity of the poem and the view of the artist as the projector of literary form. "Within the plurality of forces the Heraclitean opposites have the drama and pathos of a heightened figure upon a ground in which a multitude of figures appear" (L 674). Duncan had read the discussions about the role of the poet in political events, among them Herbert Read's:

> When an artist, a poet or a philosopher—the kind of person we often describe as an intellectual—ventures to take part in the political controversies of his own time, he always does so at a certain risk. . . . He is a creature of intuitions and sympathies, and by his very nature shrinks from definiteness and doctrinaire attitudes. . . . Disenfranchized by his lack of residence in any fixed constituency, wandering faithlessly in the no-man's-land of his imagination, the poet cannot, without renouncing his essential function, come to rest in the bleak conventicles of a political party. It is not his pride that keeps him outside; it is really his humility, his devotion to the complex wholeness of humanity—in the precise sense of the word, his magnanimity. (*Poetry* 41, 42)

The contradiction remains, however, that this "devotion to the complex wholeness of humanity" could undermine and fracture the attunement between two poets. Even though they called a truce period of a "year-and-a-day" (L 707)—the length of time, that is, that Duncan would delay writing an essay on her poems—neither poet was able to compromise enough to heal the estrangement. They made attempts in unmailed letters; then Levertov read Duncan's comments in James Mersmann's book *Out of the Vietnam Vortex*, in which Duncan was highly critical of her positions on the war. She wrote back: "I felt our friendship twice broken, deeply betrayed" (L 711). By the time Duncan changed his position and wished for reconciliation, after he had read new poems by Levertov, Levertov wrote: "The sad thing is that your letter came *at least* 2 years too late. I don't find it in me to respond with the warmth & gladness you expected. There can be a statute of limitations on emotional commitments" (L 717).

Duncan remained as firmly committed to his belief in the authority of individual volitional acts to create an imaginative company as Levertov did in her powerful feelings against the war in Vietnam. Personalities, affections, and loyalties of the spirit can be negated in such intense confrontations, as indeed they were in the case of these two poets.

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