Letters on a Reprint of Robert Duncan's *Letters*

Letters: Poems 1953-1956. Robert Duncan. Ed. and with an Afterword by Robert J. Bertholf. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2003.

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A Robert Duncan's *Letters*, first published in a beautiful letter-press edition by Jargon Press in 1958, has recently been re-issued by Flood Editions. The new edition does not have some of the deluxe features of its predecessor, but it is quite lovely in its own right and it performs the valuable service of bringing back into print a seminal work in the oeuvre of one of the best American poets of the past century. Written from 1953 to 1956, *Letters* marks a turning point in Duncan's movement from the Berkeley Renaissance fellowship he shared with Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser toward his Black Mountain cohort of Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley. Duncan effects this turning point by engaging the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, which had been lurking as a part of his intellectual repertoire since he heard it whispered of by his parents at theosophical meetings during his childhood. The conceit of *Letters* is that there is a "rime" in the operations of three different entities: the letters of the (Hebrew) alphabet, the creative unfolding of the universe, and the poetic company of the peers to whom Duncan's "letters" are addressed. Each of these entities is a constellation of powers, capable of bringing forth a new poetry of creation—a "projective" poetry tied not to the individual ego but obedient to greater impulses.

B An advertisement for the book: "The composition of *Letters* begins with 'Letter to Denise Levertov' ['For a Muse Meant'] and moves out over almost three years' work to complete a book presided over by an alphabet primary to world creation. These angelic letters then those powers hidden or discovered are substance of our speech. A naming of my peers, and an exclamation of joy: Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, James Broughton, Mike McClure, Helen Adam—it is the presence of companions, named and unnamed, that inspires *Letters*. A book of primaries, a book of companions. A book of praise. I have stored here, as best I know how, the songs of all I live by. For I adhere to form as the bee obeys the geometry of the hive" (54).

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Letters grows out of actual correspondence with other poets, just as Olson's initial *Maximus* "Letters" do. The first poem, for instance, "For a Muse Meant," was sent as a letter to Denise Levertov, inaugurating a large and crucial correspondence that has recently been published as well (Robert Bertholf and Albert Gelpi, eds., *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003]). "Correspondence" refers at once to the (Medieval, Swedengorgian, Baudelarian) doctrine of analogies and to the active epistolary communities in which Duncan operated. The "hive-like" quality of the book gives evidence that, although Duncan repeatedly stated that *The Opening of the Field* (1960) was the first book of poems he composed throughout as "a book," the same is true of *Letters*.

C Kabbalah has become important to modern poets because of the powerful, even cosmic, significance it accords to letters, words, and the notion of the book. As David Meltzer explains, "The Kabbalah, as much as poetry, is the study of and submission to the mysteries of the word. The language used by Kabbalists is so intricately dimensional that it is almost impossible to fully convey the simultaneous levels of meaning revealed in the simplest of words. It is said that one word is the seed of a particular universe, a system of interactions and realities as complex as the birth and death of a sun" (David Meltzer, ed., *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah* [Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1998], xiii). In Kabbalah all of the levels of occult "work"—magical practice, meditation and contemplation techniques, visionary excursions, and spiritual and psychological self-transformation—can be found, as they would be in any esoteric system, but all derive from investigations of language and writing.

Duncan learned of the Kabbalah as a child listening in on his parents' theosophical meetings (Rodger Kamenetz, "Realms of Being: An Interview with Robert Duncan," *Southern Review* 21.1 [1985]: 9-10), where the most important kabbalistic text, the *Zohar*, was read as one of the keys to the mysteries of the universe. From Duncan's own perspective, as he told Meltzer, the *Zohar* is instead "the greatest mystical novel ever written" (Meltzer, x). It is remarkable that Duncan, who was raised as a Christian hermeticist, would become the instigator of lifelong research by such Jewish figures as Meltzer, Wallace Berman, Jack Hirschman, and Jerome Rothenberg into a Jewish form of mysticism. Meltzer, for instance, who edited a journal devoted to Kabbalah, *Tree*, and an anthology of kabbalistic texts, *The Secret Garden*, calls Duncan "my exemplar" in Kabbalah studies (x) and credits Duncan with introducing him to the works of Gershom Scholem, the modern scholar responsible for reviving interest in the Kabbalah (xv).

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D "RD: There are two things which would make Scholem's book on Jewish mysticism particularly of interest to me in the first place. One was, I knew my parents were Christian Kabbalists and that they worked with the Hebrew alphabet, but since that was part of their mysteries I was never permitted to. Second, I'd already begun to get into letters and serious puns through *Finnegan* and to think more about them. *Letters* is influenced toward a creative veil or world-cloth which would be identical with the maya in which it's woven all the way through. The warp and woof are connected and the figures emerge and disappear. All of that was there and working with the idea of letters—the letters of fire on a ground of darkness, isn't that it?

"RK [Rodger Kamenetz]: The Torah is conceived as black fire written on white fire.

"RD: All of those ideas have a good deal of cross-resonance, and in the most intensified place where people lived entirely in the book—and it's the book I was writing—the two would be James Joyce and those mystical Jews who live in the Torah." (Kamenetz, 12-13)

E From the *Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Daniel Matt, ed. and trans. [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004]): "When the blessed Holy One wished to fashion the world, all the letters were hidden away. For two thousand years before creating the world, the blessed Holy One contemplated them and played with them. As he verged on creating the world, all the letters presented themselves before Him, from last to first" (11). Each letter stepped forward in turn and asked the "Master of the world" to "create the world by me" (12). The Holy One praised the virtues of each letter based upon a particular word that it begins, but refused to create the world with it, until the letter *bet* entered and said, "Master of the world, may it please You to create the world by me, for by me You are blessed above and below" [*berakhah*, blessing, begins with *bet*]. The Holy One agreed.

The letter *aleph* had remained outside in humility, at first not wanting to assert itself where other letters had failed and then not wanting to usurp the favor that had been granted already to *bet*. "The blessed Holy One said, '*aleph, aleph!* Although I will create the world with the letter *bet* [using *be-reshit*, the first word of the Torah], you will be the first of all letters. Only through you do I become one [*aleph* is the number one]. With you all counting begins and every deed in the world," (16).

Duncan: "Even the name *Letters* comes from the *Zohar* which I was reading in that period" (Kamenetz, 13). Or as he says in the preface to *Letters*: "the lore of Moses of Leon in the *Zohar*, has been food for the letters of

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this alphabet" (*Letters*, xii).

F Duncan's relationship with the Kabbalah is not a religious one. Were he alive today, he would not have accepted an invitation to accompany the rock entrepreneur Madonna on her recent pilgrimage to Jerusalem's Western Wall: "Already by the time I'm reading Scholem I was not at all in search of religion, but in search of the nature of the imagination. It seemed to me that in mystical traditions of Judaism, religion was passing into imagination, including the imaginary. But the imaginary is not significant in relation to the imagination because the imagination is the final ground of reality. That's what I mean by the imagination" (Kamenetz, 13).

"[I]n creating something, you don't refer to it. You can't refer to it. And what you then create doesn't resemble something else. Finally, imagination is my ground and I hold to it. . . . Creation to me is a mystery of the Universe—I'm a Heracleitean in that the universe creates itself, and human beings have these ideas; they have them like plants have flowers. We don't have tulips but we have ideas and religions which are our distinctive way of blossoming, sorting out, mating—the same as the flowers" (Kamenetz, 14).

G From the "Preface" to *Letters*, under the heading "Nests": "It is an intensity of excitement which compels a man to work out a designd feeling that variously arrives at stations on three levels: the presence in the imagination in which the speech 'comes', a mortality out of immortal letters; the evident manifestation or trace we in the xxth century worship as Art and declare immortal; and the return, the dwelling of the imagination in the speech" (ix).

The circling that Duncan practices makes a hermeneutics that is deconstructive by virtue of its refusing to be grounded anywhere but in the imagination. In "For a Muse Meant," Duncan proposes a "deconstruction— / for the reading of words" (2), marking probably the first use of the term. The three nested levels of his deconstructive hermeneutics involve, first, the precipitation of individual speech out of the originary writing inherent in the "immortal letters"; second, the transposition of the "sacred" into an art that participates in the creative forces that structure the universe; and third, the imaginative act of reading, which recognizes the creative potencies at play in something written or spoken.

The hermeneutic circle of writing, art, and reading arises out of excitations that can be ascribed a biological basis in a reductive reading of Freud. Duncan accepts a biological reading of Freud but argues that biology and imagination intertwine, that patterns of speech are akin to patterns in

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nature: "What happens when immediate excitements are postponed, when sexual responses are transmuted into hate and love, when talk is reserved to re-emerge as poetic speech? These are specializations of the individual creature, spiritual lusters or armories which I see as alike to the shells or furs or combs apparent in the animal world. Specializations of action. And then a will in living or a consciousness. I confound the two, having in mind a process which sets self-creation and self-consciousness in constant interplay" (ix-x).

H In *Letters*, Duncan is already mining the territory that will be worked a decade later by Edmond Jabès and Jacques Derrida. The continual puns and anagrams in the poetry of both Duncan and Jabès derive primarily from the puns and anagrams of the *Zohar*, in which the dramatic movement of the text comes from conjuring with words and letters. For both poets, too, the notion of the Book goes beyond Mallarmé's conception of a Book that contains the entire world. Jabès and Duncan regard the Book as a kind of deity in itself, within whose imperatives they must work. Duncan speaks of "this God in which we dwell," who "finds all our poor writing as we knew it to be: the Writing. In these excesses of confidence I become nameless agency of movements in a book that unimagined generations project.… For the Book, the autonomous book, bears witness for and against all claims" (xiv-xv). In "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," Derrida speaks of "This movement through which the book, *articulated* by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history" (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: U Chicago P, 1978]: 65).

In a long essay on the work of Jabès published in 1985, Duncan recognizes a poet whose *Book of Questions* shares the same territory he first began to explore in *Letters*: "*The Book of Questions* is meant to arouse, beyond the boundaries of apparent meaning, suspicions and rumors of meaning within meaning, words within words. Jabès writes in order to read, or reading is the order of his writing, and he brings us back again and again to this boundary of the presence of its being written in the presence of its being read—to the letter the eye sees even as the hand writes the word, to the rhyme or homophone the ear hears even as it attends the message of the voice in the book" (Robert Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf [New York: New Directions, 1995]: 208-9)

I It is more than coincidental that Jabès in *The Book of Questions* and

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Duncan in much of *Letters* investigate the powers of language through the vehicle of a prose poetry. "Passages of a Sentence," for instance, is a chain of sentences in which birds that are words fly in and out, disturbing the ongoing sense, the predatory intent: "As we start the sentence we notice that birds are flying thru it; phrases are disturbd where these wings and calls flock; wings are a wind, featherd, a beating of the air in passage or a word, the word 'word', hovers, sailing before dropping down the empty shafts of sense" (*Letters*, 33). Even in its title, "Passages of a Sentence" can be seen as an embryonic version of the two unbounded poetic sequences Duncan was soon to begin writing: "The Structure of Rime" and "Passages." The chain of sentences with birds erupting from it runs not only into the abyss, "the empty shafts of sense," but also through a history of the prose poem, as Duncan read it in Charles Henri Ford's "Little Anthology of the Poem in Prose" in *New Directions* 14 (1953), especially in poems by Mallarmé, Philip Lamantia, Magritte, Lautreamont, Ford, Poe, Nicolas Calas, and Nietzsche, and in Duncan's earlier reading of St.-John Perse. This history continues in the prose poems in *Letters* and the Stein imitations of the 1953 *Writing Writing* and in the "Structure of Rime" series. And it comes into a new phase in the "New Sentence" of Language Poetry, as theorized by Ron Silliman.

There is a direct continuity between *Letters* and *The Opening of the Field* (1960) that Duncan sought to obscure by speaking of his "projective" period as including the latter book, *Roots and Branches* (1964) and *Bending the Bow* (1968). According to Bertholf, Duncan finished the poems of *Letter*s in December 1955 and began *The Opening of the Field* less than two months later. Some of the very first poems he wrote for the new book were the first seven prose poems in the "Structure of Rime" sequence, which he published as sections of a single poem in the famous "San Francisco Scene" issue of *Evergreen Review* in 1957. The "Structure of Rime" picks up from the Kabbalah-inspired prose poems of *Letters*, taking words and sentences as animate beings capable not only of conjuring things but also of measuring the world and thought. The "Structure of Rime" calls forth an "*absolute scale of resemblance and disresemblance*" that "*establishes measures that are music in the actual world*" (*Selected Poems*, 46); this scale and the measures it establishes partake of the kabbalistic correspondences worked out in the poems of *Letters*.

J Despite their kabbalistic currents, the prose poems of *Letters* and "The Structure of Rime" played an important but mostly unacknowledged part in the development of the New Sentence in San Francisco in the seventies.

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Duncan functioned for many of the Language poets as not only a primary conduit for the innovations of Stein, Pound, and Zukofsky, but also as a relentless and deconstructive explorer of the interactions of words, grammar, the sentence, and the book. The surplus metaphorizing in Duncan's poetry and prose prepared many younger poets to appreciate such qualities in the French thinkers and poets they would read and respond to in the seventies. In fact, the lush, over-ripe riming and ringing of tones in Duncan's poetry has the sound of poetry in French, where there is a much smaller phonemic repertoire to choose from and a tendency for much greater repetition. In English this can strike readers as a baroque quality, out of fashion in resolutely modernist circles. What Duncan gains by this obsessive word-play and sound-repetition is an ability to dig, like Mallarmé or the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, into the very structure of language—into that which makes statements and apprehensions possible.