

# The Downtown Review

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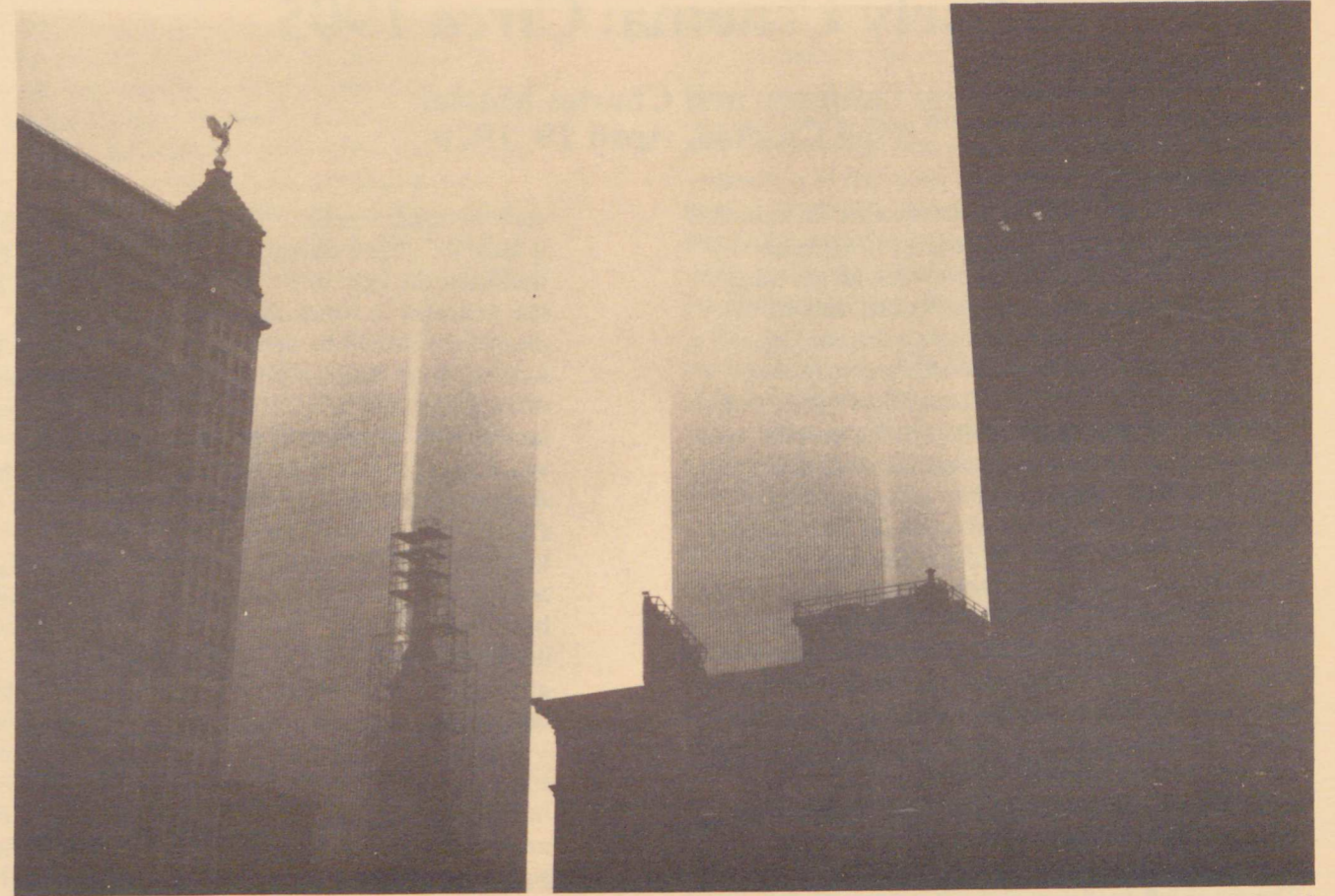
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Knowledge does not survive;  
accuracy does not survive;  
but the devotion survives,  
bearing wounds  
no wisdom would bear.

Robert Duncan, *The Venice Poem*



Willard A. Small

## A Spring Double Issue

With this May-June Double Issue, *The Downtown Review* closes its Spring, 1979, season. We shall begin again in the Fall. I wish to thank all of those who have been involved in this project and all those who have offered support, advice, criticism, and, most importantly, articles. *The Downtown Review* has, in a few short months, attracted a great deal of attention and has become a forum for discussion of the arts in Lower Manhattan. For this, all of us are particularly grateful.

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# Robert Duncan

at the 92nd Street Y  
April 16, 1979

When Robert Duncan reads, there are actually two Duncans, one who recites the poetry and the other who makes brilliant off-hand remarks, some of which are hilarious. The former concentrates intensely, almost to the point of being in a trance. The poems are read with a fluent sonorous voice (as if straight from the diaphragm) in precisely modulated tones of great dramatic range. The concentration here is needed no doubt to keep the "other" Duncan at bay, the rambling, fast-talking, occasionally stuttering one who breezes out witty comments in a high-pitched nasal voice, a performance which proves to be as enthralling as the presentation of the verse. A playwright as well as poet, Duncan has always shown a flair for the theatrical; one simply must hear him read if the chance presents itself. Unfortunately, the chances don't present themselves too often. Since he resides in San Francisco, Duncan makes a much-welcomed appearance in New York about every two or three years. This infrequency doesn't seem quite fair in a way, for incidentally, he just may very well be the greatest living American poet.

Unlike perhaps too many writers who enjoy a fecund creative period when comparatively young, only to suffer a painful and prolonged decline, Duncan's *oeuvre* shows a slow and consistent maturation. He never received the overwhelming acclaim (or the outrageous notoriety) of a Ginsburg or an Olson, thus avoiding their lapses into mere mannerism. In what is now a clichéd model for his career, one sees the forties as Duncan's adolescence, culminating in the breakthrough work, his first great one, "The Venice Poem;" the fifties as a decade of tuteledge, experimenting and craft perfection, the fruit of which was *The Opening of the Field* (i.e., the struggle with technique for its own sake was over), a strongly unified and quite impressive collection of short lyric; and finally, the sixties as the flowering of the mature Duncan, the period which saw the beginning and development of two major open-ended serial works, "Passages" and "The Structure of Rime."

Duncan is now sixty and has finished a large portion of a new serial poem, "Groundwork," whose theme evidently (and not surprisingly) is the passing of time and old age. The reading closed with a long and moving section of that poem, about a trip to Australia, a brief love encounter there, and the eventual return home. Besides other things, the poem concerns escape, a literal and figurative flight from daily, earth-bound routine,

the sense of timelessness and renewed youth that feelings of love can engender; but most poignantly at the end, the willing return to the day-to-day, to the incessantly steady unfolding of the hours one spends with a familiar, lifelong companion. In "Supplication," the landing of the plane back in California becomes a great prayer for the earth to receive the poet once again, this time perhaps for good. Then in the penultimate closing section (labeled "Quotidian"), unlike the rest of the poem, the words pour forth in a tightly controlled fabric of noble ("walking") iambs and rhyme as if shifting into a measured *timefulness*, much like the tone of Spencer's *Epithalamion*, also an evocation of the clock. There is a great acceptance of aging here, the very acceptance now synonymous with the act of writing itself, which, in lines unfortunately quoted from memory, Duncan said was done "as if we merely meant to sign/this place and time."

Duncan's longevity as a poet may enable him to outlive some of the misguided polemics surrounding modern poetry which he has always had the good sense to eschew anyway, a sure sign of his particular strength. One senses Duncan has never much cared for such easy (and perhaps false) dichotomies as open vs. closed or modernist vs. romantic verse or for rallying cries such as objectivist, beat, projective, etc. I take personal delight in knowing that Duncan (as opposed to Pound) does not consider Whitman a bumbling primitive, nor (unlike Olson) can he write-off a figure like Henry James in one sweeping phrase. Though Duncan has called Olson one of his masters, he will take special (even devilish) care to cite Edith Sitwell as well, who writes anything but projective verse. Having received his only formal education in the area of Medieval Studies (take note, short-sighted Creative Writing M.F.A.'s everywhere!), Duncan has the energy and courage to attempt the Herculean task of trying to retrieve history from the junk heap and keep it alive. He has a more profound sense of the Christian myth than any of his colleagues and equally heroically refuses to let that die also. In his theoretical and critical work, Duncan has avoided Pound's cantankerous prose style (where so many young writers fall astray), with its energetic informal choppiness and slang. Duncan has preferred to practice a more classic manner, refreshing in its clarity and balance, always evincing a true erudition.

If Duncan rightfully sees modernism as a lie (or possibly, a downright error), then this of course leaves so-called post-modernism (where Duncan supposedly belongs) in a vacuum, a fact some rather dense critics can't seem to accept. Having taken the contemporary labels and jargon too seriously, certain literati listen to Duncan's

pronouncements with laughable incredulity, as in a recent and rather luxurious volume of interviews and essays by a young "scholar:"

*Ekkert Faas: A poet like Antin traces post-Modernism to the Cantos and The Waste Land.*

*Duncan: Well, I'm not a Modernist. He can do that. I read Modernism as Romanticism; and I finally begin to feel myself pretty much a 19th Century mind.*

*Faas: Really!*

*Duncan: I don't feel out of my century, I like this century, immensely. But my ties to Pound, Stein, Surrealism and so forth all seem to me entirely consequent to their unbroken continuity from the Romantic period.*

This refusal to reduce and schematize the past prematurely, thus keeping the "field" wide and complex is laudable. It accounts for the distinct impression that hearing Duncan recite put me not so much in the possible presence of a living Williams, but a living Shelley, and the result for me was overwhelming. The well spring of Duncan's voice seems, at times, that deep, his calling forth of the dead that far reaching.

John Pruitt



Jefferson Market, 1860