

## ABOUT THE AMBASSADOR FROM VENUS

Lisa Jarnot. *Robert Duncan, The Ambassador from Venus: A Biography*. University of California Press, 2012.

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Those who feared that Lisa Jarnot's long enroute biography of Robert Duncan might be 500 plus pages of hagiography should be relieved by her subtitle, "The Ambassador from Venus." It comes from a Harvey Brown anecdote about Charles Olson's "story of walking around and around the block near Duncan's house before building up the courage to actually ring the bell. 'Well how would *you* feel,' he asked Brown, 'if you were about to meet the Ambassador from Venus?'" While Jarnot's account of the poet's life is hardly a laugh-in, it does manifest a touch of humor in its distinctly measured perspective on his foibles and fopperies as well as his intense devotion to his craft and its metaphysics. This is not inconsistent with Duncan's own perspective. Early on Olson chided Duncan for preoccupations with occultism and theosophy. Duncan acknowledged in his journal, Jarnot astutely notes, that Olson "suspects, and rightly, that I indulge myself in pretentious fictions." But he went on, "I like rigor and even clarity...that is, as I like muddle and floaty vagary. It is the intensity of the conception that moves me." Point, counterpoint. Intensity transforms vagary, or can, something Olson also knew quite well.

Still, to maximize peevishness, I'll complain that Jarnot's perspective is more quotidian than need be. There are of course ways and ways to write a biography. Ekbert Faas' *Young Robert Duncan, Portrait of the Poet as a Homosexual in Society* (1983), for example, opted for a thematic narrative. It's "portrait" motif derives from Duncan's very self conscious coming out essay, a courageous stance that cost him credibility in the gay, straight and modernist literary communities of the notoriously straight forties and fifties. Jarnot's m.o. eschews narrative synthesis and evokes instead an anecdotal travelogue. This quite nicely suits what became Duncan's peripatetic life style but is not quite so well adapted to exploring a complicated man's complexities, to say nothing of his poetics. Given the volume of Duncan's travels, Jarnot's account features relatively short chapters anecdotally loaded but sketchily narrated. For example, in one three and a half page chapter focusing on 1947, when he is 28, Duncan is instrumental in starting the San Francisco Poetry Festival, meeting James Broughton and attempting a particularly crude seduction, beginning correspondences with Louis Zukof-

sky and Charles Olson, making a cross continental “pilgrimage” for a two day visit with Ezra Pound and his wife Dorothy at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington D.C., rationalizing Pound’s anti-semitism as standard Americana analogous to that of his parents and neighbors back in Bakersfield, spending several weeks in New York, hitchhiking back west across the continent, all recounted in two and a half pages. Apparently because of toothache that lays him up in Denver he arrives back on the coast too late for his sister’s wedding, instead, Jarrot says, “focusing his sights on a family of his own.” By this point Duncan has indulged several homosexual affairs, published and signed “The Homosexual in Society,” unsuccessfully tried heterosexual marriage and declared his homosexuality in order to be (dishonorably) discharged from the WW II military. A family of his own? What could this mean? Jarrot provides no explanation. In the next sentence, however, we learn that Duncan covers for a friend who has left his pregnant wife, “juggling the roles of surrogate husband and nursemaid.” Is this the sought for family? Apparently not, as “within weeks Duncan was swept in other directions.” Abruptly, Jarrot ends the chapter with a three-quarter page account of Duncan’s first meeting with Olson, sprawling on the campus lawns of Berkeley.

Consequent to Jarrot’s minimal narrative style is a kind of flat surface where a super abundance of details, as cited above, tends to give them all an equivalent perspective, which of course results in little or no perspective. Her suggestion of Duncan’s domestic inclinations evaporates to ether almost before the syntax of her sentence is complete. It’s too wispy even to quite be an anecdote. Fortunately, however, Jarrot does know a telling anecdote when she sees one. The Broughton seduction cited above is an example. Broughton focuses on the intensity of Duncan’s cross-eyed appearance and his sexual aggressiveness, noting that “when sexually attracted to anyone both eyes would come into fierce focus.” Broughton was considerably important in Duncan’s early poetic life and, Jarrot notes, “had spent his early twenties tracing a trajectory similar to Duncan’s, living on the East Coast as an aspiring writer and escaping service in the Second World War by declaring his homosexuality.” Early in their acquaintance Broughton invited Duncan to dinner and to spend the night at his Sausalito cottage, where Pauline Kael was also staying. He takes a pillow to Duncan in the guest room. Duncan is wearing only his “scivvies,” and

“He came toward me focusing his greedy stare, then grabbed hold of me, ‘You don’t want to sleep with Pauline, you know you don’t. Look at me!’ He moved back to drop his shorts and reveal his erect cock. ‘I want you! You want me, don’t you? I can give you a better fuck than Pauline can!’”

Throughout Duncan's life he was notorious for his startling appearance of one eye on the pot and t'other up the chimney and only slightly less so for his sexual appetite. Both are staple refrains in Jarnot's account, and her inclusion of Broughton's version, though we never learn whether he chooses the lady or the tiger, certainly punctuates the matter.

On the other hand it sits in a characteristically bland context like a vivisection at a Presbyterian tea. That is, the chapter is not really about Duncan's traits, or about his relation to Broughton, or about his relation to Pauline Kael, or about Kael's relation to Broughton, all of which might be interesting and pertinent. It is rather about where Duncan traveled and whom he saw in the year 1947, a year that seems to signify essentially because it intervenes between 1946 and 1948. In fact, notwithstanding the revelatory amusement of Broughton's story, Jarnot introduces it not as an instance of Duncan's intensity, sexuality or appearance. She introduces it as an example of his "tremendous appetite for attention." That too was true of Duncan, but seen in this light it becomes ridiculous—his motive for producing and exhibiting his erection is simply to get Broughton's *attention!*? If this inadvertent reductiveness is another difficulty of the travelogue style Jarnot has adopted, she nonetheless uses her unusually keen eye to sprinkle anecdotes liberally through the book. They might result from a sentence, as this one from a memoir by Gerald Ackerman, a onetime lover of Duncan, "Although he wanted to make...his life a maelstrom that drew everything into it (the act of super egocentricity necessary to his type of poetry) he allowed me to spin in my neighboring eddy." Critically incisive observations about both Duncan's life and his work, and they are echoed in one of Jarnot's own incisive epithets characterizing Duncan's "ferocious intellectual appetite and equally ferocious narcissism." If there is no place in her text Jarnot may relegate a particularly appealing anecdote to the endnotes, like this one about the youthful Philip K. Dick as told to Thom Gunn by Duncan, "One day...Dick arrived...as Robert sat on his bed... Dick arched his back and masturbated in front of an astonished Duncan. 'I was the only one he could have shown this side to,'" Duncan confided to Gunn, apparently not so astonished after all. OK, so much for sex, which presumably had a frequency in Duncan's life similar to that in Jarnot's account.

While Jarnot's anecdotal brevity at times may be distracting she can also work it to good advantage. Her account of Duncan's long turbulent relationship with Denise Levertov is one of several cases in point. What began in mutual admiration in 1955 and developed fruitfully via epistles over the years had devolved by 1972 to an argumentative truce, the argument turning largely on their differing poetics in regard to the Vietnam

war. Duncan argued for a kind of aesthetic purity in contrast to Levertov's anti-war urgency. But, comparing Levertov's "Advent 1966" with Duncan's "The Soldiers, *Passages 26*" in terms of anti-war politics, Jarnot rightly implies Duncan's critique of Levertov seems overblown if not gratuitous. Her account of Duncan's long relationship with Olson is yet more fulsome and ends with a touching episode of Duncan's urgent cross continental visit to Olson's deathbed. Similarly, Helen Adam, Robert Creeley, H.D., Anais Nin and of course Duncan's partner Jess all receive substantial attention. Principal among Duncan's many longtime relationships were those with Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Spicer and other colleagues in the early San Francisco scene such as Robin Blaser, James Broughton and film maker Stan Brakhage. While Duncan's relationships could be very intimate, if they went south they often did so with vehemence. Of course many of his friends were as intensely egocentric and idiosyncratic as he was. Rexroth, always a feisty outsider, even as the *pater familias* of the Bay area scene, was an early instance of a friend-cum-antagonist.

For the most part Duncan's enmity was produced by differing aesthetics, as with Levertov, Spicer and Blaser. In Rexroth's case the split was due to a clash of egos and apparently turned on the innocuous matter of a \$50 reading fee. Whatever the cause, I can testify, elaborating on a minor Jarnot anecdote, that a tension between them existed at least to 1974, when I invited them to read together at Northwestern University. While Duncan accepted the assignment without comment, Rexroth told me long distance that putting them together on the stage would be a mistake, though he did not specify why. As it happened it was necessary that they read on the same program. Rexroth accepted this but asked to read first, to which Duncan of course consented. I think Rexroth had been working on translations of Tu Fu, so his reading featured translations. Accordingly, he presented a quiet, well tempered reading. No impassioned indictments such as the conclusion to his famous anti-war threnody for Dylan Thomas, "You killed him, you killed him / In your God damned Brooks Brothers suit / you son of a bitch." As Duncan took the podium he seemed oddly distracted from the start. His reading devolved to a combination of meandering meditations and the occasional tentatively proffered poem, one step up from a total disaster as he seemed to succumb to his well known vice of logorrhea. I was puzzled until I went to his solo reading at Loyola University two nights later, where he was focused, incisive and eloquent. Also he had performed "Spelling" for one of my classes with characteristic vivacity. I realized what Rexroth had implied but not said, that Duncan's mind would be disheveled with Rexroth in attendance. Neither Duncan nor I broached the subject

over the next couple of days. Nor, for that matter, did Rexroth.

Duncan's poetry, poetics and aesthetic stances are what warrant biographical attention, but of course he made his homosexuality a substantial dimension of his artistic life, beginning with his publication of "The Homosexual in Society" in the August 1944 issue of Dwight Macdonald's *Politics*. A complicated piece that was a critique of different sorts of exclusiveness in both the gay and straight worlds, Jarnot's account foregrounds how its circumstances illuminate Duncan's lifelong anarchistic disinclination to join either political or aesthetic cliques, "parties" or institutions. For starters Macdonald's note accepting the essay is a gem: "You've written a really thoughtful and sincere piece here, and very well expressed (though your style is more rococo than my personal taste)," as Duncan noted in a letter to Pauline Kael. Not a few folks have spoken similarly of Duncan's verse. John Crowe Ransom, however, had enthusiastically accepted Duncan's poem "An African Elegy" for the *Kenyon Review* until he read the essay in *Politics*, after which he rejected the poem for supposed homosexual inuendo though it was already typeset. Among other observations Ransom told Duncan that "homosexuals should be 'altered'...to prevent breeding of that type." Duncan's reply was brilliant and suggested how formidable his wit could be: "I would willingly take a pledge that I'm not going to breed this year, but just leave me with my equipment, could you?" Though Macdonald urged him not to sign the essay, Duncan insisted that the integrity of the piece required a candid signature. By the time that point in his life had passed he quite possibly was pleased that he had managed to offend everyone but his anarchistically inclined friends Paul Goodman and Jackson Mac Low.

Duncan's poetics of course had a somewhat more complex base rooted as they were in his exposure to the theosophy practiced by his adoptive parents and his own theistic transcendentalism. Jarnot's methodology tends to offer brief glimpses rather than extended inquiries into Duncan's poetics, though some of the more luminous are her occasionally lengthy citations from poems. Others come by way of anecdotal fallout from his aesthetic arguments with Spicer, Blaser, Levertov or, as noted above, Rexroth and Olson, where he validates his dialectical synthesis of "clarity" and "muddle" via "intensity of conception." In his letter to Levertov about her poem "Advent 1966" he exhibits a simultaneity of clarity and muddle in attempting to mandate a pure poetics facing the "monstrosity" of the Vietnam war that he opined was "taking over" her life,

And I wish that I could advance some—not consolation, there is none—wisdom of how we are to bear constant...testimony to our grief for those suffering...and at the same time continue as constantly in our work (which must

face and contain somehow this appalling and would-be spiritually destroying evidence of what human kind will do...) now more than ever, to keep alive the immediacy of the ideal and the eternal.

That appeal to the ideal and eternal is an aesthetic to which Wordsworth and Shelley could and did subscribe. It identifies Duncan's distinctively anachronistic and unapologetic romanticism, an uncompromising quality that precipitated the end of several relationships, including that with Levertov. In fact it appears that it was only with Olson that he could acknowledge criticism, rationalize it productively and sustain the relationship. The rift with Levertov seems essentially perverse, since as noted above her political rhetoric and his in several of the 1960s *Passages* are alike in their poetic "impurity." Perhaps the saddest fallout was with Spicer, once a close friend whom Duncan greatly admired. Their mutual bitterness became such that only after Spicer's death could Duncan acknowledge the value of his work.

While Jarnot tends to evoke Duncan's poetics on the fly, on occasion she slows for a more penetrating look. One of these is her chapter entitled "The Venice Poem," an early poem she describes as both "a testament to an encroaching psychodrama" and "a memoir of the collective erotic longings of the Berkeley Renaissance participants," though particularly reflecting a Duncan infatuation in the midst of an unusually intense university scene. "The world that Duncan, Spicer and Blaser sought was utopian," Jarnot says, "a place where poetry descended from the divine and poetic community could be assembled like a Greek city state." They studied Greek classicism and medieval history and theology with one Ernst Kantorowicz, who in turn had studied with Stefan George in Germany. Apparently they all were under the spell of George's messianic homoerotic romanticism, where Duncan persisted though Spicer and Blaser later strayed toward preoccupations with "a real lemon...a real moon" and away from "sweet Platonic spiritland, / You can't see us in spiritland, and we can't see at all," as Spicer would later put it. But there in 1947 in the Berkeley Renaissance, in the intellectual community that also included P.K.Dick and Pauline Kael, Spicer could see well enough to perceive that Duncan not only "read his poems to anyone who would listen" but had seduced and set up cohabitation with a young student Spicer himself had been courting, hence the "collective erotic longings" recorded in "The Venice Poem." Jarnot notes the poem's debt to "modernist practices of Pound and Eliot" and cites Duncan's notation of Jane Harrison's influence via her theory of the dithyramb. The poem drew on such local landmarks as the campus campanile for sonic effects and derived images from Kantorowicz's slide show lectures on medieval Venetian architecture. It also featured an allegory of the erotic dynamics cast as an

*Othello* subplot, where the young man who was the object of both Duncan's and Spicer's affections was cast as Desdemona ("whore of Venice"), Spicer as Iago and Duncan multiphasically as Othello, Shakespeare and "the cross-eyed king of 1000 lines." Predictably, as Duncan's *amour* waned his relationship with Spicer improved, the poem was completed and Duncan earned A in each of his esoteric classes, "The Philosophical and Religious Matrix of Political Problems in the Periclean Age" and "The Life and Times of Confucius." Jarnot does not vouchsafe how Spicer's semester turned out.

Perhaps the best reflections on Duncan's poetics emerge from short citations Jarnot folds into her account. A good example is her chapter on Duncan's freshman year at the University of California, where in about four pages she not only gets him installed and enrolled but gets him introduced to the main influences of his aesthetic life, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and most of all Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. Jarnot quotes from Duncan's 1965 essay, "The Lasting Contribution of Ezra Pound," that he was "the carrier of a tradition or lore in poetry that flowered in the Renaissance...in the Provence of the twelfth century that gave rise to Albigensian gnosis, the trobar clus, and the Kabbalah, in the Hellenistic world that furnished the ground for orientalizing-Greek mystery cults, Christianity, and neo-Platonism." She is alert to how Pound's musical premises led Duncan to Igor Stravinsky's 1947 *Poetics of Music*, where Stravinsky "defined melody as 'the intonation of the melos, which signifies fragment, a part of a phrase. It is these parts that...mark certain accentuations' From the unit of the musical phrase, music and poetry too seemed to be turning to...the melos or syllable." Jarnot concludes, "The confluence of these two ideas... provided an early cornerstone for Duncan's method of composition: he resolved that repeated vowel phrases would work together to form melodies throughout his poems." One can also see how primed he was for Olson's projective verse when he came to it. Not bad for a college freshman.

Another useful insight is Jarnot's brief on Helen Adams' importance to Duncan. At San Francisco soirees Adams' reading of her works in the tradition of Scottish border ballads were compelling in their evocation of "the psychological borders of existence, especially the otherworldly—ghost stories, tragic love affairs, and great catastrophes. For Duncan, Adams' creative influence was immediate." Later, in the context of Cocteau, she cites a highly pertinent entry from Duncan's notebooks regarding "a period of virulent contagions, fevers of Blake; and the closeness of Cocteau's journals to my own designs...But to give my vices a world in which to flower, and a universe for my demons to walk by night is a virtue of writing at all." One of Jarnot's virtues as a biographer of so self-indulgent a man as Duncan is



to let his words at once indict and redeem him. Here, his acknowledgement of his indulgences goes a certain way toward redemption. At other times she employs a sly side winding humor. After a pre-performance dinner in Toronto that featured a dessert Duncan described, Jarnot says, with “mixed horror and delight,” as “the Soupe-anglaise Greek style ice cream in a huge bowl puddled with fruits, nuts, jams, dates, orange-juice, amarette, ground coffee—whatever phantasy is on hand,” Jarnot says, “His lecture mirrored the ambrosial sea of dessert.” The talk was entitled “Forth on the Godly Sea: The Daemonic in the Realm of Poetry.” Jarnot playfully quotes Duncan’s letter to Jess [a daily practice throughout their long life together], which acknowledged “The talk was more ‘at sea’ than ‘of the gods’” and then went on to inadvertently demonstrate the point with a dithrambic sequence of causticities, concluding, “The Unconscious is that which is without content.” And there is a Duncan statement of that that we have both loved “Nothing inside but the inside inside.” And that perhaps is the inside scoop on what held Duncan and Jess together through 37 years of Duncan’s infidelities.

Duncan has of course written at some length on his poetics, about both prosodic technique and imaginative conception. So perhaps it could be counterproductive for a biography to pursue so theoretical a herring. On the other hand, Duncan’s is a romantic concept of poetry and has capacious ambitions and failures. In that sense a biographer might well be expected to engage her subject on that ground. It may be that Jarnot took Duncan’s dismissal of Faas’s biography too much at face value. She cites Duncan’s comment to Jess that Faas reflected “absolutely no sense of humor and very little insight.” But she also notes how Duncan acknowledged that Faas’s work “forced him to meditate upon a troubling aspect of his personality,” a forceful egocentricity whereby he rode “roughshod over even your [Jess’s] love and a picture can be developpt [*sic*] in the darkroom of a photographer with no sense of more than the ego structure of me living off of everyone around. I read...disheartened at what I had delivered myself over to.” Jarnot sums up the situation thus: “In the end, as Duncan had predicted, Faas’s book would focus heavily on his early sexual encounters, treating Duncan’s writings primarily as narratives of sexual psychodrama and overlooking the complex cultural and aesthetic worlds from which they grew.” Well, just how “disheartened,” could such a Freudian as Duncan be that a biographer focusing on ‘the [Young] Poet as Homosexual in Society’ would address “early sexual encounters” and be preoccupied with “sexual psychodrama” in his work? Perhaps there is a clue in Faas’s book, where he recounts Duncan telling him that a “household” was not a fit subject for a biography, “which is a story like the Odyssey.” Apart from the merits of Duncan’s recipe for a



proper biography, this suggests how Duncan saw himself, not as a workaday pedestrian along the neurotic pathway of life, but as a mythical beast sailing the whale-ways of allegory and epic romance.

Then again, even Homer provides us some quotidian details, such as the suitors trashing Penelope's environs as well as her crackerjack ingenuities at keeping them from her bed. As for whether more or less detail is better, in the case of these two biographies each has a chapter entitled "The Venice Poem" providing case studies in differing perspective. As suggested above Jarnot's treatment of the melodrama from which the poem emerged is brief but incisive, sketching the poem, its sources and environment in about four pages of a five and a half page chapter. Faas spends about 13 pages of a 19 page chapter laying out Duncan's relationship to the players, how that evolved into the poem itself, the sources of the poem in Pound on prosody, Igor Stravinsky on music and poetry and Jane Harrison on dithyrambic poetry. In other words, he covers the same ground but does so with a great deal more elaborated narrative, psychological and interpretive attentions. Of course interpretation has its risks, particularly when the poet is still around to vet one's conclusions. Jarnot reports how David Meltzer remembered Duncan's reaction to Faas' biography: "Robert found it so funny and so totally wrong that he brought copies to give to New College Poetics faculty and students." Presumably, had the book been found sober and totally right Duncan would not have troubled the faculty and students with copies. Wisely, Jarnot ventures no exegesis of this anecdote.

By the time Jarnot came to her task Duncan's spouse, Jess, was more than cooperative. That obviously was not the case with Faas, partly because of Duncan's dismissal of his household as pertinent to his life story and partly because Jess was notoriously one of Whitman's isolatos. In Faas's 292 pages of text Jess is mentioned exactly twice, whereas he has a substantial role in Jarnot's 434 pages. And, though Faas's book was published only five years before Duncan's death in 1988 and one prior to his kidney failure, dialysis and declining health, his biography effectually ends with the era of "The Venice Poem," 1948, when Duncan was about 30. In Jarnot's account the same chapter comes early on, when she still has 319 pages to go to cover the remaining 39 years of his life. She does this essentially in the manner I have described above, with reportage as the touchstone and little or no interpretive flourishes. While there might be times when one wishes Jarnot would give herself more latitude, the fact is she covers "the long trip," as Duncan called it, rather well. Still, as Dr. Johnson said of *Paradise Lost*, whatever its virtues no one ever wished it longer than it is.