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**A SCHOLAR IS NEVER WITHOUT HIS LUTE:
ROBERT DUNCAN AND COMPANY IN THE POETICS PROGRAM
AT NEW COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA, 1980-1987**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Nicholas James Whittington

December 2020

The Dissertation of Nicholas James Whittington is
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2020

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ABSTRACT

A SCHOLAR IS NEVER WITHOUT HIS LUTE: ROBERT DUNCAN AND COMPANY IN THE POETICS PROGRAM AT NEW COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA, 1980-1987

Nicholas James Whittington

At base an institutional history of the initial incarnation (1980-1987) of the Masters in Poetics program at New College of California, a now defunct, alternative school in San Francisco (1971-2008), this work contributes to the field of study that has been developed over the past decade by such books as Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, Eric Bennett's *Workshops of Empire*, Loren Glass's *After the Workshop Era*, and Juliana Spahr's *Du Bois's Telegram*, which are concerned with the literary and political implications of the teaching of Creative Writing at institutions of higher learning in the United States. Inaugurated at the very moment that the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) issued its first formal recommendations for the hiring of faculty in this rapidly expanding discipline, defining the Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) as the degree of preference, the New College Program expressly positioned itself against such departments, while also positioning itself against more traditional departments in English, Comparative Literature, Rhetoric, and the like. It offered instead a sui generis course of study designed for young working poets to investigate the historical, theoretical, and technical aspects of their art. There were no writing workshops such as form the cornerstone of most MFA programs in Creative

Writing; students studied “subjects” —from prosody, musical proportion, and the poetics of theater; to classical Greek myth, diverse African cosmologies, and medieval Muslim comment; to the Troubadours, the Romantics, and modern and contemporary American and European poets; as well as Field Theory, Linguistics, Kabbalah, and more—but all of these courses were designed to deepen the technical attention of student-poets as they grew more intimate with diverse modes and meanings of being a poet, not merely methods and manners of writing poems.

The dominant mode of learning in the Poetics Program might be called “anarcho-scholasticism,” a term Stephen Collis has coined “to name a presiding ethos, a peculiar *merging* of concerns in...scholarly writings by poets – poets’ attempts to write their responses to other poets. They are Janus-faced works – part exegesis, part original expression – ‘creative’ in their own right, but their creativity is often located in the collagist’s eye for the found object and critical juxtaposition.” At root was a sense of history as *istorin*, “finding out for oneself,” as Charles Olson put it, and a sense of knowledge as *gnosis*, a highly personal and personalized cognition and fascination. The faculty encouraged such mystical modalities of reading as the Jewish *PaRDeS*, the Islamic *ta’wil*, and ecumenical contemplative practices, types of personal exegesis that complicated both the temporality of the text and the textuality of time, turning the student body, so to speak, into a community of visionary readers, who performed analogous and interrelated, but ultimately inconvertible operations, each exegete presenting the common text uniquely, as each exegesis was

inscribed in the nunc stans of a collective, living tradition of Poetry. As Collis notes, “for writers, other writers are always passages to still other writers,” and so faculty and students alike were engaged as well in both individual and collective efforts to descry their broader poetic cosmologies.

Such a conception of eternal community depends on a temporal community in which to conceive it, and this is what the participants in the Poetics Program provided one another despite their internecine conflicts. Like the college that housed it, the program was quasi-anarchic and collectivist in both administration and academics, inviting, even depending upon, student participation in all its aspects, and insisting on Poetics “in the plural,” as the catalog put it, so what emerged was neither an aesthetic school, nor a social coterie, but what I have come to call a community of inquiry, where faculty and student-poets worked collaboratively, in official classroom contexts and in unofficial reading and work groups, often over a duration of several years, to define and redefine the Basic Elements of poetry and poetics, and to build their own alternative academic model for the study of the art.

My approach has been to directly involve myself with the relevant persons by way of interviews, with the relevant poetry by way of close reading, and with the relevant pedagogical materials by way of archival research. I have attempted thereby to imagine myself back into the program as it was forty years ago, which has meant imagining myself back into the social milieu of the program and of the city of San Francisco, the general cultural and specifically poetic landscape of the local and

national scene, and the fraught political moment. I have taken my cues from the persons I have interviewed, not attempting to articulate my own concerns or discern a shape in the material until I had spoken with a dozen key figures. However, I earned my own MFA in Poetry from San Francisco State University before becoming one of the inaugural students in the Creative/Critical concentration of the PhD program in Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a concentration that is still struggling to define its terms and intentions, so I also write from an invested position as a poet-scholar with experience of diverse academic and extra-academic settings, with the hope that my study might help invigorate various aspects of the discipline. Among the models I have taken for this project is Martin Duberman's *Black Mountain College*, an institutional history in which the historian is implicated by way of the questions that guide it—questions about the subject, object, and mode of inquiry—and expressly present in the description of the persons that populate the text. In my writing, I have tried to weave the anecdotal with the documentary, the practical with the theoretical, the intellectual with the emotional, and the historical with the personal, in the same way that the participants in the program did, in the way, too, that they wove the critical with the creative, the warp and the weft of what may be called properly a Poetics.

for the dead
in memory
of the living

DAVID MELTZER
1937-2016

DIANE DI PRIMA
1934-2020

Introduction

...barring cogent reasons, a scholar is never without his lute.

—Book of Rites

Over the course of his nearly fifty-year writing life, Robert Duncan was astonishingly prolific. Thankfully, most of his magisterial *oeuvre* is now collected in four massive volumes published by the University of California Press, including his auto-critical magnum opus, *The H.D. Book*, composed from 1959 through 1964, a volume of *Collected Essays and Other Prose*; and the two volumes of *Collected Early* and *Collected Later Poems and Plays*. It is foremost as a Poet, of course, that Duncan is known, and rightly so, but of the more than 1,400 pages of work collected in the last two volumes, a relatively scant fifty pages contain all the poetry Duncan wrote in the final eight years of his life, from his 61st birthday, on January 7, 1980, to his death, on February 3, 1988. Most of that work dates from 1980 and 1981, with only fifteen pages coming from 1982, and a mere four or five pages—three poems—thereafter. What's more, aside from a few brief introductions and other statements, the only prose Duncan composed in these years was his twenty-page, fifty-part meditation on the work of Edmond Jabès, "The Delirium of Meaning," written early in the decade. Now the simple explanation for this sudden slowing is that Duncan was sick. It's true that he grew increasingly ill over the course of these years, and no doubt illness

took its toll on his writing, but that can only be part of the story, for Duncan was notoriously irrepressible, and tales of this irrepressibility abound, even from the early and middle 1980s when his body rapidly deteriorated and he was forced to undergo continuous ambulatory peritoneal dialysis, draining his own waste into a bag through a hole in his abdomen and introducing a fresh bag of fluids, four times daily. As many who knew him have attested, he would do this whenever required, wherever he may be—during intermission at the Opera, for instance, or, as was often the case, in the middle of whatever class he was teaching under the auspices of the Poetics Program at New College of California. “He’d unplug, pull this thing out, plop it on the table and reach over, plug in another one, and never miss a beat,” fellow faculty member David Meltzer recalled: “Initially so many of the students were just aghast—but as I always say, he taught us how to live, and he taught us how to die, and he went out in a blaze of Duncan-esque glory.”¹ Student Dan Blue recognized that Duncan “had a performer’s eye for a good prop.... He sensed the theatrical possibilities and milked them for all they were worth, opening his lower shirt and undoing his belt with a sly portentousness that always gave us pause. He made it into a strip show, and when one day he stood up and his pants fell off, I couldn’t tell if it was a mortifying accident or theatrical coup.”² Indeed, Blue’s remarks here recall fellow student Carl Grundberg’s description of Duncan’s performance of *Faust Foutu* on November 1, 1981, inaugurating the “Works and Words” series hosted by Poetics classmates Aaron Shurin and David Levi Strauss at

544 Natoma, which “involve[d] him taking off all of his clothing while reading. He was in his 60s at the time, and it was this mind-boggling moment of vulnerability and exposure..., reading while he’s stark naked, saying, ‘This is me! This is me!’ And he kept reading, and gradually putting his clothes back on, until he was his usual, impeccable self.”³ As fellow student Susan Thackrey said, “fear, failure, aging, and death...were basic elements that Robert brought with an awesome aplomb into his later poetics and into the poetics of his instruction.... Robert put everything into his teaching and so he put into it his own aging and dying.”⁴

In light of these remarks, it seems that while the sudden slow-down of Duncan’s writing might be attributed *negatively* to his illness, it must also be attributed *positively*, in at least equal or even greater part, to his teaching in the Poetics Program, for despite his erratic, continually declining health, Duncan did not finally stop teaching until the end of 1985. He finished only one poem that year, however, as he had finished only one the year before, and one the year before that. Clearly, it wasn’t only that he was ill, but that his energies shifted. In her biography of the poet, Lisa Jarnot writes that “on more than one occasion, Robert Duncan told friends that at an appointed time he would become a ‘master teacher,’ even if it meant standing on a street corner and imparting information to passersby.”⁵ As Duncan entered his sixth decade of life, it seems that appointed time had come. A mere fifteen-minute walk from his home in San Francisco’s Mission District, the ad-hoc administrative structure of New College of California, an alternative, collectively

run, financially precarious, but fully accredited institution, enabled its resident poet-scholar, Duncan McNaughton, to invite Robert Duncan, Diane di Prima, and David Meltzer to join him and co-founder Louis Patler on the core faculty of their nascent graduate program in Poetics, which welcomed its first cohort of students in the Fall of 1980.

From their earliest musings, McNaughton and Patler had in mind an unconventional course of study, which would be “neither a variation on ordinary graduate studies in literature, lacking students’ and faculty’s primary commitment to the vocation itself—nor...a glorified creative writing program, lacking a thorough, sound acquaintance with the values and knowledge of the tradition of poetry,” as they wrote in their original proposal. Beginning “with a minimum assumption of [students’] prerogatives as working poets,” they meant collectively to “address...the character and intentions of the tradition of poetry...(its practice and the knowledge transmitted within the formalities of its practice), [which,] while always exoterically conditioned by the exigencies of time and locale, is never less than, in each instance or recurrence of itself, an individual esoteric science, a gnosis.”⁶ Duncan, Meltzer, and di Prima were all deeply sympathetic to this view of the poem and equally committed to one another, having enjoyed a personal friendship and poetic comradeship dating back two decades before they came together to develop their completely *sui generis* curriculum. The intensities and intimacies of their fertile community of inquiry not only dominated Duncan’s last years, but “really kept him

going, in a very positive way," Meltzer said.⁷ "We had all these poets teaching themselves, and learning from each other. It was an immensely interesting synthesis of poets and really gifted students.... I'm convinced, and I think Diane is too, the program kept him alive for five years. It was just the interchange with the students, and the energy."⁸

Though his own illness had not yet begun to affect him when the Poetics Program first got underway, Duncan did feel that the poetic body at large had begun to break down. The disease had no one source and several symptoms, but according to Strauss, at the program's first orientation on September 17, 1980, Duncan said "it was only the recent 'observable collapse of craft' that had brought him back to teach, that it was like when dangerous machines break down (a car with a leaky exhaust, or a poorly constructed bookshelf that falls on someone's head), and all of the people who make these things feel responsible."⁹ Shifting metaphors, "Duncan said that poetics is to poetry as medicine is to the body or as botany is to flowers, and that real information was equally as scanty in those other disciplines, as needful of inquiry."¹⁰ As classmate John Thorpe put it, "Duncan expressed a very troubled concern that poetry as an art, as the art and craft and revelation it might be, was in peril of being lost."¹¹ "People just didn't know what the materials of writing a poem were anymore; they'd just sort of write down their thoughts and break them into lines and call that a poem," Grundberg said.¹² According to Thorpe, "on the basis of American poetry in the 1970s," Duncan was concerned that poetry had become increasingly

“identified with vehicles for expressing personality, in view of a great many reactions to [post-WWII sociopolitical forces of] depersonalization.... He didn’t decry needs to assert or expand personality in poetry whatsoever, but...he thought that treating the presences in oneself as an Identity threatened full articulation.”¹³

“He wanted to meet that situation and provide some remedy,” Grundberg said.¹⁴ So over the first two semesters of the Poetics Program, Duncan prescribed an intensive and expansive course of study concerned with what he called *The Use of Basic Elements, Ideas of Meaning, and The Nature of Persons Proposed in Poetry*. In the latter, Duncan had his students “inspect [these persons] at numerous levels—at least four,” Thorpe said: “1. Ourselves; 2. the pronouns and loss of pronouns in English grammar; 3. the figures recurring, regardless of epoch, in poetry; and 4. the figures of other poets as guides, allies, or companions.”¹⁵ *Ideas of Meaning in Poetry* would consider “the nature of poetry as presented by poets” like “Hesiod, Homer, Parmenedes, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, [and] Whitman,” and consider these poets’ “intent” by looking at “their defenses and apologies..., where the poets really advance ideas of what poetry is.”¹⁶ Complemented especially by di Prima’s classes on what she termed *The Encounter: The Beloved, The Angel, The Guide, The Landscape, Vision and the Visionary Poem, Poetry and Magic, and Hidden Religions in the Poetry of Europe*, along with Meltzer’s signature sequence on the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, the courses of the core faculty were designed, as Meltzer put it, to introduce students to “the multiple histories of poetry, and its

concerns and vocabulary, and its tools,"¹⁷ particularly those that had been excluded, or at best given short shrift, historically, in academic settings. "The idea that at that time poetry was something to be handled primarily academically was disturbing to a lot of the people there," said Thackrey,¹⁸ so "the Poetics Program tried...to give us an [alternative] intellectual base...of historical import that we could build on, and then to give us sources that we could draw on for the rest of our lives," Strauss added. "All the teachers were very serious that they had this material they wanted to present, and that was the important thing, rather than their own poetry or their own poetry careers," Grundberg said: "The materials that inspired them to write poetry in the first place was what they wanted to share with people."¹⁹ Students were encouraged to trace their own lineages and to develop their own visions of what poetry was, what it could be, and what it could do. At the same time, as di Prima insisted, "however great your visioning and your inspiration, you need the techniques of the craft, and there [was] nowhere really to get them,"²⁰ so in the Poetics Program both the technical and the ecstatic aspects of the poem would be investigated and exercised, equally and in tandem.

Of course, "craft" had been the primary, even sole, focus of the workshop in academic and academic-adjacent settings since at least the 1950s, but as Duncan and company would have seen it, and as I will argue further below, these workshops too often risked producing mere craftsmen, rather than Poets, in the fullest sense of that title, in part by encouraging an excessively self-centered attention to students' own

poems at the expense of that “thorough, sound acquaintance with the values and knowledge of the tradition of poetry,” which McNaughton highlighted in his proposal. In the original incarnation of the Poetics Program, students’ poems played next to no part in the coursework, which completely avoided anything at all resembling the workshops *de rigueur* of those Creative Writing programs then proliferating across the country. As McNaughton wrote in the first program catalog, “Courses of that type are not only without merit, but...intrinsically fraught with endless potentials for disaster for anyone concerned with learning the nature of poetry.”²¹ Instead, while Robert Grenier and Michael Palmer taught relatively traditional, if rather idiosyncratic, Prosody courses, Duncan administered his course on the Use of Basic Elements, which he described as “an advanced study of soundings, interrelationships of vowels and consonants, stress and syllabic count, junctures and disjunctures, phrasings, complex structures and functions of language as making for poetry.”²² This was decidedly not a workshop, but a seminar in which students collectively identified the Basic Elements as they saw them, then studied the use of these elements by poets from Dante Alighieri to Louis Zukofsky, taking the tradition, rather than their own emotions, ideas, and experiences, to be the originary ground of their own developing poetics, as well as those of their contemporaries and immediate predecessors. In the Basic Elements course, students attended to an irreducible array of formal aspects of poetry and, more fundamentally, of language, down to its smallest units of seme and phoneme,

drawing heavily on linguistic theory and thereby addressing another of Duncan's concerns for that contemporary poetic body whose disease he meant his teaching to treat.

While Duncan worried, as noted above, "about a fashionable deluge of persons asserted in poetry unambiguously, when they should have been composed with full ambiguity in mind, he equally worried about a fashionable deluge of signs so randomly impersonal that they could only be disambiguated by a losing sequence of guesses," Thorpe said: "Personalities were flying short of craft and composition, while arbitrary signs were flying past craft and composition."²³ Here, the foil was not workshop verse, but so-called Language Writing, whose foremost theorists and practitioners were then in the midst of their ascendance in avant-garde poetry circles and on their way to the positions of power and influence they've since attained in the academy. Some students felt that the core faculty of the Poetics Program "came together for that short period of time to try to counter this thing that they saw happening [with Language Writing]. That's why this thing with [Barrett] Watten was such a watershed for us, because we could see it, we could see the split," as Strauss said,²⁴ referring to a now infamous 1978 confrontation between Watten and Duncan, ostensibly over the work of Louis Zukofsky, but more fundamentally over different ways of reading: what might be called academic, on the one hand, and ecstatic, on the other. This broad, theoretical opposition is key to articulating the peculiarity and importance of the Poetics Program, but it is hardly exclusive to the

Poetry Wars then (and occasionally still) swirling around Language Writing. Though there were a number of significant personal and poetical conflicts between members of the two factions, alliances and oppositions were “all fluid,” as Norma Cole put it,²⁵ and for Poetics students and faculty alike, the highly-charged poetic atmosphere was quite stimulating. San Francisco, circa 1980, was arguably the most fecund poetry scene in the country. “In those days I thought there must be more poets per capita than any other place on earth.... It was poetry heaven...,” recalled Mary Margaret Sloan, citing the Beat and Berkeley/San Francisco Renaissance legacy, North Beach street poets, movement poetics flowing into and out of the 1968 San Francisco State strike, feminist poetics, queer poetics, New Narrative, and an influx of international poets and poetics, in addition to Language Writing: “And it was part of the conversation, all of it.”²⁶ Indeed, not only did McNaughton invite a number of writers often associated with the Language group to teach courses and give readings under the auspices of the Poetics Program, but members of the core faculty, Duncan, Palmer, and Meltzer, in particular, explicitly engaged much of the contemporary critical and linguistic theory that formed the ideological base of much Language Writing in their own courses, too. As Susan Thackrey recalled:

Robert Duncan was bringing in from the very beginning Saussure, Jakobsen, etc. He was intensely interested in Lacan.... He was so attuned to the multiple relationships going on in poetry.... My sense is that he objected to some of the Language poets—certainly not all of them, but some of them—for what he felt was an over-reliance on contemporary linguistics to create their medium. He felt, well, ‘Yeah, it’s there, we do concentrate on that’; yet at the same time he was

feeling that their relationship to language was curtailed, constricted, constricting rather than enlarging....²⁷

Indeed, in an interview in 1982, Duncan identified the “Language poets” as “one of the most interesting and coherent movements” then active on the local scene, but, he said, “I find them reductionists”:

I usually quip, you start out with logical positivism and you end up with illogical negativism. All sorts of things that are ruled out in language: it can't refer and so forth. So language is turned over to a kind of logic. I'm never illogical, but I'm never logical, for in my head logic is zero—zilch. I'm a poet, not a logician.... The Language group has set logical rules on their language.... They set their premises, and then they rationalize what language should do, so now there is depreciation...., [and] proprieties show up.²⁸

The determination of what is and is not proper has long been one of the academy's self-assigned duties, and it was on account of its exclusion of prophecy, vision, imagination, and romance that Duncan and company rejected the traditional academic treatment of poetry. In the face of such enduring academic stricture, and in the midst of the broader Culture Wars then being waged—Reagan was elected to the Presidency midway through the Poetics Program's first term—it pained them to witness the ascendance of a new poetic avant-garde that also seemed predicated on the restriction of poetic permissibility and possibility. Interestingly, because of the exclusionary inclinations of certain of its most vocal proponents, Strauss said “Duncan always compared [Language Writing] to New Criticism.”²⁹ To be clear, Language Writing, still a fledgling outsider movement at this point, was in no way aesthetically or politically allied with that earlier hegemon; however, the comparison

does call us back to the Poetics Program's rejection of the whole discipline of Creative Writing, and most explicitly of the workshop, which was so heavily influenced by the New Critics.

To set the stage and establish the stakes of this rejection, at the Robert Duncan centennial conference in Paris in the summer of 2019, I attempted to condense the unique conditions of the Poetics Program into a slight, suggestive presentation digressing into the history of that discipline, the influence of the New Critics upon it, and Duncan's youthful flirtation and final conflict with those Critics. I also attempted to address this conflict's reverberations and resonances in Duncan's subsequent life and work, up to and including his engagement with the Poetics Program, presenting all of this under the rubric of a "*Kreis* in Poetry." Here the German *kreis*, was meant to echo the French *crise*, and so, in echoing Stéphane Mallarmé's "*Crise de vers*," my title meant to suggest the constitution of a circle (*kreis*) as Robert Duncan's response to crisis (*crise*), not only in this instance, but throughout his life, for Duncan had faced a number of personal, political, and poetical crises before and, in each instance, found or formed a circle to carry on in the face of it. These earlier experiences both prefaced and informed the peculiar *kreis* of the Poetics Program and the multifaceted *crise* to which it responded, so to sketch Duncan's history in this respect is also to outline the foundational parameters of the Poetics Program itself, which is what I would like to do here, over the next several pages.

•

*Something we call Poetry is happening in the poem...,
a stirring in the depths of language where it sounds...*

—Robert Duncan

In the late 1940s—when the Berkeley Renaissance, the first major *kreis* of Duncan’s life, was in full bloom—there were a mere five graduate programs in Creative Writing. By 1970, that number had grown to 45, and ten years later, when the Poetics Program at New College was born, there were more than 100 programs offering an MFA in Creative Writing, or something analogous. The Poetics Program, however, rejected that booming discipline, just as it rejected the academy’s more traditional mode of literary study, complaining that “English departments presume custody of the tradition in which they have had no hand in making,” while “creative writing naively presumes a careerist objective.”³⁰ Now, as D. G. Myers wrote in his seminal study, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, the term “Creative Writing” actually “refers to two things: (1) a classroom subject, [i.e.] the teaching of fiction- and verse-writing at colleges and universities across the country; and (2) a national system for the employment of fiction writers and poets to teach the subject.”³¹ The faculty’s antipathy to the first thing will be addressed more fully below, but in short, as Duncan put it: “It isn’t our affair what kind of poems [students] are [writing]; it’s our affair how they *answer* for their poetry.”³² As for the

second thing, that “careerist objective,” the faculty had no more interest in training future teachers than they did in influencing the aesthetic development of their students or fine tuning their poems, for to be a Poet was not to hold a position within the university as lecturer or ladder-rank faculty, but to occupy an office of an entirely other order. They identified Poetry not merely as a craft, or even an art, but “as a singular spiritual discipline whose primary embodiment is in its own art of language, and whose motives and consequences lead out to a knowledge equal in magnitude and completeness to any other...,” as the original program proposal has it:

The goal of our program is to at least demonstrate to students the outline of the esoteric tradition of poetry as we know it, and to direct students to certain crucial terms to which that tradition evinces and which is almost universally ignored, refused or adulterated within academically prejudiced situations.... [Despite] the advent, history and presence today of the reasoning mind as the dominant assumption of human knowledge during the past two and one-half millennia..., [the Poetics Program] posits poetry and its tradition as a primordial, initial act of perception and imagination which precedes and exceeds rational discourse and reduction.³³

It is interesting to note that Creative Writing, as an academic discipline, was introduced with a seemingly sympathetic outlook. Myers writes that the discipline’s originary desire was to broaden and invigorate “an austere and uninspiring literary scholarship, obsessed with the ideal of scientific knowledge, [that] had treated literature as mere material for analysis instead of what it was—the most spiritual of subjects.”³⁴ By the 1920s, under the thumb of what he calls the “philological

syndicate,"³⁵ Myers writes that "poets (and poets' point of view) had been excluded from academic literary study[, but the early Creative Writing pedagogues felt that] 'poets should be inside the universities,' [as Henry Seidel] Canby said, 'for scholars in literature should be poets even if they never write a line of verse.'"³⁶ Norman Foerster, the original director of the Iowa School of Letters, out of which the Iowa Writer's Workshop would spring, turned "for examples of thoroughly integrated literary personalities...to the Renaissance humanists—Petrarch, Poliziano, Erasmus—who took 'all of literary scholarship as their province.'"³⁷ For Foerster, "the divergence of the humanists from 'the typical scholar of the present day' was captured...in the term used by the great historian Jacob Burckhardt to describe them in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1878): they were 'poet-scholars.'"³⁸ It was upon this New Humanist desire for a reintegration of the poet and the academic that the discipline of Creative Writing was built. "Why then does creative writing now seem like anything but this integration?" is the fundamental question that motivates Myers's book: "In the hallways of the English department, exchanges between poets and scholars are marked by mutual hostility. The poets complain that literary study has 'no point of contact with the concerns of most working poets'; the scholars dismiss creative writing as 'pseudo-literature.' The institutional situation is a far cry from what the founders of creative writing envisioned. What happened?"³⁹ Myers's own answer is only partial, but it initiates a line of inquiry that helps explain the

Poetics Program's vehement rejection of the MFA industry and Creative Writing complex:

In the decades following the Second World War, as the American university expanded under pressure from several different sources—the postwar demand for more democratic access, the demand for more education to compete with the Soviet Union after Sputnik, the sheer demand for more classroom space as the baby boom generation began to make itself felt in the mid-sixties—creative writing became one of the primary engines driving the expansion. It was a means for enlarging the university's role in American society. It needed no further justification: if it was no longer undertaken for the sake of integrating literary study with literary practice, it could be pursued for its own sake—free from any other institutional responsibilities.⁴⁰

Though Myers does not dwell on the nefariously nationalist implications of this expansion, Eric Bennett and Juliana Spahr, among others, do. In *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War*, Bennet argues that “to understand creative writing in America, even today, requires tracing its origins back to the apocalyptic fears and redemptive hopes that galvanized the postwar atmosphere.... The Cold War–era writers who laid the ground for a future nation of Master of Fine Arts programs..., cared deeply about the Pax Americana, and built up their writing programs informed by that concern.”⁴¹ Reinforcing Bennett's study, Spahr points out, in *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment*, that “the MFA is just one part of [the much larger] machine”⁴² of governmental interference in cultural production, domestically and internationally. Spahr and Bennett both trace larger patterns of instigation, “infiltration,” “harassment and

recuperation"⁴³ of cultural organizations, literary magazines, academic programs, conferences, and more, investigating the broad "institutionalization of culturist movements and of creative writing in higher education," in part via covert and overt public-private "recuperative funding"⁴⁴ partnerships, involving the likes of the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations, the State Department and various domestic governmental agencies and operatives.

The work done by Bennett, Spahr, and those they draw on is invaluable, but despite Bennett's claim that the "revelation," as he puts it, "that creative writing programs played a role in the national-security establishment is...original to [his own] research,"⁴⁵ McNaughton and those he brought together at New College to form the Poetics Program wouldn't have needed all the facts and figures to identify these essential patterns, or to connect them to the Creative Writing complex.

McNaughton was briefly engaged in graduate study in Arabic at Princeton, "to study, [he] thought, Medieval Islamic philosophy and theosophy and so forth," before recognizing that in fact he was being trained to become "an agent of the set-up," as he put it, to "go into the government foreign service..., work for ARAMCO, or...become a college professor." He quit, of course, "to be a poet."⁴⁶ Diane di Prima had been surveilled and harassed repeatedly by the FBI for her own writing, including her *Revolutionary Letters*, which were serialized throughout the underground press in the later 1960s and 1970s, as well as her publishing activities with *The Floating Bear* and Poets Press, theatrical productions with the Poets Theater,

and her direct, material support of various revolutionary actors and actions in those years. David Meltzer, while to my knowledge never directly targeted, certainly witnessed a great deal of harassment and recuperation, infiltration, and pacification in the poetic, artistic, musical, and political countercultures of Los Angeles and San Francisco from mid-century on, and he addressed these diverse and synergetic forces throughout his work, including the essays "Patchen" (1962) and "Isla Vista Notes: Fragmentary Apocalyptic Didactic Contradictions" (1970), *Rock Tao* (1965), and variously throughout the poetry, including his later opus *Beat Thing* (2004), which make clear both the sensitivity and trenchancy of his critique.

For his part, Duncan writes evocatively in *The H.D. Book* of his own rejection of the University of California's enmeshment in the military-industrial complex in the run-up to World War II, when he refused conscription to the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) in favor of "stay[ing] with Joyce," and consequently "turning from the authority that the requirements and grades of the university...had once had over [him] to a new authority in the immediacy of what [he] had come to love."⁴⁷ As Jarnot writes, in addition to committing thus to a life in poetry, "Duncan [also] found a new political consciousness..., join[ing] the American Student Union (ASU) on campus,...[which] sought numerous reforms, including 'federal aid to education, government job programs for youth, abolition of the compulsory Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), academic freedom, racial equality, and collective bargaining rights.'"⁴⁸ Duncan soon abandoned his academic studies altogether,

living in New York for several years before returning to Berkeley after the war.

Upon his return, Duncan studied with Ernst Kantorowicz, the professor of medieval history who had previously been a member of the mystically-inclined literary circle of the poet Stefan George commonly known as the *George-kreis*, and also participated in Kenneth Rexroth's Libertarian/Anarchist Circle. Likewise involved with Rexroth and Kantorowicz were fellow poets Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser, who would soon join Duncan in their self-styled Berkeley Renaissance. Sadly, the university's complicity and collaboration with the military-industrial complex irrupted again, now in the form of the anti-communist "Loyalty Oath," and their refusals to sign caused the poets, their professor, and many others to be scattered, essentially spelling the end of the magical moment of Duncan's first major *kreis*.

Between these two irruptions and refusals of state power, while growing into his life as gay man and poet among the New York literati, Duncan flirted and finally conflicted with the state-sponsored New Critical establishment integral to all accounts of the development of the discipline of Creative Writing. In respect to the Poetics Program's rejection of that discipline's standard workshop model, this conflict is particularly instructive. Noting that "the New Critics and the early creative writing pedagogues fed from the same abundant trough," Bennett writes that "the New Criticism gained a high profile largely by way of funding from the philanthropic arm of Standard Oil..., part of an extra-institutionally supported internationalist vision for global culture under the terms of a liberal democratic

capitalist American order.”⁴⁹ “In the 1950s,” he continues, “anybody who was anybody published in the *Kenyon, Partisan, Hudson, and Sewanee Reviews...*, [and] the major intellectual themes and preoccupations of the period, as formulated and promulgated by [the New Critics], attained their influence through them.”⁵⁰ On the cusp of this hegemony, in late 1943, arch New Critic John Crowe Ransom accepted the 24-year old Robert Duncan’s poem “An African Elegy” for publication in *The Kenyon Review*. The poem was slated to appear in the fall 1944 issue, but Ransom reneged at the last minute after reading Duncan’s essay “The Homosexual in Society” in the August 1944 issue of *Politics*. Cast in the light of Duncan’s argument, the poem now seemed to Ransom “to have obvious homosexual advertisement, and for that reason not to be eligible for publication.”⁵¹ In a 1980 interview, conducted at the outset of his New College adventure, Duncan spoke with a certain relief of these events, remarking how he had just barely “escaped being acclaimed.... Well, let’s call it ‘claimed’”:

I was *out*, just read out, out, out, at a point when I would have been *in* the wrong place. When the issue came out, I would have been *in*: Auden, Paul Goodman, Parker Tyler; I mean the place looked like it was a coffee klatch. I’m glad I wasn’t in there; I would have been read not as an advertisement but a conformist of the first water.... This was one of the meanings of the Black Mountain Movement: you don’t get mixed up. Think how important it was to Coleridge and Wordsworth that they weed out and that they not get mixed up with Southey.⁵²

The danger of getting mixed up in the establishment, for Duncan, was that one begins “writing those poems as you’re told to write.”⁵³ In this case that would mean

adhering to New Critical dictates, but Duncan had a starkly antithetical view of the poem and of the poet, a view clearly expressed in the snarky introduction he gave to a reading by Ransom's ally Randall Jarrell: "He has no obsessions: he has been trained in psychology and his poetry never yields to unreal convictions.... Jarrell is both a poet and a university professor. In the latter profession, of course, a divine madness is not an asset. Daemoniac inspirations such as Yeats or Lawrence sought, or discomfiting convictions such as Williams or Pound have been limited by, are not compatible with the responsibilities of teaching in the humanities."⁵⁴

The New Critical influence that so dominated Creative Writing's struggle against the "philological syndicate," hinged on the New Critics' "search for a method that would rival the analytical rigor of science while escaping 'the stigma that attaches to the romantic view,' as Ransom called it—treating literature as 'at best a heroic but childish affirmation in defiance of the most conscientious revelations of science.'"⁵⁵ The New Critical approach to "the formal properties of literature...refused to acknowledge meaning independent of carefully rendered form..., insist[ing] on the irreducible and indivisible integrity of the poem or story," as Bennett puts it.⁵⁶ New Critical "poetics demanded that a writer fashion a text so perfectly that it provided readers with everything they needed."⁵⁷ The New Critics attempted "to purify literature," or "to 'purify the world they stud[ied] by isolating it,' as Ransom said of academic investigators in general."⁵⁸ In isolating the poem, the story, the so-called creative writing from anything that might attend that writing,

e.g. literary, cultural, social, political, spiritual, and imaginal history, and at the same time from Romantic experience, all that remained was “the internal structure of poems. What all of the critics had in common, [R. P.] Blackmur said, was ‘a tendency to make the analyzable features of the forms and techniques of poetry the only means of access to poetry and somehow the equivalent of its content.’”⁵⁹

This is a far cry from the Black Mountain mantra, which Charles Olson attributed to Robert Creeley in the former’s hugely impactful essay “Projective Verse”: “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.”⁶⁰ That admonition must be understood at least dually: that form should arise out of content, i.e. be extended by it, rather than be arbitrarily or conventionally imposed upon it, and also that form, in turn, should extend that content, i.e. stretch it, take it further, farther. These are corollaries, not equivalences. Form and content should not be seen as co-extensive, merely, but mutually extending, and thus open ended, leading the poet and the poetry ever onward and outward, as opposed to inward toward some static crystalline perfection. The *raison d’être* of the workshop, as Donald Davidson said, was the “exposure of any weakness as to rhyme, meter, imagery, metaphor.... A poem had to prove its strength, if possible its perfection, in all its parts.”⁶¹ “Projective Verse” on the other hand insisted on attention to “*process*,” to “the *kinetics* of the thing,” that the poet should “go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself,” Olson writes: “USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must

MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"⁶² The movement articulated here is not linear, i.e. logical, nor centripetal, turning inward toward some central eye of the poem, but centrifugal, as Nathaniel Mackey has put it,⁶³ turning outward from that ostensible eye, which is only its beginning. This, of course, is the advantage and challenge of such work. Forever unfurling and enfolding as it does, the poem thus tends to fray as much as it may weave. To shift imperfect metaphors, if I may, for *Black Mountaineers*, and later *New Collegiates*, the poem might be likened to a room full of windows, while for the New Critics it was a room full of mirrors. The latter might be shined to perfection via the sort of creative writing workshop developed under New Critical influence, so that every facet of its "form and style" brilliantly reflects some singular pip, but the former under such treatment is likely to leave the average workshop participant stupefied by the myriad and multiplying views.

It is the mirrored-room model of reading that accounts for Ransom's inability, once his bigotry was aroused by Duncan's essay, to see anything other than an invasive "abnormality" corrupting what had initially seemed a "brilliant" poem. The mirrors would have multiplied instantiations of this "abnormality" throughout, turning what might have been an acceptable, even admirable "sublimation" of the poet's "problem," had Ransom perceived it, into crass "advertisement," not for the poem itself, but for a sociopolitical position, defying the New Critical "pressure to make the text successfully autonomous in its economy of symbolic meaning," as Bennett writes: "No insignificant part of the obsession with craft, in the early writing

workshops, reflected this pressure.”⁶⁴ “Impure” work, i.e. work that does not endeavor to be “autonomous” in this way, cannot be accommodated by the traditional workshop, with its focus on timely production and thingly perfection, its prompts, and its deadlines for drafts, revisions, term portfolios, and thesis manuscripts. What such a focus leads to, unfortunately and all but inevitably, is the compartmentalization of the poet’s work. In this traditional workshop model, “with its provisional ceding of authority to the peer group which evaluates an unpublished work while its author, by custom, listens in squirming silence,” as Mark McGurl characterizes it in *The Program Era*,⁶⁵ the work is always cut off, delimited, and “ceded” in digestible, perfectible pieces to this “peer group,” or, as McGurl has it elsewhere, “the competition.”⁶⁶

In recent years the book length “project” has been in vogue and Modernist strategies of fragmentation, polyvocality, use of appropriated material, and other “impurities” are hardly foreign to MFA programs today, but as Bennett and Spahr note, historically, this is on account of the same forces that originally backed the New Critics also co-opting what were at first oppositional formal strategies in an effort to defang them. This oft articulated primary opposition between the dominant New Critical model and the alternative Modernist example—which most poets subsumed under the New American Poetry label followed—was about both form and content. If the New Critics and their acolytes wanted to “isolate” and “purify” the world of the poem, the Modernists and their heirs wanted to do precisely the

opposite. They wanted to adulterate it, or rather reify its always already adulterated reality. As has often been said, if the New Critics were nationalists, the Modernists were internationalists, and their formal strategies reflected these differences.

However, as Bennett notes, via Greg Barnhisel's *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy*:

The writing classes at Iowa and Stanford...embraced for the most part only the formal radicalism of modernism, doing as Barnhisel argues *Perspectives USA* did, "redefining modernism as being characterized primarily by style, not by subject matter: in directing modernism away from its often collectivist/Utopian origins and toward bourgeois individualism; in transforming modernism from an avant-garde, oppositional movement to a style that could be comfortably embraced by diverse spheres of elite culture in the U.S.; and in constructing a coalition of elites that accepted and endorsed modernism as America's high culture and that linked, however implicitly, modernism to the mission of the U.S. national-security establishment."⁶⁷

Spahr rather lackadaisically lumps the New American poets in with this recuperated "national American modernism,"⁶⁸ seeming to conflate the anthology, *The New American Poetry*, with the New American poetry at large, which I think is quite a bit less nation-oriented than she gives it credit for in her brief remarks, but she does name Charles Olson and Robert Duncan as two New American poets who do "attempt to represent something other than a U.S. landscape, include languages other than English, or attempt to think about global culture (rather than national culture)."⁶⁹ The Olson-Duncan, Black Mountain, or Projectivist strain of the New American poetics was indeed deeply involved in "other than national" thinking, to

borrow Spahr's phrase,⁷⁰ and it was this strain of the New American poetics that most influenced the Poetics Program at New College of California. The poets who taught in the Program were all USAmericans—with only two or three visiting poets as exceptions—writing in the wide vein of the New American poetry, and significant attention was paid at New College to the work of other USAmerican poets also writing in that wide vein, along with their Objectivist, Modernist, and Romantic predecessors. At the same time, the Poetics Program's curriculum was distinctly "other than national," placing this whole USAmerican tradition in its international, transnational, pre-national, or again, more broadly, "other than national" and transtemporal context. The English-language tradition, of which the USAmerican was part, was seen in turn as part of a wider "European" tradition—contemporary, Post-Modern, Modernist, Romantic, Medieval, Classical, Pre-Classical—which was seen as part of an even wider Mediterranean tradition, with mystical Jewish, Islamic, Gnostic, heretical Christian, and Pagan constituents also placed in conversation with diverse African cosmologies—most notably the Dogon—and indigenous traditions of the occupied land now known as the United States and the Americas at large. It is here, not only in its eschewal of the Creative Writing workshop in favor of the intensive study of actual traditions in poetry, and not only in the "other than national" scope of these traditions, but in its ecumenical insistence on the spiritual base and esoteric aspects of the art—embracing the "divine madness..., daemonic

inspirations..., [and] discomfoting convictions” Duncan faulted the New Critics for rejecting—that the New College Poetics curriculum most stands out from any other.

The curriculum, of course, cannot be extricated from the pedagogical practices and fundamental philosophy of the program. This community of poets, faculty and students alike, inquired into “the character and intentions of the tradition of poetry,” in order to define, albeit provisionally, as must always be the case, a capacious poetic community in which they would themselves participate, but which spanned generations, even millennia, and showed no concern for geographic or linguistic borders. That this community was not a mere coterie was clear even to those on the outside looking in. Lyn Hejinian, one of the foremost Language writers, who briefly taught at New College, observed that the poets in the Poetics Program, “wrote for a kind of brotherhood, which is different from a coterie..., more of a transtemporal...circle, like the Stefan George circle. *Mystical*.”⁷¹ Indeed, in a brief essay for the second Poetics Program catalog, Duncan acknowledges “the appearance of a Poetics of Religion,” but not one founded on a given scripture or liturgy. Here, “the workings of the poetic imagination present the law.”⁷² What he seems to suggest is more a Religion of Poetics, and in a manner of speaking, the Poetics Program was as much a community of belief as it was a community of inquiry, the former being something of a precondition for the latter, perhaps. The poets McNaughton brought together as faculty and students “shared an understanding of mythopoetics...and a devotion to poetry, not as something that

would be the same in everybody, but the idea that poetry...was of the utmost importance..., that poetry, in some way, was at the center," as Thackrey said, citing Percy Bysshe Shelley's assertion that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world": "This was a place and a time where that was being recognized."⁷³ Just as our acknowledged political legislators lean on long historical precedents in law, whether their aims be conservative of the status quo or effectively revolutionary, so we unacknowledged poetical legislators must lean on even longer historical precedents in poetry, whatever our aims may be. Such was the fundamental argument of the Poetics Program.

The fundamental argument of this introduction is that the Poetics Program should be considered the last of Duncan's three major poetic *kreise*, and that, as such, it deserves far more attention than it has received from Duncan scholars, for it is, in a way, the synthesis and extension of the first two. While the realization of the Berkeley Renaissance had been predicated on the close physical proximity of its three central participants—Duncan, Spicer, and Blaser—enabling them to establish a kind of magic circle of readers to trace what Maria Damon calls a "queer genealogy"⁷⁴ of poetic permission and possibility and thereby pursue their hieratic art, the core four of Duncan's second major *kreis*—Duncan, Olson, Creeley, and Denise Levertov—spent precious little time together, in the flesh. Their intimacies developed largely through the mail, via letters, and in the pages of such magazines as *Origin* and *The Black Mountain Review*, and it is due to their identification with

these magazines, not with Black Mountain College itself, that Donald Allen associates them in his seminal 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*. While this fact has been acknowledged widely enough, its significance is somewhat underappreciated, for if the crisis in part occasioning the Berkeley Renaissance in the middle 1940s had been the substantial lack of local poetic activity, inside or outside the academy, the crisis a decade later was a significant lack of publishing outlets for work that did not adhere to the dominant New Critical dictates. The geographical dispersion of this second *kreis* and its corresponding textual basis seems key to understanding Duncan's poetic and pedagogical stance, throughout his life, and most especially in his last years in the Poetics Program. As Olson writes in *The Maximus Poems*, "Letter 5," interestingly enough addressed to poet Vincent Ferrini, who in fact lived, like Olson, in Gloucester, Massachusetts:

A magazine does have this "life" to it (proper to it), does have streets,
can show lights, movie houses, bars, and, occasionally,

for those of us who do live our life quite properly in print

as properly, say, as Gloucester people live in Gloucester

you do meet someone

as I met you

on a printed page⁷⁵

Duncan would "meet" some of his own most important contemporary interlocutors "on a printed page," or in typescript or manuscript—or if he did not first meet them

there, they would grow into a company, as Creeley was wont to put it, in that medium—and so the material conditions of that company of Poets in the contemporary world would correspond to the material conditions of the company of “Authors...in eternity,” as Duncan has it, via Blake.⁷⁶ Both Olson and Duncan understood these at least double temporalities, double materialities, and double realities to be proper to the poet, whose responsibility, as Duncan puts it in “The Law I Love Is Major Mover,” “is to keep / the ability to respond”⁷⁷—and correspond—to and with one’s peers, one’s mentors, and one’s antecedents, both in the flesh and breath and in the text.

The cultivation of the ability to so participate, collaborate, or respond was Duncan’s primary goal when he taught alongside Olson, ever so briefly, at Black Mountain, and when Duncan subsequently returned to San Francisco, where his Black Mountain and Berkeley Renaissance *kreise* overlapped and interpenetrated, Duncan joining Spicer then as dual, dueling elder-guides to a passel of younger poets at regular salon gatherings, while also orchestrating Spicer’s “Poetry as Magic” workshop and arranging a residency for Olson via the Poetry Center at San Francisco State, circa 1957. What critics like to call the Beat Generation had sprung up in the city, and the two poets sought to counter what seemed to be not merely an anti-academicism (as had run through the Berkeley Renaissance and Black Mountain, too), but an anti-intellectualism and correlating devaluation of poetic tradition. While Duncan would develop a number of intimate and important poetic

and personal relations with the (mostly) younger poets he met at this time, nothing quite akin to the Black Mountain and Berkeley Renaissance *kreise* emerged, for it seems to have been much more of a tutelary relationship for him: the elder, guiding spirit holding open a space for potential protégés, to give them entrée to that tradition. One of Duncan's younger poet-protégés then was David Meltzer, who recalled being "intoxicated by the dynamic between Spicer, who wanted to 'de-rhetorize' poetry, and Duncan, who proposed a rhetorical, lyrical verse."⁷⁸ A quarter-century later, however, when Meltzer and Diane di Prima, another longtime poetic compatriot and mentee, joined Duncan as colleagues on the core faculty of the Poetics Program at New College of California, they had long since entered their own mature periods and were very much his peers and collaborators. While Duncan remained, irrefutably, the intoxicating star of the program, the center around which all things swirled, it was the long-standing friendships and poetic engagements he enjoyed with Meltzer, di Prima, and many others who would participate in the program as teachers and/or students that allowed the Poetics Program to erupt into the extremely idiosyncratic and rigorous program that it was.

Though the vast majority of what little information has been heretofore available about the Poetics Program, including in this introduction, has so centered on Duncan as to have given the impression of the program having been created for his sake, just to give him a place to teach, this is not true, and what's more, unintentionally I'm sure, this representation does a certain disservice not only to the

fulness of the program, as such, but also to Duncan's own part in it. In a brief note of introduction to a 1984 interview with the poet, Robert Glück wrote "Duncan *presides* over San Francisco; more particularly, over the Poetics Department at New College,"⁷⁹ and his influence on the poetry scene both in the city and at the school were outsized, indeed, as he himself was well aware. At the same time, Duncan insisted, in an interview conducted the following year by David Melnick, that "living in San Francisco, with hundreds of poets, that the hundreds of poets are what enables me to write. I'm ruthless about that, it's as if, as far as I'm concerned, they make the environment, they make the place."⁸⁰ Duncan wrote three decades earlier, in his introduction to *Letters* of being reminded, by the paintings of Hassel Smith, of "the appearance of crowds at the margins of my solitude—and that there might be a crowd of one who writes."⁸¹ There is a crowd, too, of one who teaches; the students and fellow faculty are what enable one to teach. What made its idiosyncratic rigor and rigorous idiosyncrasy possible in the first place was, above all else, the personal intimacy and *communitas* manifest between so many of those involved in the Poetics Program, which was not merely an unorthodox academic program with an unusual curriculum concerned with esoteric traditions of poetry, but a true *kreis*, an actual community of inquiry, and as such, perhaps the apotheosis of Duncan's career-long cultivation of the "ability to respond."

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Books are inevitably apologies for what they could have been.

—David Meltzer

When I first approached this project, I intended simply to write a quick historical sketch of the Poetics Program to serve as an introduction to and frame for a series of individual essays on the works and worlds of four poets at the heart of it. I thought of Robert Duncan's time at New College in the last years of his life as the apotheosis of his career; McNaughton's in relative youth as a beginning; and Meltzer and di Prima's time there, midway along the paths of their lives, as a lens through which to look at their prior and subsequent endeavors. Each essay would have dealt with their individual work as poets, in light of their individual work as teachers, and vice versa, and I imagined myself, by looking at and through this common moment, becoming something of the total student of each of them, unifying my prior positions of reader, mentee, and friend of three of these four persons with my maturing positions as poet and critic. It was in no small part my personal relationship (about which more below) to these poets that made me want to pursue the project in the first place, imagining what it might have been like to study more formally with each of them, and with the incomparable Robert Duncan at the same time, so I did not feel that I could write about their work and their personal and poetical histories without

also writing about their persons, as I knew them—nor did I want to. Why fabricate distance or feign critical detachment from my “subjects”? Inevitably, such a filter would distort, or itself be distorted. I had no qualms about this. The problem was that I’d never met Robert Duncan. I was just shy of my fifth birthday when he died, so the Duncan essay would necessarily be of a different order, and therefore not belong, but his oeuvre had long fascinated me—it was my fascination with his work, in fact, not personally knowing the others, that originally led me down this path—and he was so important to the other three, not only during their time as faculty colleagues in the 1980s, but throughout their adult lives, that it would be impossible not to include an at least equally substantial consideration of him and his work. I was at an impasse.

I plowed ahead, however, with my reading, research, and personal interviews, hoping an appropriate form might reveal itself in the process. What became quickly and increasingly clear was that I could not focus solely on those four persons. Though di Prima, Duncan, Meltzer, and McNaughton were, and remain, absolutely central, the faculty also included Michael Palmer, in a much more integral capacity than I’d previously understood, with poets Robert Grenier, Leslie Scalapino, Anselm Hollo, Joanne Kyger, John Clarke, Bill Berkson, Anne Waldman, Robin Blaser, Judy Grahn, Lee Harwood, Michael McClure, George Economou, Philip Whalen, Robert Creeley, Beverly Dahlen, Susan Howe, Nathaniel Mackey, Kenneth Irby, Bernadette Mayer, Clark Coolidge, and more also playing important roles. Moreover, students

enrolled in the first few years included the likes of Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Aaron Shurin, David Levi Strauss, John Thorpe, Susan Thackrey, Robert Kocik, Sarah Menefee, Susan Friedland, Norma Cole, Steve Dickison, Julia Connor, Todd Baron, Judith Roche, and others who had already begun or would go on to do substantial poetical work, and each had a peculiar story to tell about their arrivals and experiences in the program. In speaking with many of these poets, I found each of their stories rife not only with names and anecdotes but with a sincere and lasting affection for these other persons and of the work they were doing at New College, individually and together. It was the story of the community of the Poetics Program that needed to be told. That was clear enough, but the form and focus remained elusive.

Questions about what exactly this book was, what I wanted it to be, continually arose as I worked on it. Was it to be a critical engagement with the poetry of those involved, a critical engagement with the curriculum of the program, a pedagogical study, an institutional history, a community history, a personal essay, or something else entirely? To some degree, it is all of these things, and none. In the end, the way I've put it all together is, of necessity, idiosyncratic, slipping from historical, to novelistic, to critical, to speculative, to personal, and (I hope at least occasionally) poetic modes. I won't pretend to be entirely satisfied with how it coalesced. I've many regrets, not least that I haven't included any substantial consideration of actual poems written by the poets whose community of inquiry this book addresses. I do

wish I might have found a way to incorporate some close readings (or even more distant ones, for that matter) into the text, and yet, in the end, it proved not only impractical, but also out of line. As noted above, it was not a Creative Writing program. Student poems played no significant part in the curriculum, and “there was a real humility among the teachers as well,” as one of the inaugural students, Carl Grundberg, said: “They were definitely not grandstanding their own poetry.”⁸² So I have focused on the curriculum, on the teachers and students who constituted the Poetics Program’s community of inquiry, and on the context in which this inquiry proceeded.

There has been precious little information available until now about the early years of the program, and what there has been—mostly brief reminiscences in blog posts and reviews, passing mentions in interviews and acknowledgements pages, and the like—is fragmented, partial, often not entirely accurate, so in the interest of setting the record straight and filling it out, I have chosen to organize this book more or less chronologically, with frequent glances back (at one or another actor’s personal history, for instance) and occasional looks ahead (e.g., at subsequent developments of the story). I would like to claim some sort of “authority” for the history I present here, so I have made every effort to ascertain the “facts”—while the diverse memories of my interlocutors, thirty years removed (and thus reformed) from the events in question, haven’t always aligned, and the documentary record isn’t itself entirely reliable, I’ve done my best to triangulate, as it were—but I also

want to insist on the flexibility and fungibility of the tale. There is a certain “novelistic” tendency, as there is in any history. Any given anecdote might have been told from another angle, any given connection made differently. As I’ve said to friends and colleagues, at times I’ve felt a bit like a conspiracy theorist or detective from some bad movie, trying to connect persons, projects, and events, photos, manuscripts, and newspaper clippings with thumbtacks and colored string on my bedroom wall (only in this case it was neon sticky notes, transparent tape, and felt-tip pens on a length of butcher paper stuck over the bookcase in my living room). I’ve described the experience to others as trying to put together a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle without reference to the box top, because there was no box top; I was making up the picture as I went along. I’ve been encouraged in my efforts, however, by the advice Joseph Albers gave Martin Duberman as the latter worked on his useful book, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*:

When it comes to an educational institution like Black Mountain, where teaching was to some extent the most important concern, I would say, let’s not tell fact for fact in order to have it done once more; as we cannot repeat the Bauhaus, so we cannot repeat Black Mountain College.... Do not become an adding machine for dates and factual facts.... Produce *actual* facts. That’s my terminology. It means giving statements and formulations which lead further. “Actual”: it’s still “act-ing.” You see? Alive facts. And so if you get for yourself

some experience of a new insight, by discussing this institution..., if there's an essence that was for you providing a new experience, that has given you new insight, that is helping you to develop yourself further..., this work on Black Mountain must directly or indirectly state some growth in your mind and in your looking at education.⁸³

Duberman's book was a model for me, in addition to being a source, in the same way that Duncan's *H.D. Book* was both source and model for New College Poetics students, as it has been for me, too. Duncan wrote *The H.D. Book* in the early 1960s, but it was published in bits and pieces in various magazines from 1964 through the early 1980s, the last-published pieces appearing in *Sagetrieb* and *Southern Review* toward the end of Duncan's tenure at New College, in 1985. I'd heard it rumored that someone, or several someones, Diane di Prima named among them, had compiled all the variously published pieces in a sort of samizdat Xerox edition that circulated among the students of the program (and many others outside it, of course)—indeed, I'd seen partial copies of such a thing and would later find the whole tome, variously bound, on bookshelves in the homes of several former New College Poetics students—but I hadn't read it myself until the UC Press edition came out. It is an astonishingly devotional engagement with one singular poet's work and world from the vantage of the author's own singularly invested self, rather than through any extant academic, critical, or theoretical textual framework. Ultimately, it says as much about Duncan himself as it does about H.D., or more, because the

responsibility in writing it wasn't to what anyone else had said, but to the author's own understandings, imaginations, experience, and aspirations. It is unique, but written in a mode similar in certain ways to that in which I later found such works as McNaughton's dissertation *Love Triumphant: Meditations on Shakespeare's "Sonnets,"* Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, and Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* were also written.

In *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism*, Stephen Collis coined the term, anarcho-scholasticism, "to name a presiding ethos, a peculiar *merging* of concerns in...[such] critical, or better, scholarly writings by poets—poets' attempts to write their responses to other poets." I found this description apt: "They are Janus-faced works—part exegesis, part original expression—'creative' in their own right..., [but with] their creativity...often located in the collagist's eye for the found object and critical juxtaposition."⁸⁴ Duncan often spoke and wrote of poetry as "grand collage," proudly referring to his own work as "derivative," and describing it on occasion as a kind of "chrestomathy," which is a "collection of choice passages from an author or authors, *esp.* one compiled to assist in the acquirement of a language," as the OED has it. In "Divining the Derivers: Anarchism and the Practice of Derivative Poetics in Robert Duncan and John Cage," Andy Weaver suggestively rephrases the latter part of that definition as learning "how to speak"⁸⁵ and cites Duncan's poem "Orders, Passages 24" wherein the "cunning passages [and] contrived corridors" of History from Eliot's "Gerontion" are realized and actualized,

in a sort of derivational, or as Collis writes, “citational economy,” which, in its “eternal regress..., eradicates any sense of authority, ownership, or ‘intellectual property,’”⁸⁶ and thereby opens all up for use. As Howe writes in a letter to Duncan, which Collis cites: “This is for me why your H.D. Book is such an inspiration. You follow trails and drop them and pick them up again and search yourself and use H.D. as a path into what is unknown and *unspoken*, what will always be beginning.”⁸⁷

Collis notes that “for writers, other writers are always passages to still other writers, and ultimately into the intimate and authorless space of protean language itself,”⁸⁸ and indeed, in *The H.D. Book*, Duncan was actively engaged in describing his own personal poetic cosmology, in a way not dissimilar to other diversely anarcho-scholastic works that also have served in one way or another to guide my own approach, such as William Everson’s *Archetype West*, which identifies a theretofore unidentified literary lineage of the poet’s particular geographical region; William Carlos Williams’ *In the American Grain*, which investigates a personal and peculiarly flexible “national” character as it develops in respect to selected historical events and personages; Michael Heller’s *Conviction’s Net of Branches*, which treats for the first time as such the specific “school” of the poet’s self-selected precursors; Alice Notley’s *Coming After*, which considers the poet’s self-identified poetical peer group; Lorenzo Thomas’s *Extraordinary Measures*, which relates the poet’s self-selected precursors to his self-identified peers; and Nathaniel Mackey’s *Discrepant*

Engagement and Paracritical Hinge, which range roughshod over the oft re-inscribed academic divisions between groups of poets, and between poetry and “nonliterary expressive practices,” as Mackey puts it in the latter.⁸⁹ Indeed, the subtitle of that text, *Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*, points up where we might be most likely to witness the anarcho-scholasticism of other poets’ works. Such loose collections of “secondary” materials by many of the poets mentioned in these pages often show the chrestomathic collagist’s mind at work. As Collis, again, notes, “a poet must make her own world no matter rights or rules: non-connection is distinct connection, if she wills it so.”⁹⁰ At root is a sense of history as *istorin*, “looking / for oneself for the evidence of / what is said,” as Olson put it, and a sense of knowledge as *gnosis*, a highly personal and personalized cognition and fascination, or “individual esoteric science,” as the Poetics Program’s initial proposal has it. It has seemed to me that New College Poetics students and teachers alike had been engaged in much a similar fashion in establishing, at least provisionally, through direct intellectual and emotional engagement, their own imagined poetic cosmologies as multivalent with and enacted within their immediate material community.

I have tried to write this book in something of a like manner. Throughout, I have leaned as heavily as possible on “words of others” to find out for myself what the Poetics Program at New College was all about in its early years and how it might help guide me in my own future work, be it inside or outside the academy. I dreamed, at an early stage, of a kind of Benjaminian *Arcades Project* of the Poetics

Program, comprised entirely of quotes from participants in it and observers of it, drawn from my own interviews and others' published essays, talks, catalogs, ephemera, memos, recordings, private and public correspondence, and the like. That dream book quickly proved beyond my ken, but I have tried to keep the chrestomathic spirit of the work alive, making extensive use of direct quotations from both published and unpublished sources. Of course, paraphrase and synthesis are inevitable, perhaps essential, practices in writing a book like this, and I have had recourse to them throughout; however, especially as concerns my own interviews, transcriptions from audiotapes, manuscripts, and other archival materials, I have chosen at times to offer wholesale extended excerpts and at times to weave passages from separate sources into a sort of conversational exchange in an effort to give the story more texture, to allow more voices, with all their peculiarities, peccadillos, and occasionally deeper offenses, to contribute to the din of this history. Still, as Meltzer writes in the introduction to his anthology, *Writing Jazz*:

Speech turned into the silence of type, into 'writing,' is a genre in its own right.... I'm also aware of the ambiguities of an oral historian's interrogative techniques of editing and shaping the spoken into a script corresponding to the interviewer's narrative needs.... In cutting and pasting, mixing these texts together into a fractured narrative, I'm aware of what's left out..., and I carry the anthologist's "what-if" burden of knowing how they would have made for a richer work. *Anthology* is from the Greek and means "flower-gathering," and this is a sparse bouquet.⁹¹

This book is, in its own way, a kind of anthology, and I share Meltzer's ambivalence about "oral history." I've no doubt much has been skewed or fallen through the

cracks. (The spottiness of the documentary record hasn't helped, either. As Ammiel Alcalay notes, "New College had a certain evanescence built into it: it was more involved in the creation of relationships that could resonate beyond the perimeters of its immediate activities than with the documentation or institutionalization of those activities."⁹²) Other things, I must confess, have been intentionally withheld. I rue my inability to tell certain stories I've been told, perhaps casually, but still in confidence. "Between you and me," "off the record," "maybe you shouldn't put this in there," and other such phrases seemed peppered throughout my conversations, so respecting various individuals' trepidations about being sources for certain things, I've left a good many anecdotes and observations out, or only obliquely referenced. As a result, this book may be less salacious than some might want it to be. Perhaps I'll work up an anonymous novel from the apocrypha someday, but this is not that.

Most of the information and much of the insight I do offer here was gleaned directly from conversations I had with one or another, and more often several, of the participants in the New College Poetics Program. I was not there for any of the events in question, so I have tried not to overplay the hand of Presence, but at the same time I have been there all along, in the gathering of this material and in the working of it, so I have allowed myself to rear my head, to raise my hand, to ask questions, and to offer suggestions in the text, wherever it has seemed appropriate to do so. And it has seemed appropriate throughout, for this work has always been about exchange. I've hesitated to call my conversations with program participants

“interviews,” as I tried to limit my own questioning, allowing my interlocutors to wander at their own paces and by their own whims down the factual and affectual alleys and boulevards of their memories. Their ambulations directed mine, by and large, leading me to other persons to whom I would subsequently speak, while also leading me to many of the main themes of this book. I regret not having had the opportunity to talk to many of the key actors in this play. Some had departed this plane before I began, some were ill, or became ill, or passed away while I was working on it, for some I was unable to obtain any contact information, some never responded to my attempts to contact them, and some initial exchanges simply never came to fruition, but no failure do I regret more than my failure to get Diane di Prima to speak with me about all of this before her health deteriorated. Though she expressed an antipathy to interviews when I first broached the topic, having been unable to conduct an interview of my own, I’ve had to depend largely upon those very interviews with others that must have engendered that antipathy in the first place. More broadly, abstract apologies are due in advance to anyone who might read this book and find it lacking or unfair in some way. I do hope any omissions or inaccuracies will be pointed out to me by those who know better.

That said, I want to thank, above all others, those who did make time for me. Their accommodations and patience, as I navigated first the obstacle course of doctoral work, the otherworldly initiation into fatherhood, and the absurd and awful political developments of the late 2010s are sincerely appreciated. There were many

occasions when questions my interlocutors posed to me forced me in most useful ways to articulate my own thoughts about, desires for, and intentions with these efforts, as they developed. So at certain points herein, I have taken time out from the historical narrative to consider in some depth specific pedagogical matters, publication practices, conceptions and enactments of community (both immediate, i.e. flesh and breath, and imagined, i.e. textual), individual vision and collective effort, and other topics. I've allowed such discursions to happen where they will, shifting from anecdotal to academic, from documentary to speculative voices (and others perhaps hybrid and half-formed). I trust that readers will allow for such shifts in the text as I hope they would allow for such shifts in conversation. It is important, to me, to maintain a sense of this book as not only built *out of* conversations, but being *in* conversation with a variety of persons and texts on a variety of subjects, which all pertain, ultimately, to poetry and poetics and how we might study and practice these in relation to the university.

Actually teaching courses in both Creative Writing and Literature and considering making a career of such teaching in an institutional setting made me particularly aware of both the enabling structures and constraining strictures of the institutional context of the Poetics Program, which was inextricable from New College, even as it was, in many important ways, also quite tangential to it, and so I have attended to the origins and evolution of the college itself, in both philosophical and practical terms, through the end of the initial incarnation of the Poetics Program,

but only briefly, in the concluding pages of this book, to its life after the program's reconstitution in 1987. Ultimately, it comes back down to the story of these people, who came together at this time, in this place, to form the community of inquiry that was the Poetics Program in its initial incarnation. I've found nothing more enjoyable about this project than serving now and then as a bridge between folks who hadn't seen or spoken to one another in years, wanting to know about one another, how they were, what they were up to, as people do. Whenever I've met someone in person, I've passed along a publication or two of my own, and as often as not received something in turn, a copy of a book or magazine produced in or around the program in the 1980s or in more recent years. We've shared poems, and I have felt myself progressively more invested in this community, by which I mean not only that I have developed relationships with various of the persons I've interviewed for this book, but also that in my attendant research, reading, and writing, I have developed a broader sense of that community whose realization was among the central aims of the program, a community that knows no temporal or territorial bounds, the Poetic Community, so to speak, which is a community unique not to the particular household, neighborhood, city, etc., and not to the given language (of English, say), though these are in part constitutive of it, but to the language of the poem. And yet that transcendent tongue is ever tied to a mouth, which must open to shape air pushed out from a pair of lungs, wrapped in a ribcage and some-odd pounds of flesh, dwelling in a peculiar place, where the story might find a

beginning, so while this book is not about me (thankfully!) it seems appropriate, even necessary to elaborate a little of my own history with some of the persons who appear in it and my own educational experiences, in an effort to lay bare, at the outset, my own investments—not only in the material itself, but also in the terms of my engagement therewith—for these persons and these experiences have motivated the work’s central concerns all along and have led me to write the book in the way that I have. I can’t stress my personal investment enough. This is no disinterested study.

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I have just realized that the stakes are myself....

—Diane di Prima

When I was a sophomore in high school, a small bookstore was offered for sale just down the street from our home in San Francisco, and this, too, was a serendipitous event, as my mother, who had been undergoing treatment for breast cancer for much of the previous year, had recently seen that cancer go into remission, and though I wasn’t privy to any of the conversations my parents had about it, I imagine this most visceral reminder of their mortality impelled my parents to reevaluate their lives. My mother had been happily working as a pre-school

teacher for several years before her illness, and though she'd decided to return to work, she may have been uncertain about that decision. My father, on the other hand, had been quite unhappily working as a typist and editor for a corporate valuation firm ever since the birth of his second child—yours truly—had forced him to relegate his aspirations in filmmaking and music-promotion to the back-burner and find “gainful” employment. They decided to buy the store, and having no savings to speak of, took out a large loan to do so, closing down Glen Park Books and opening Bird & Beckett Books and Records in its stead, in May 1999, shortly after my 16th birthday.

Glen Park was a sleepy little hamlet, unknown even to a good many decades-long residents of the city, but the artists Bruce and Jean Conner happened to live just up the hill, and they quickly became fixtures in the shop. Not long after, encouraged by a neighborhood denizen and former student, the poet Diane di Prima wandered across the freeway from her home in the Excelsior district, and she too became a regular patron. I imagine it was largely on the suggestion and support of these local legends—and in response to enthusiastic invitations from a young writer, Justin Desmangles, who lived in the neighborhood and came to work at the shop, almost singlehandedly keeping it afloat for a time, when my mother's cancer returned a year or so later—that others found their way to our shop and thus into my adolescent attention. I won't list here the names of all the people who came through in those early years—they included a host of poets who will appear in this book—

but the most constant and, to me, outsized of these was di Prima, surely. She was friendly to this teenage scribbler, puffed up as he was with a morbid, pseudo-surrealist smoke, but looking back now, I had no real sense then of who she was, or who any of the others were, either. They were just cool, quirky, older folks I knew, poets, mostly. And they were just *there*, though I was soon enough gone. My mother died shortly before I left for college at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the ensuing years were full of dope, depression, and poems, always poems, as I dragged myself through short stints in various California locales, with another short stint abroad, ever uprooted. Eventually, twenty-five years old and finding myself in Anaheim, of all places—certain not the happiest on earth—trying to finish a “novel” I’d been working on for far too long, I knew it was all wrong. I had to come home, to San Francisco, to the poem.

I decided to apply to the Poetics Program at New College of California, a scant two miles from the bookshop, in the Mission District, where I knew the poet David Meltzer was on the faculty. I had a particular fondness for David from my teenage interactions with him at the bookstore and was optimistic about the possibility of studying with him, but before I submitted my application, he advised me that the college might soon give up the ghost, and I’d better save my application fee. So I did, and so it did—but I came home anyway, worked at the bookstore, lived for a time in my old bedroom in the basement of my childhood home, where hundreds of slips of paper bearing lines from others’ poems still flapped in the draft around the mirror

where I'd tacked them in high school. When the similarly dark apartment underneath the store became available, I moved in. I'd roll off the air mattress on the green carpet in the morning, walk up the stairs to work, shuffle books around, read, occasionally make a sale, set up for a reading or concert, listen, clean up, then stumble back down the stairs at the end of the night. I was writing poems again, and reading more seriously, and so I began a magazine, the house organ, as it were, calling it *AMERARCANA: A Bird & Beckett Review* and tapping Diane and David and a number of other admired elders for advice, information, connections, and their own work. Out of these activities—the magazine itself and the readings organized around it—I developed my first sense of what a community of poets might be. As it turned out, many of those into whose company I'd been drawn, both the friends and the mentors, had been associated in one way or another with New College, though the significance of that fact wouldn't occur to me for several years.

After a couple of years, for reasons that remain a bit murky even to me, I insisted on pursuing more formal study again under the auspices of an academic institution, eventually enrolling at San Francisco State University, because it was nearby and it was essentially free for an impoverished poet like me. Coincidentally, *The H.D. Book* by Robert Duncan had just been published, after long anticipation, by UC Press, with several volumes of Duncan's collected works promised to follow in short order. I'd first read Duncan at about the age of 17, then studied his work at Santa Cruz, and now, a decade later, it seemed an oeuvre I might make the cornerstone of my

graduate work, so I proposed an extended independent study centered on *The H.D. Book* and the coming Duncan volumes to Steve Dickison, Director of the Poetry Center at SFSU, who I also knew from the bookstore. Talk of that possibility brought us to talk about the beginnings of the New College Poetics Program, when Duncan was its primary guiding light, and that was when I first began to think about this work—though it was far from a “book project” in my mind at that point, more a personal inquiry.

In the American Poetry Archives at the SFSU Poetry Center, there were tapes of many readings and lectures that had taken place at New College in the late 1970s and 1980s to which I might listen, but first, to give these tapes a bit of context, I asked di Prima, Meltzer, and Duncan McNaughton, who I’d met more recently, at the behest of Bill Berkson, if I might interview them about the program.

Unfortunately, di Prima put me off, writing in reply to an email, “As you know interviews are one of my least favorite things. Not the interview itself, but the mis-hearings, mis-transcribings, slight changes which change the meaning, etc. Kitaj said something like ‘Even if you wrote down exactly what I said, it might not be exactly what I meant.’”⁹³ Meanwhile, in response to my suggestion that *someone*—again, at the time I wasn’t thinking that someone would be me—should write a history of the program someday, McNaughton said maybe so, though it’d have to be someone who liked “walking into windmills.”⁹⁴ Still, he didn’t reject my request for an interview outright. Meltzer expressed complete openness, of course, as was his

went, but it would be three years before I formally followed up with him or McNaughton, having by then graduated from SFSU and enrolled as one of the inaugural students of the Creative/Critical concentration of the PhD program in Literature at my own alma mater down the coast.

During my three-year MFA experience, I'd taken some worthwhile classes in the Creative Writing department, written some decent poems, and met some lovely people—I've great affection still for a number of these (both the poems and the people)—but I'd found my studies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Arendt, Benjamin, and Adorno across three departments (namely Literature, Philosophy, and Political Science) impacted my writing, my thinking, and my life at least as much as, and probably more than, the Creative Writing coursework, where theoretical and historical concerns generally took a back seat to models and prompts for the generation of new work. I could name exceptions, of course, but exceptions, as they say, only prove the rule. I wanted something more unruly, and at the same time more rigorous, something that demanded more than producing a poem a week, reading classmates' weekly productions, and saying relatively unoffensive things to one another in workshops, but something that didn't discount the writing of poems as serious work, either. I thought I might find all that in this new concentration at UCSC.

As it turned out, being brand new, the concentration didn't have a clearly defined or strongly articulated sense of itself as yet, what it was, what it wanted to

be, or even how it understood the relation between the “Creative” and the “Critical.” Did one mode merely supplement or compliment the other? Or were the “Creative” and the “Critical” coextensive, the “Creative/Critical” a peculiar mode in itself? The faculty involved seemed to be of different minds about it all. The students also had their diverse ideas, and the faculty’s lack of agreement seemed to open the door for those of us in the first cohort to help determine the concentration’s tack. So we all—faculty and students—had a meeting or two to discuss the matter, early on.

Although those meetings didn’t seem to lead us anywhere, as a group, in attempting to articulate for others and for myself what I thought about it all, I found myself returning persistently to my understanding, which was then really only my imagining, of the foundational terms of the New College Poetics Program. And so it was I actually began to work on this book. It arose as an attempt to explain, partially and provisionally, what I found wanting in my own experience both in the Creative/Critical concentration of the doctoral program in Literature at UCSC and the Poetry concentration in the MFA program in Creative Writing at SFSU. I hope that the New College Poetics Program might offer something for students and teachers to think about when considering their own institutional relations to the art. I do see this book, in part, as a contribution to the growing critical literature lately called Creative Writing Studies, though in the end, it is not so much a study as it is a story. And so it begins...

Pre-Ambulations

I. Foundations

Driving his '47 Chevy panel truck up 19th Avenue, on the way home to Mill Valley from some unremembered errand on the peninsula, Louis Patler stopped for a hitchhiker, “another long-hair like me,” as he put it, who was also headed across the Golden Gate, to Sausalito.⁹⁵ Patler told him to hop in— “a lot of people hitchhiked [in 1971]; you don’t see it so much anymore” — and as they rode north and got to talking, this hitchhiker explained that he was one of a dozen original students for a brand new college, creatively called New College, now just into its second semester. The school was conducting faculty interviews for the coming year that very afternoon and this young long-hair was on the committee. Timing couldn’t have been better. Patler had only been back in California for a few weeks, ending up in Marin County by sheer happenstance at the end of his first teaching gig: a four-month appointment he’d come into also by chance. A year or so earlier, he’d been finishing his doctoral work in the sociology of language at Wayne State University, in Detroit, where he’d explored the general areas of race relations, political violence, and urban guerilla warfare, and was concerned with what he saw to be the fundamentally racist nature of most social scientific discourse around such events as the Watts Rebellion and other so-called “race riots.” He’d done his research and was “all-but-dissertation,” but he was burned out and desperately in need of a change of

scene when he saw a poster in a hallway about a program called World Campus Afloat—now known as Semester at Sea. He called the number at the bottom of the poster, got the secretary, and said he'd like to apply to be on the faculty.

"Let me ask you a few questions first," she said. "Tell me a bit about your publication record."

"Oh, well, I have none," he said.

"Oh, ok. Have you been in the classroom?"

"Well, I was a TA last semester."

"Oh," she said, chuckled, and asked, "Are you still in grad school?"

Patler confessed he was.

"Well," she said, "usually our average professors are on their first or second sabbatical, but you *sound* like the kind of person we'd like to have, and I'm obligated to send you the application form. Just don't hold your breath."

She sent the materials. In the meantime, Patler applied to the Peace Corps and was accepted to go to East Africa. Over that summer, preparing to go, he came upon the World Campus Afloat application and filled it out, thinking, "I've got two years in the Peace Corps, maybe I can get some publications and the dissertation done, etc." He wrote a nice professional cover letter, and then thought, "I don't stand a chance, really. So what possible competitive advantage could I have?" On the cover letter of the application he wrote with a big red felt pen: I CAN LEAVE WITH 24

HOURS NOTICE, and he mailed it in. Six or eight weeks went by, and then, on a Friday afternoon, about two weeks before he was to leave for East Africa, the phone rang. On the other end of the line was that same secretary.

“Listen,” she said, “our sociology professor this morning had a stroke. We’re sailing next Tuesday. Were you serious about what you wrote?”

When he was on the ship that first time, “being so young and my hair down to my waist and so on,” Patler ended up spending much more time with the students than with the other faculty, and he became friends with various residence assistants and dorm counselors who were mostly in their mid-twenties, closer to his age. One of these new friends lived in Mill Valley and was coming back at the end of the program to a house he was to rent with a few other guys up on the mountain. They needed another roommate, so having no place to live when he came back off of the ship—“I hadn’t planned that part of it”—which had gone from New York to Europe to South Africa around Cape Horn up to Columbia and on to San Francisco, Patler went directly to Mill Valley. Now, a mere two or three weeks later, unemployed, he’d picked up this young student, with his thumb out, who was on his way to conduct faculty interviews for a start-up college. Patler asked if he might apply. The student saw no reason not, so Patler drove him to his meeting and came inside with him.

The interviews took place in the living room of John P. Leary, S.J., who had long been affiliated with Gonzaga University, in Spokane, Washington, rising to the position of Rector and President, positions he held throughout the 1960s. In her 1988 paean to the priest, *Jebbie: A Life of John P. Leary S.J.*, Monda Van Hollebeke details both the progressive social and pedagogical experiments and the costly expansion of campus infrastructure he promoted and oversaw as President, putting the university in a precarious position and engendering a certain “fear among the older Jesuits that what they had given their entire lives for was about to crumble.... It seemed to some that the school was being forced, by financial requirements to give up its religious affiliation in the hope that it would qualify for state and federal funding.”⁹⁶ Concern for the life of the college was coupled with another over certain “lifestyles” on campus. At issue mainly was Leary’s support of student lobbying for so-called “parietal hours” during which male and female students would be allowed to visit one another in their private quarters (standard practice at most public universities and even at many religious universities by this time, but not yet at Gonzaga). The political pressures of these and a number of other seemingly small matters eventually lead to Leary’s resignation “for health reasons.”⁹⁷

Or so the official story went. It would be revealed over three decades later that the tale was more sordid. Though all of the above was true, it turned out that Leary also was accused of sexually assaulting several young men in the middle to late ‘60s. Years later, a series of lawsuits led to numerous newspaper articles, and a public

statement from the Oregon Provincial of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 2006 ultimately admitted that allegations had first been made against Leary in 1966 and that in 1969 “new allegations were brought...by Spokane civil authorities, who demanded that he leave Spokane within twenty-four hours or face arrest. The Provincial and his advisors accepted this offer, creating an artificial scenario in which Leary was to go to New York and resign for ‘health reasons.’ Going briefly to New York then to Massachusetts, Leary was later assigned to positions throughout the Western United States.” For what it’s worth, the statement also claims that “more than 30 years later, no accusations concerning Leary have come forward from those later assignments.”⁹⁸ Presumably unaware of all this in 1988, Von Hollebeke notes with an unwitting dark irony that “the details of [Leary’s] final struggle [at Gonzaga] are sealed in an envelope in the Oregon Province Archives.”⁹⁹ He died, aged 75, in 1993.

When he left in 1969, he was offered, but declined, a position of vice president at another Jesuit institution, Loyola University in Chicago, then eventually wound up as vice president at Santa Clara University, also a Jesuit school and the oldest extant university in California, about 50 miles south of San Francisco. Here he continued to develop the alternative pedagogical ideas he’d been working out over the course of the previous decade and more:

The construct he came up with at Gonzaga was actually a college within a college. Some graduation requirements were eliminated, for

example, a proficiency in a foreign language was substituted for actual credits in that language. Upper division course work was substituted for some of the lower division classes. Seminars were added to course work so the Socratic method and student-executed class projects could be experimented with. A small community was formed among the enrolled students, a close-knit community that stayed together for four years and beyond. Teachers became mentors and friends with students due to contact outside the classroom and intense interaction in small group discussions.... Teachers were chosen...who shared Leary's educational idealism, and who saw learning as centered in the student-as-partner.¹⁰⁰

At Santa Clara, in an article in the campus newspaper, Leary detailed his vision for an Experimental College in a similar vein. Bob Raines, "a careerist young teacher, the [English] Department's token radical, a self-styled Poet-Scholar," as he would characterize himself in an embittered pamphlet two years later, read the article and was "intrigued."¹⁰¹ Raines became Leary's top ally, and throughout the spring of 1971 the two set up a series of public discussion, garnering interest and support from more than 200 students and a dozen faculty members. They fashioned a formal proposal and presented it to the University President, "who expressed neither support nor disapproval but referred a decision about whether to incorporate this plan for a 'year of General Wisdom' under the University's auspices to the school's Education Programs Committee. Briefly:

about 150 freshmen and 50 upper classmen would take a year out of the core curriculum, with ten full-time faculty members, representing all of the liberal arts areas, offering small seminars once a week seven offerings a year. Subjects would be interdisciplinary. Class titles: Play, Work, The New Politics, Christianity Today, Sex and Love, War and Peace, Death, Loneliness. Techniques would include team-teaching

and independent study. It would be both a pilot for the University and a laboratory for revitalizing the faculty.... Teachers would learn how to develop “community” and design better criteria for measuring the quality of the student's classroom experience.... It would have no required subjects. The goal of the experiment would be to enlarge the student's imagination and develop interior discipline. The Associated Students of the University of Santa Clara, as one might expect, unanimously approved the proposal. The Educational Programs Committee, late in May, voted against it, apparently for financial reasons.¹⁰²

Three months later, in August, Raines got a phone call from Leary, who announced a gift of \$2,000 from a businessman friend in San Jose, Eli Thomas, and a \$500 gift from the Oregon Provincial who had negotiated Leary's quiet departure from Gonzaga, both sums given in support of Leary's proposal to start a new college, unaffiliated with Santa Clara, but based on the principles laid out in his rejected Experimental College plan. It seems a paltry sum—about \$17,000 in today's dollars—but in that plan, “Leary showed concern for the fiscal base of education. He wrote that his proposed program might ‘serve even as a financial model’ for other institutions: ‘Do educators get unrealistic about their dreams and the resources deemed necessary? Why not set up a program where the tuition and fees do it—and that's all?’”¹⁰³ So Raines agreed to join Leary in the venture, and they reiterated this fiscal concern in the original New College Prospectus, printed that very month: “How much does it cost to educate people? If the College succeeded on a self-financing basis we could rethink our need for philanthropic support and the inevitable strings attached to such funding.”¹⁰⁴ It was a worthy aspiration, but New

College would never prove reliably “self-financing.” Van Hollebeke writes that “the school's first ‘seed’ money...evaporated quickly in Sausalito's salty sea air. Leary commented later to a reporter of the Independent Journal that only \$150 remained after renting the house [that would serve as the school’s first home] in Sausalito.”¹⁰⁵

Leary turned to again and again to wealthy businessmen like Andrew Polich, president of Tek-Electric Control of Portland, Oregon, and the first chairman of the board of trustees, Howard Vellum of Tektronix, and Dan Hanna of Hanna Industries, who collectively donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep the school going over the next several years, “though the college gradually decreased the percentage of outside funds in relation to the total budget from 50% in 1971-72 to only 18% in 1974-75.”¹⁰⁶ Serious financial problems—including frequent failures to meet obligations to faculty and other staff due in part to incompetency, in part to malfeasance, and in part to outright fraud—were ever hanging over the college from the first days to the very last. Frankly, it’s something of a wonder that the college lasted as long as it did, from 1971 to 2008, more than 35 years, but the problems caused by being ever in such a precarious position and having to rely upon repeated bailouts by moneyed “friends” of the school would create complications and engender great bitterness over the years. At the outset, however, there seemed to be nothing but optimism.

Raines and Leary figured fourteen students would be enough—at \$1,000 tuition per semester—to start the school. In September, Leary printed college stationary,

made up posters and placed ads in various newspapers. He mailed out letters to the students who had expressed interest in the Experimental College at Santa Clara and mailed letters to their parents. He also contacted many students who had been his supporters at Gonzaga. The letter to students read, in part:

If you can't do what needs to be done within the system you go outside the system.... The test of one's sincerity may be the risk he puts his views to.... The big reason for joining up has to be enthusiasm for going at this new thing, when we only obscurely see the outcome. You know, *outcome*, that wild improbable phenomenon that never happens (the way we expect).... Are you willing to be a partner in this new and fulfilling experience? To actually help shape and define a college which I feel could help alter American higher education? It may be safer to decide against it, but I hope your courage and faith exceed your caution.¹⁰⁷

To the parents he wrote:

Maybe the one advantage you have on your kids is perspective. You have been farther down the road and can see more.... It is the cool mind, the attitudes, discipline, maturity and imagination of the professor which keeps coming through to the learner.... What you'd like to see happen in your kid is growth. A warm and perceptive development of his mind and personality. This will be one asset richer than riches and the status of a big name degree. Practicality in the narrow sense can be a cul-de-sac. Always talking about *whether it works* and seldom looking into the *it* or what *works* means.... If a young person can climb into the well-tutored head of a professor and see out through his eyes the reality which is everything, then light years have been traversed. Seeing is what education is about.¹⁰⁸

On September 28, 1971, only six students came from the Santa Clara group to register, according to Raines, but twelve from other places joined them. Other estimates are lower—ranging from a total of twelve to sixteen—but no list of names

exists. Regardless, it was enough. In October, classes began, with Raines as the only full-time faculty member and Leary and a handful of others teaching a class or two. The first New College Catalog, printed that month, lists forty-five courses, though obviously not all were offered that first year; rather, these descriptions were “written by the President in the hope that many of them [would] be offered some day,” according to Raines, who cites two of them:

SKINNER, CONTROL, & FREEDOM. Problem—We proclaim endlessly our liberty in the Star Spangled Banner and a hundred other ways. Is it true? Don’t we just disguise the massive manipulation? Aren’t controls everywhere, visible and furtive, the paramount phenomenon of our time?

MARXISM & THE PROFIT MOTIVE. Problem—So many of the young are enamored of Mao and the collective paradise. They have some severe and legitimate indictments against the gross use of our common heritage—the Earth. What reconciliations lie ahead?¹⁰⁹

Van Hollebeke offers a glimpse of another “basic class (urged but not required): a two-semester seminar in Analysis; the topics would be Population, War, Ecology, Sex, Religion, Poverty. Other urged courses would be: Imagination, Discipline, Practicum (internship one day a week in an interest-related job); Art, Literary Habits, Science Habits, and The City and Revolution.”¹¹⁰ Classes mostly met in Leary’s newly rented house, which the catalogue claimed “glisten[ed] at night, like a sky turned sideways,”¹¹¹ and other rented rooms around Sausalito and in San Francisco—this ad hoc, peripatetic quality was proposed as part of the charm. As the

catalogue put it, students would “find the campus of New College conveniently located inside their heads.”¹¹²

On October 18th, Leary formed a Board of Trustees,¹¹³ which met for the first time on December 14th, where the good news was shared that the state of California had empowered the college to grant Bachelor of Humanities degrees. The Board hired a recruiter who placed advertisements seeking additional faculty that drew more than six-hundred applications. A group of faculty, including recent hires Elizabeth Coleman and George Bloch, and students evaluated the applications and narrowed the pool to a dozen or so finalists, who came in for interviews at Leary’s home. That spring, the committee hired Martin Epstein, Don Moses, Robert Rahl, and Louis Patler, whose résumé hadn’t been among that flood of six-hundred, but who just happened to pick up one of the committee members hitchhiking his way to the meeting that morning.

Coincident with the hiring of new faculty at the end of that first school year, in June 1972, was the granting to New College of the first level of accreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Accreditation would enable students to receive federal grants and financial aid for the following year, but the decision to pursue it was not uncontested. Indeed, accreditation would be at the crux of a first acrimonious split among the faculty and administration of the college, most dramatically here between the two founders: John Leary and Bob Raines. In Raines’

account it was a matter of a young idealist following an older visionary only to find that elder's vision clouded by a conservative pragmatism. At the outset, for both Raines and Leary, the radicalism of the college was not just in its curriculum and pedagogical philosophy, but also in its (anti-)institutional structure. In his pamphlet, *In Good Faith: The Rise and Fall of Community Governance at a Small Alternative College; or, The Waterbag Caper: The Hoax and its Subsequent Coverup*, printed in fall of 1973 and distributed to members of the New College community and the press as an exposé of what he took to be the rank corruption of the founding ideals of the college, which corruption he contended had led to his dismissal from the faculty along with fellow radical Ann Kreilkamp, Raines quotes at length from the first New College Catalogue—which he attributes to Leary's "singlehanded" authorship—including the following passages:

Students: In most colleges today they do not want "administration" arranging their happiness. This is good. It was paternalism and a usurpation of autonomy, maybe at its worst.... The school is the eye of mankind. Its profession is to help brother man to see. To be closer and more helpfully joined with each other... Faculty: Helping the professor to revitalize himself must be one of the challenges of New College.... We feel professors are fellow learners with the students, but that they earn authority by the way in which they teach, agitate, respond and prod, illuminate and themselves grow....

Administration: It is the role of the administration to serve. To expedite the overall direction of New College.... Internally, the students and faculty will try various ways toward the collegial. Sharing power is always hard, impossible if simply made mathematical, devious if left so obscure that a few can manipulate.... The administrator is a coordinator, in a way, who tries to help the various semi-autonomies to move toward a whole view.... His position means high accountability to those he serves.... At times of

impasse, and since there are few demonstrably best ways of doing anything, a decision from an administrator, once all sides have been argued and heard, would seem wiser than paralysis. But New College can't exist or make policies without continuing consensus from its whole community.¹¹⁴

Indeed, in the early going the faculty, students, and President Leary met on a regular basis, more or less informally, whenever problems arose or decisions needed to be made. Primarily for financial reasons the college chose to pursue accreditation and the necessary Self-Study, including a more detailed plan for internal governance, was undertaken. Raines was apprehensive of formal institutional structures and of adhering to the requirements of WASC, but despite his opposition to the pursuit, as the sole full-time faculty member, Raines was charged with composing the document with community input and approval. In it, he compares New College to such other progressive and experimental institutions of higher learning as Old Westbury, the University of California at Santa Cruz, Goddard, Evergreen State College, and others, noting:

We believe that the total or partial failure of such programs has certain economic origins.... Students did not pay for the major part of facilities; therefore, the students did not have significant influence on the policies of the institution. At New College of California, on the other hand, student involvement in decision making is a necessary consequence of their funding involvement. New College has therefore developed republican structures by which student involvement is a reality rather than a token gesture.... The Community Council is the heart of the organization. This body will be made up of fifteen members, seven students, seven faculty, and the President.... All members are elected at large. The President is the only ad hoc officer.¹¹⁵

He goes into a great deal more detail about the powers of the President and Board of Trustees, but the upshot is that the community as a whole is the decision-maker, and therefore that decisions would be made by consensus, without the President or Board taking action independently, except when it proved impossible to reach such a consensus, or in the case of an immediate emergency. These notes were approved by the community as a whole, submitted to the accreditors, who also approved, and the detailed structures put in place.

In a small pamphlet entitled "Ten Years Old," printed in 1982 and cited by Van Hollebeke without authorial attribution, the first year is described as one of "mystery and joy, a year when there was no campus, no buildings, practically no administration, no library, and almost no operating funds. The focus was on learning and daily experimentation with a totally new venture. It was a year never to be repeated."¹¹⁶ Everyone knew the college was "going to get bigger, and...harder and harder to run as a family," Raines wrote, claiming that at the start of the 1972-73 school year there were 60 full time students (of a hoped for 100).¹¹⁷ Van Hollebeke puts the number at about half that, but Raines' figure seems more likely, for in addition to hiring more full-time faculty that fall the school also moved out of its itinerancy to a firm tenancy in the Schoonmaker Building at Sausalito's waterfront. Patler remembered "this triangulation: you had the Record Plant where we'd go out walking and we'd hear Carlos Santana recording,¹¹⁸ and then you'd walk the

equivalent of a block down and that's where the Whole Earth Catalogue was being produced..., and then there's New College.... It was a very rich area."¹¹⁹ The students were also by and large thrilled by the growth, despite some initial trepidation among the first group "that the new students would be very different from us, that they wouldn't understand us, that they'd try to take over the school."¹²⁰ According to Raines, "within a month we had discovered how much we all had in common."¹²¹ The faculty now numbered at least 7 full-time members, including Norman Dayron (interdisciplinary sciences), Martin Epstein and Bob Raines (literature), Ann Kreilkamp (philosophy), Don Moses (philosophy, political science, theology), Louis Patler (social sciences), and Stanley Scher (natural sciences), plus several adjuncts and President Leary. The new arrivals joined the original community in moving the college forward.

The trouble, never unanticipated, was that few faculty and fewer students had any experience running a college. That was part of the point, of course, one of the thrills, as well. Students and faculty alike relished the experience, but they were equally frustrated with it. Community Council meetings often ended without resolution, and when it came time at the end of the fall term to begin determining contracts for the following school year, the council was faced with a financial reality to which they weren't prepared to respond, at least not to the satisfaction of the President and Board of Directors. With the growth of the college, the jobs with which many had been tasked had grown, both for the small faculty and the smaller

administration, but salaries hadn't. The money wasn't there. Part of the problem, as Raines puts it, was that "a number of students...decided that a college degree doesn't mean all that much, and that they could learn what they wanted from New College without paying tuition.... All told, nineteen students either stop[ped] paying tuition or drop[ped] down to part time."¹²² The deficit kept growing. The Board was not pleased and left its near invisible position to impose a plan for the reorganization of authority, demanding more of the President, permitting less of the community. Amid this financial and organizational tension, the conflict over accreditation and just how the college ought to be run, i.e. who was responsible to whom, reared up again as the second level of accreditation was awarded and another self-study conducted. Student Steve Polich, who had become something of Leary's fundraising sidekick and was the son of the school's main benefactor, told Von Hollebeke:

It got to a certain point [where] Jack said: "This is not the school that I founded. I don't feel that I can go ask for support from these people who are good people and who believe in me. I can't ask them legitimately to support this school. So Jack made a decision to dismiss [Raines and Kreilkamp, the two major dissenting voices against accreditation and the reorganization of the institutional power structure]. He had some very clear ideas on where he was willing to experiment and what values he wasn't leaving up for grabs. He moved quickly and cleanly. I think that left everybody surprised but also it left them clear that there was strong leadership and ideals behind the founding of the school. The school would not have gone on had Jack not done what he did."¹²³

There was, of course, disagreement on these last points, but most of the community accepted the action as final and filed away any grievances. The firing occurred over

the summer, and by the following fall, the college and community simply moved forward, though perhaps with a bit more skepticism than before.

What with the college only in its second year of existence and already embroiled in conflict and controversy, in addition to adjusting to new quarters and a student body four times as large as it had been previously, Patler was just trying to “getting the feel for things,” but from the very beginning, he said, “I really believed in the vision of New College, that that was a way, and perhaps *the* way for me to get a true education,” so he threw himself into efforts to move the school forward:

I was writing grant proposals almost from the day I arrived. I would get a little bit here and a little bit there. Then this program came out [called the University Year of Action (UYA)] that was designed to subsidize college students in pursuit of giving back to the community, to put it in those terms, and proposals were being solicited to describe projects...that were community focused, community based. Jack Leary had always wanted to start a law school and had never done so. So he had in mind that the next step after the humanities school would be...a law school [concerned with social justice].¹²⁴

Tom Mack, then Regional Director of Legal Services for the Office of Economic Opportunity, had heard about New College, and so he came to meet Leary and discuss the possibilities. As Von Hollebeke tells it:

[Mack] felt strongly that most law school admissions requirements precluded women and minorities from entry into the legal profession, when these were...precisely the persons likely to have a strong interest in law as a means of promoting social justice and protecting the rights of individuals. He wanted to change this. Mack's philosophy fell on the ears of a kindred spirit [Leary]...who envisioned the study of law as a form of the Humanities, harkening back to an ancient tradition.¹²⁵

As Leary would write in the following year's catalogue, "the thrust here is to help make law what it was in the great medieval schools, the first humanity: sensitive, historical, idealistic..., to take the figure of the concerned lawyer and to project both male and female images of several ages and races, striving to make real our dreams of a better world."¹²⁶

Patler collaborated with faculty members Stanely Scher and Dan Moses to write an ambitious proposal for the UYA that included several projects, including the first moves toward a public interest law school in the country, in conjunction with the Public Defender's Office; other projects included designing and building affordable furniture and acting as advocates and liaison workers for the inmates in the San Francisco county jail. The New College proposal was pitted against proposals from Stanford, UC Berkeley, and other prestigious universities, and it won \$140,000. "In those days, in those dollars, it was a lot of money.... It was enough for 25 students to start a law school, plus these other two projects which each had six or ten other students. It covered a third to a half of the costs of the [law] college in its first year of existence."¹²⁷ The projects were all successful, and the grant was renewed for two years, allowing New College students to take other actions, including building roughly 50 community playgrounds on unused land in San Francisco's Mission District and elsewhere in consultation and cooperation with the families who lived there. Patler's grant-writing talents and general institutional savvy would prove vital

in following years as again and again he wrote successful applications for grants from various public and private foundations and negotiated funding from the college's general coffers for the soon-to-begin programs in poetics at New College, but particularly in the early going, to have such an active hand in the development and direction of the school on the institutional and community level was particularly invigorating for Patler. So too were the first classes he taught that year:

I was still on this path of burning out and leaving the social sciences behind. New College was all about the Humanities and I was given complete license to teach whatever I wanted, so the first class I taught...was called The Place Class—this was before I even knew the name Charles Olson. The premise was, however many of us were there for the first day of the class, we would determine by the end of that semester where, anywhere in the world we chose, we were going to go, find a way to get there, record the process of being there, study the place we were going to, capture it in some way and bring back our sentiments about that place to the rest of the college and the immediate community. That first trip we decided to go to Scammon's Lagoon in Mexico, to the birthing grounds of the whales. In those days you could go down there and get a local fisherman to take you out amongst the whales, and because it's sandbars with deep channels, you could literally lean out of the boats and rub the backs of the whales... I was doing The Place Class and I was doing a class on the interaction between art, architecture, and really not poetry *per se*, but art and architecture and words, language.¹²⁸

He'd been concerned with the sociology of language in both his MA studies at San Francisco State University where he worked on "the language that street gangs used to describe each other"¹²⁹ and in his aforementioned PhD studies at Wayne State. Now at New College his courses clearly continued in a creatively linguistic direction. Though Patler insists he was not as yet hip to the New American Poetry scene—"I'd

been a drummer all my life and involved with things musical and scholarly, and I would write poems all the time, had since I was a kid, but I never 'took it seriously' I was so naïve about that whole world."¹³⁰—he was nonetheless primed for the opening onto that scene that came the following year.

II. Arrivals

In the fall of 1973, Duncan McNaughton found his way to the college, looking for a job: "I don't know how I heard about the place,...but I just went over there and they said, in effect, 'Well, what do you do?' and I said, 'Well, I'm a poet,' which was really not the case, I mean I was just an asshole, you know... But they hired me like that, and so I taught a course,"¹³¹ as poet-in-residence. The mere fact and product of that first course in the spring of 1974 quickly puts the lie to McNaughton's self-effacement. Invited to teach whatever he wanted, he thought, "Alright, we'll do a magazine.... That's what will come out of this class." McNaughton said the six or eight students in the class "didn't know from poets and poetry and so forth, but they were interested in some way..., so a magazine was done:

The magazine was called *Yanagi*, which was Japanese for "Little Willow," which is what Sausalito means in Italian... There was a Japanese-American girl in the class...She was an absolutely wonderful girl...and I think it was because of her that it got that name. So, "Who was going to be in the magazine?" I was putting some things on the table for them to read, and it wasn't simply around *my* interests in poetry, it was just people, which is why people like Ron Padgett and others wound up in that first issue of the magazine, along with John Wieners and whoever else.

The first issue of *Yanagi*, published in May 1974, included work by Michael McClure, Sara Schrom, Louis Patler, Bill Berkson, Tom Clark, Lawrence Kearney, Ed Kissan, George Butterick, David Meltzer, Fred Wah, Duncan McNaughton, Lewis

MacAdams, Ebbe Borregard, John Tehan, John Wieners, Ron Silva, Dick Gallup, Bill Barrett, Michael Palmer, Ron Padgett, and Joanne Kyger, with covers by Bill Beckman.

Many of these persons, McNaughton included, were then living in Bolinas, a small coastal hamlet with a now legendary reputation as a rural redoubt for poets and a maelstrom of poetic activity in the 1960s and 1970s. McNaughton and his wife Genie had just moved to Bolinas in the summer of 1973, after a nine-month sojourn in New Hampshire, where McNaughton had a job teaching at Nathaniel Hawthorne College: “We were over there for a very short time before we knew we were gonna get the hell out as soon as the school year was over. It was a fucking madhouse. It really was, literally..., but that’s a whole other [story]. It’s like a bad satirical novel.” McNaughton had previously been at the University of Buffalo, New York, where he’d earned his PhD in English, and “the connections we had in Bolinas were the Creeleys [Robert and Bobbie Louise (Hawkins)], from Buffalo, Lewis and Phoebe MacAdams, likewise Buffalo, and to a lesser extent Tom and Angelica Clark, because they had come up to Buffalo in the springtime of ’68—that’s when they got married—stayed with Lewis and Phoebe, and...the four of them drove across country in the summer of ’68, landed in California and stayed here. So we came out here and wound up staying in Bolinas, too.” The nexus of persons pertinent to McNaughton in Buffalo, the connections between the community of poets there and the community of poets in Bolinas, and the ways in which these persons contributed

to the development of the programs in poetics at New College are all extensive and complex, as is McNaughton's whole experience of higher education.

Graduating from New York University in 1964 with a BA in Classics, the Boston-born McNaughton went straight into graduate school at Princeton:

I was there studying Arabic, [in order then] to study, I thought, Medieval Islamic philosophy and theosophy and so forth, "Islamic studies," Arabic, Persian, etc.... I had this fat fucking fellowship, too.... *Everything* was paid for, plus I had 750 bucks spending money every month, which at that time, '64, was plenty of money. My fellow students were there sponsored by the State Department, Navy, CIA, etc. It was that kind of scene... It was after that that I read Edward Said's *Orientalism*, but that was the climate at Princeton, too. The climate there was that the Arabs, etc., had made a mess of their own history, their own culture, and all the rest of it, and luckily some Europeans and North Americans were putting it all back together for them. Or for themselves.

McNaughton couldn't do it. He didn't want to "go into the government foreign service or some other weird-ass scene like that, or...work for ARAMCO, or...become a college professor..., an agent of the set up." He wanted to be a poet. So he quit after one semester, returned to New York, married Genie, and got a job at the now legendary 8th Street Bookstore, owned by brothers Ted and Eli Wilentz. The Wilentz brothers were also the publishers of Corinth Press and, with LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Totem/Corinth, and according to McNaughton, "when I went to work there, Ted and Eli—they were really good guys—they just gave me—you know, like, 'Now that you're working at the store, here!' —the *Maximus Poems* [by Charles Olson], they

gave me *Second Avenue* [by Frank O'Hara], they gave me all the Totem/Corinth books."

Meanwhile, McNaughton's childhood friend, Albert Glover, had gone to Buffalo, following a professor he'd had at McGill University the year before who was hired away during the recruitment blitz that followed the integration of the theretofore private university into the State University of New York (SUNY) system in 1963. Al Cook, the man in charge of the English Department, had been roommates with Robert Creeley at Harvard and had followed Creeley's activities, including his association with Black Mountain College and its outsized rector, Charles Olson, so along with such academic stars of the time as Leslie Fielder, Angus Fletcher, Lionel Abel, and others, Cook hired Olson. He also brought in a young John Clarke, who had recently completed his dissertation under Cook at Cook's previous place of employment, Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Olson had sworn off academia after the collapse of Black Mountain College in 1956 and didn't really want the job, but he hadn't had any real income in the intervening years, so he took it. Both he and his wife Betty were miserable, and when Betty died in a car crash in January of 1964, Olson was miserable and alone. He would end up leaving, mid-semester, in the Fall of 1965, turning his classes over to Clarke, with whom he'd grown close over the intervening months. While at Buffalo, however, he'd also encouraged the poet John Wieners, a former student at Black Mountain, to join him, and arranged a job as a teaching assistant to seal the deal. The year following Charles

Olson's departure, Cook filled the vacancy with his own old roommate and Olson's close collaborator, Creeley. When McNaughton spoke about his time at Buffalo and the people he got to know there, he began with these three:

John Wieners and Bob Creeley and Jack Clarke, and some of the students that landed there, who were there a year or two ahead of Lewis [MacAdams] and I, who got there at the same time, in '66. Same time Creeley got there. John [Wieners] had been there since '64 and he left in '69, but there were others there who had been students of Olson's.... [Albert] Glover.... —we had grown up together in this little town in Massachusetts... —and Fred Wah, who was a Canadian poet, and another Canadian named Mo Donaldson; Stephen Rodefer was there at the same time... Rodefer, Wah, Donaldson, an English poet named John Temple and another English poet named Andrew Crozier had been in New Mexico. Creeley had been teaching in New Mexico for a few years...and the reason the Canadians were there was because of Warren Tallman in Vancouver, who was connected to Creeley. Wah and these others had been students of Warren's [at the University of British Columbia]—Crozier and Temple, I'm guessing, because of Jeremy Prynne, who was very young at the time but was in communication with Olson.... So when Olson went there, Creeley turned to these guys that were with him in New Mexico and said, "You need to get yourself over to Buffalo." And they did.... George Butterick got there at the same time.... So Glover was over in Buffalo, and he said, "Why don't you come up? Charles is here." —I was starting to read, at that point. Reading Wieners a lot. And starting to try to read Olson... —He said, "Charles will love you. You know Greek...." Then [Olson] left. I still went up there.

McNaughton's six years in Buffalo, learning from and with these and other persons, would shape and inform his life and work, both during his New College years and after. His decision to "do a magazine" with his first class at the college was by no means arbitrary. At Buffalo, McNaughton had joined MacAdams as editor of the final three issues of *Mother* magazine (numbers 8-10), and soon launched his own

magazine, *Fathar*. By the time he arrived in Bolinas, he had published 5 issues of *Fathar*, with work by Buffalo affiliates Creeley, MacAdams, Temple, and Wieners, as well as Ted Berrigan, Stephen Jonas, Frank O'Hara, Ed Sanders (who'd been McNaughton's classmate as an undergraduate), and others. Issue III was dedicated entirely to the work of John Clarke. *Yanagi*, like *Fathar*, in the tradition of most "little mags," drew largely if not exclusively on the immediate community for its contributors; at least two-thirds of them lived within an hour's drive of the college. Several others were part of the Buffalo scene. Only a couple lacked a direct connection to one or the other place, and nearly all the contributors to the magazine would make important contributions to the soon-to-be developed programs in Poetics at New College in other ways, too. It was an auspicious beginning.

A glimpse at the Bolinas community, too, is necessary to understand the ethos of the Poetics Program; so many of those who would make the program go were tied to it, or to one another through it. Kevin Opstedal tells the Bolinas tale well in his long essay-history "Dreaming As One: Poetry, Poets and Community in Bolinas, California, 1967-1980," from which I crib and quote at length for the following picture of the historical moment: "Just down the road, [in] Stinson Beach [the] poet Robert Duncan and artist Jess Collins had a house" in the 1950s, and many poets associated with the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat scene in North Beach had made their way from the city to visit and take part in workshops there, but in the

early 1960s, “Bolinás was a forgotten, scruffy little rural coastal town,” as Opstedal writes:

In 1965 the writer Bill Brown...bought a parcel of land in Bolinas. Poet Jim Koller helped Brown clear the land and a local Bolinas carpenter named Calagy Jones built the Browns a house there.... Brown and Koller were the editors of the influential Coyote's Journal..., started in 1964 by Koller and Ed Van Aelstyn..., [who] was the editor of *The Northwest Review*, a literary magazine published by the University of Oregon. The University suspended publication of the review in 1964 in reaction to an issue which contained work by [Antonin] Artaud, [Philip] Whalen, and an interview with Fidel Castro. Koller, Van Aelstyn and Will Wroth decided to start their own magazine, and Coyote's Journal was born. The journal printed an impressive array of poets and writers including Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn, Charles Olson, Joanne Kyger, Allen Ginsberg, Richard Brautigan, Clark Coolidge, Larry Eigner, Anselm Hollo, Richard Duerden, Tom Pickard, Philip Whalen, and others.¹³²

Poets quickly began to gravitate toward Bolinas. Lew Welch, Gary Snyder, Kirby Doyle, Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger, and Richard Brautigan all came, followed throughout the late 1960s and into the early 1970s by more poets and artists, like Ebbe Borregaard, Jack Boyce, Lawrence Kearney, Arthur Okamura, Lewis MacAdams, Gordon Baldwin, and Tom Clark, who then encouraged many of his New York friends to come visit, which they did. “Lewis Warsh and Anne Waldman, Larry Fagin, Jim Brodey, Tom Veitch, Ted Berrigan and Bill Berkson, to name a few, all visited, staying for varying lengths of time in Bolinas,” as did others from elsewhere, including Robert Creeley, Jack Clarke, David Meltzer, et al. “The beginnings of a real community of writers and artists was taking shape in Bolinas....,

[while] just north of Olema, between Point Reyes and Bolinas, Peter Coyote lived with a mix of truck people and Diggers, a notorious group of San Francisco anarchist street theater activists that promulgated counterculture ideals,” Opstedal writes:

By 1968, there was an interesting mix forming in Bolinas, including both the older representatives of the San Francisco beat scene, and the younger hippies—representing two generations that shared a similar bohemian anarchist philosophy. Along with these newcomers were the long-time residents of Bolinas, mostly farmers and some fishermen. It was by all accounts a mellow scene, but there was revolution in the air.

It's important here to understand the historical and cultural context. In the 1960's, America's materialism, as well as the country's cultural and political norms, were being questioned by a new counterculture of young people, generally referred to as hippies. It was a tumultuous time. By the late sixties controversial issues such as civil rights, the Vietnam War, nuclear arms, the environment, drug use, sexual freedom, and nonconformity were rallying points for the young whose lifestyle integrated ideals of peace, love, harmony, music, mysticism, and religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yoga, meditation and psychedelic drugs were embraced as methods to expand individual (and collective) consciousness.

In 1967 the Human Be-In at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park attracted thousands and was a precursor to The Summer of Love. Among those taking part in the Be-In were counterculture luminaries Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. People were encouraged to question authority in regard to the Vietnam war, civil rights, and women's rights.

Members of the counterculture believed their way of life should express their political and social beliefs. Personal appearance, song lyrics, and the arts were used to make both individual and communal statements. At the same time the counterculture shaped its own alternative media of underground newspapers and radio stations.

As the sixties wound down many within the counterculture dropped out and left the cities for the countryside to experiment with utopian lifestyles. Away from urban problems and suburban sameness, they built new lives structured around shared political

goals, organic farming, community service, and the longing to live simply with one's peers.

In San Francisco the blissful 3 month dream known as The Summer of Love had shattered into police shakedowns and drug busts. Predatory rip-off's of the spaced-out youth that flocked to the city were rampant. Bolinas was one place you could go to get away from the street hassles and into the back-to-nature bio-ethos that was a hippie ideal. The proximity to San Francisco, as well as the rugged beauty and rural setting made the place a primo find. Not to be discounted as one of the attractive features of the town was the fact that Bolinas was (and still is) an unincorporated municipality—no city government, no police force....¹³³

Anarchic and communalist Bolinas was the scene of “an ongoing soap opera...so involved and complicated as to be nearly impossible to unravel.... This was a community that was largely formed of the members of that counterculture which had made sex, drugs and rock and roll one of the iconic phrases of the time.” As McNaughton told Opstedal, “everybody slept with everybody.... It was charming, except when it was not charming, then it was really a drag.”¹³⁴ At the same time, it was also a hive of poetic activity and small press publishing, and if variety was the spice of Bolinas life, the same goes for Bolinas literature. As the jacket copy of the 1971 City Lights book, *On the Mesa: An Anthology of Bolinas Writing*, puts it: “Not so much a school of poets as a meeting of those who happen to be at this geographical location at this point in wobbly time, several divergent movements in American poetry of the past 20 years...have come together with new Western and mystic elements at the unpaved crossroads of Bolinas.”¹³⁵ Whereas Buffalo had a distinctly Black Mountain tradition, dominated by the work and person of Charles Olson, and

after him his protégé Jack Clarke and closest collaborator Robert Creeley, in Bolinas, McNaughton said, “What poets did there was their business.” Nonetheless, Opstedal argues, “a Bolinas poetic could be understood as a synthesis of the poetries represented in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* anthology,”¹³⁶ which upon its publication in 1960 quickly became (and remains) a classic and indispensable text, in spite of its flaws, including its oft marked lack of diversity (Denise Levertov, Helen Adam, Madeline Gleason, and Barbara Guest are the only women among the forty-four contributors and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka the only non-white contributor), certain glaring omissions and curious inclusions, and the division of its contributors into five separate groups, four of them commonly labeled, then and since, as Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, Beat Generation, and New York School, with the fifth resisting even Allen's definition. It would be unfair not to quote, from Allen's own introduction, the following caveat: “Occasionally arbitrary and for the most part more historical than actual, these groups can be justified finally only as a means to give the reader some sense of milieu and to make the anthology more a readable book and less still another collection of ‘anthology pieces.’”¹³⁷ Opstedal notes that “these distinctions were to be [further] blurred, if not erased altogether, by the Bolinas poets.”¹³⁸ McNaughton likewise exhibited this highly diversified, but undivided—which is not to say undifferentiating—approach to the New American Poetry when he returned to teach again at New College in the fall of 1974.

Patler returned to the ship of World Campus Afloat for most of that term, while McNaughton taught two courses, each the first part of parallel year-long sequences: one called simply “American Poetics,” to which we shall return shortly, and the other more curiously titled “The Permanence of Marriage/Introductory Studies in Angelology.” This was a study of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, specifically the 1609 Quarto, “their first unedited & uncorrected edition,” as the syllabus notes, encouraging students to obtain a paperbound facsimile edition from the Scolar Press—the publisher’s address in England is provided—but allowing that “if no such is available, then a standard paperbound edition of the Sonnets will do, and restoration of the original text will be done in this course.”¹³⁹ The other required text was McNaughton’s own dissertation, completed two years prior at Buffalo, *Love Triumphant: Meditations on Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, and the course seems to have been largely an offering and continuance of the work done therein, for recommended reading to supplement the *Sonnets* themselves and McNaughton’s *Meditations*, were works that had helped him determine his approach to that text: Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and two books by Henry Corbin, *Avicenna & the Visionary Recital* and *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, which would continue to be central texts not only for McNaughton, but for many later engaged in the Poetics Program.

In *Love Triumphant*, McNaughton dwells on the “enigma par excellence” of Shakespeare’s sonnets, namely the “identities of the poet’s two lovers: the Master-Mistris of the first one hundred twenty-six sonnets, and the Dark Lady of Sonnets

127 through 152," for "there is no other problem, no other puzzle, of the overall meaning of the Sonnets that is not subordinate, ultimately, to the greater problem of these identities. This is so for whoever would desire to understand the Sonnets: whether student or poet, lover or scholar. The riddle is initial to the Sonnets' meaning,"¹⁴⁰ as he puts it in his introduction. Recalling the work in conversation, McNaughton said:

I didn't use any scholarly material [on Shakespeare]. I tried to, but it wasn't working, so I had my books at home and I said, "Well, alright if it's gonna come, it's gonna come out of me and what I've been studying for the last couple of years," and I wrote it. A lot of it comes out of classical mythological stuff, some of it is stuff I had learned from Henri Corbin, [Seyyed Hossein] Nasr, and some others who write with some intelligence about this stuff.¹⁴¹

Instead of attempting to contend with the vast scholarly and critical literature on the Sonnets, which would necessitate doing so in that literature's arena, with its terms, McNaughton proposed a form of "personal spiritual exegesis" heavily inflected by "Corbin's study of the *ta'wil* of the Muslim spirituals. In the context of procedures of certain Muslim theosophies, *ta'wil* forms with *tanzil* a pair in contrariety. *Tanzil* denotes the literal religion, the letter of the Revelation; *ta'wil* translates the Greek exegesis and is taken to designate a spiritual procedure which begins, but does not culminate, with the Revelation's letter."¹⁴² It leans as well on that "perception by the heart which the Sufis term 'inner taste' (*dhawq*)" of "the true knowledge of things...inaccessible to the intellect"¹⁴³ and on the principle of "sympathy," taken "to

be a condition and mode of perception, which takes its reality within a 'reciprocal aspiration based on the community of essence.'"¹⁴⁴ McNaughton continues:

In the context of a work of imagination, such as the Sonnets, the exegesis of the text constitutes one of two aspects, the mental operation, of the accomplishment of the whole of the work's meaning. The other aspect, which is complementary to the exegesis of the text, is psychic: the exegesis of the soul, which implies the soul has its truth, too, which must be restored. This exegesis of the soul takes its beginning likewise by basing itself on a text, which raises the text to the estate of a spiritual event. In respect to the Sonnets, we regard the work as itself an exegesis of a spiritual event: that is, the way the event was understood by Shakespeare's soul. To regard the Sonnets so is to initiate one's own exegesis of the expressions therein, to begin to lead the Sonnets back to what they originally signify. We are enabled, thus to permit the situation of the Sonnets to become situable, recognizable, for us.

In other words..., the exegesis reflects, then, an aspiration of the soul as well as a mental operation upon the text's primary condition. The success or failure of the process depends on the attainment in the exegete's mental and spiritual experience of a congruence to the experience of Shakespeare, as the Sonnets record it....

That which mediates between the truth of Shakespeare's adventure and the truth of our own, is the language of the Sonnets.¹⁴⁵

McNaughton offered this as a means of approach and mode of engagement with any text the student might encounter, for which the student might feel sympathy. "In order to understand [another's] language," McNaughton writes, "one must perform a personal exegesis upon it, that one may gain in oneself an order in experience which is congruent to the initial contexts of that language. That this is possible is simply a fact of poetry, its most obvious, when we notice it, charm."¹⁴⁶ "I am driven to this," he continues, "fleeing the fruits of a New England education. I mean the

insistent opposition of free will and determinism. One is stupefied by the apperency of choices: one must take either Oxford Street or Divinity Street. One is so stupefied that one cannot take either route for one's own, though it is all the argument of choice one has learnt."¹⁴⁷ Here then was another alternative, seeking to counter "the near disappearance from philosophy in our culture of cosmology and theosophy, except as preserved in the 'non-philosophical' practices of 'mysticism' and 'art,'"¹⁴⁸ permitting the student to seek and find a providential, not a prescribed, company. While the above is all centered on and channeled through an individual encounter, a one-to-one correspondence between reader and text, McNaughton was simultaneously concerned with impressing a broader sense of poetic community upon his students, as suggested by his first *Yanagi* course and the course he offered parallel to the course in "Angelology."

McNaughton's course in "American Poetics" leaned heavily on Donald Allen's two seminal anthologies, *The New American Poetry*, published in 1960, and *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, published in 1973, just a year before McNaughton's use of it at New College. He would supplement these anthologies, in particular during the second term, with several slim pamphlets from the Sparrow series published monthly by Black Sparrow Press in the 1970s, including Creeley's *The Creative*, and he also used a series of fascicles then coming out of Buffalo under the umbrella title, *A Curriculum for the Soul*. The series was instigated by a document Charles Olson sent a couple years after leaving the university to his former student there, George

Butterick. Clayton Eshleman describes it as “a two-page ‘outline’ that on the one hand was probably spontaneous (reflecting current preoccupations) and on the other the result of twenty years of research and writing. Such a ‘Plan’ suggests a mysterious correspondence between terrestrial labyrinths, star maps, and the human mind. Not only does this ‘Plan’ fail to follow the steps of most outlines, it treats its ‘subjects’ as if they were pick-up sticks that had suddenly been loosed from the poet’s grip, falling everywhichway on the page.”¹⁴⁹ Toward the end of Olson’s tenure at Buffalo, Butterick had joined Jack Clarke, Albert Glover, and Fred Wah in forming what they called The Institute of Further Studies, and, as Patrick James Dunagan puts it in a review of the two-volume compilation of the *Curriculum* pamphlets, “under the influential guiding hand of Clarke, they executed an ambitious pursuit of Olson-related publishing activities and events,”¹⁵⁰ foremost among these being the *Magazine of Further Studies* (6 issues from 1965 to 1969) and the *Curriculum* fascicles, the “Plan” for which the group had published in the fifth issue of their magazine. Upon Olson’s death in 1970, Clarke selected 28 of the more than 200 “subjects” noted on the document and assigned each to “members of the Olson Community,” as participant/contributor Joanne Kyger puts it: “The idea was to write a short chapbook or ‘fascicle’ of 25-50 pages on the subject. Some of the assignments were finished quickly and published from 1972-1974. Other topics were reassigned. The final fascicle was published in 2002.”¹⁵¹ In his review of the compilation, Dunagan quotes from Glover’s correspondence to Michael Boughn:

“The original ‘vision’ was of a large book written by ‘Olson’ It is that sense of ‘Homer’ and would make only the second one (this one, of course, somewhat different in its concept of ‘history’ and ‘narrative’) in ‘the tradition’” of what Glover terms “collaborative epic.”¹⁵² As Boughn notes in a useful, invested, and considered piece on “Olson’s Buffalo”:

The reference to “Homer” here is to Milman Perry’s famous proposal that in fact, rather than being an individual, Homer was the name given to a collective of bards who had invented and assembled the Iliad and the Odyssey over hundreds of years. The notion of “epic” as it’s deployed here, and as it always was used by Olson, is not what is now proposed as a monomaniacal drive toward a singular representation of the world. Olson always saw epic in that sense as a late, literary derivation, something he hated. The pre-literary “epic,” as he proposed it, was a communal invention of culturally shared narrative meanings, the invention of a cohesion of diversities within the otherness of language. The problem for Olson was how get to a procedure, a method that would make possible a similar mode of knowing/speaking as/for community.¹⁵³

Among the first fascicles to appear were those by Buffalo associates McNaughton (*Dream*), Glover (*The Mushroom*), Wieners (*Woman*), Wah (*Earth*), Clarke (*Blake*), Butterick (*The Norse*), and MacAdams (*Dance*), as well as Anselm Hollo (*Sensation*) and Robert Duncan (*Dante*), both of whom McNaughton had gotten to know over the course of various Buffalo summer sessions.¹⁵⁴

By the spring of 1974, when these fascicles were taken up, Patler had returned from his second semester on the high seas and was sitting in on McNaughton’s class, as he had the *Yanagi* course the year before:

It was like the first day, I remember very well, that I ever went snorkeling. Put my face down in the water and there's this whole other world I didn't know was there! I'd looked across the top of the ocean all my life and saw a lot of interesting things, but boy there was something else going on that I had no clue about, and that's where the times with McNaughton came in handy, to open up this parallel universe to me.¹⁵⁵

The two quickly became close friends, Patler helping McNaughton navigate the New College scene, McNaughton introducing Patler to books and persons of the Poetry scene. McNaughton had done the one issue of *Yanagi* with his class the previous spring and returned to editing *Fathar* that fall, in September of '74 publishing the sixth issue (numbered "sixty-six"), and in March of '75 the seventh ("zayin"), so an excited Patler took up the mantle of *Yanagi* and with Bill Barrett, one of the students who had worked on the first issue, published a second issue that year, featuring Joe Dunn, Barbara A. Holland, Jack Powers, Rose Dunn, Lawrence Kearney, S. Fox, Ron Silva, Rebecca Brown, Gerard Malaga, Barrett, Patler, and McNaughton. At the same time, he helped students start up a magazine exclusively for the work of New College students and faculty called *Cayati*.¹⁵⁶

Still, Patler said, "the first couple years we were both getting our feel for things. We didn't know year to year — there were no contracts, no extended guarantees. It was literally school year to school year, and even then with all the financial problems, you would or wouldn't get paid, and we went months sometimes with no pay, and then there'd be some money that would come in and they'd give it to us in

dribs and drabs....”¹⁵⁷ Indeed, according to Van Hollebeke, “in the fall of 1974, the 110 Humanities students on which the budget had been projected didn't show up. About 75 did.”¹⁵⁸ Salaries were slashed twenty to twenty-five percent, but debts continued to accumulate. The college faced financial crisis after financial crisis and soon would find itself at the brink of dissolution. Nonetheless, poetics activities at the college “started to grow and expand,” Patler said:

McNaughton and I began to talk much more seriously about, in a way sort of taking over the school. By then—I'd had this great education from him and had started reading—I was fully aware of what had gone on at Black Mountain, and I was intrigued by Olson's perspective on what really a university is at the end of the day..., ranging from who teaches and what they teach [to] who controls the embossing device that you can stamp a transcript with and award a diploma. So we just sort of figured out how we could provide a livelihood and an education for ourselves and for any student that came in to get student loans and stuff, and for any number of poets who are pretty much to the one starving artists like everybody else.¹⁵⁹

Patler continued to write grant proposals, receiving multiple awards from the National Endowment for the Arts to help pay McNaughton as “poet-in-residence” and to help publish the magazines. During the 1975-76 school year, they began to bring in other poets from Bolinas, where Patler too was living at the time, mostly for one-off readings and class visits, and Patler's teaching focus turned increasingly toward poetry. He saw courses as a way to further and deepen his engagement. Using McNaughton's recent example as a model, he would teach a year-long course focused on the Institute of Further Studies' *Curriculum*, asking those contributors

who lived in the Bay Area to visit. He would revisit this frame at least twice more in coming years, and he would also begin to lead writing workshops and advise students on *Cayati*, while publishing a third issue of *Yanagi* in 1976 and a fourth—a collection of broadsides rolled up and distributed in mailing tubes—in '77.

McNaughton, too, as poet-in-residence and on an adjunct basis, would lead writing and publishing workshops, and teach courses in American poetry and prose, as well as Homer (a two-semester sequence on the *Iliad* and then the *Odyssey*), Japanese literature, “The Gate of Horn: Meaning, Religious Thought and Ritual,” Latin, and basic English grammar and composition in coming years.¹⁶⁰ Excited by the activity and encouraged by the community response, both among the students and other faculty and among the poets who came to visit, McNaughton and Patler began to put together a plan for an emphasis in North American Poetry and Poetics under the general Humanities degree awarded by the college.

In the meantime, the accreditation process continued. In May, 1974, a team visited and though “impressed by the credentials of faculty and trustees and by the honesty and openness of everyone, they thought that the library needed improvement, the administration needed more help, and that a permanent building was necessary.”¹⁶¹ Another team visited six months later and noted the same deficiencies. Perhaps foremost among the requirements for accreditation was a fixed address, something more permanent than the handful of rooms the college rented at the Schoonmaker building and the six-room bungalow a ten-minute walk up the

waterfront at 2330 Marinship Way, which it also rented beginning in the fall of 1973. So a committee was formed to visit various possible sites around the Bay Area, among them an old elementary school, a Berkeley seminary, various business and residential properties, a mortuary, and even the decommissioned military site Fort Baker, at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The college nearly secured four acres of waterfront property in Sausalito that the General Services Administration had declared military surplus, but after extensive negotiations, it fell through. Ultimately, in the fall of 1975, the college acquired the former Gantner, Maison, Domergue Mortuary building at 777 Valencia Street in San Francisco's Mission District, taking on a \$195,000, 15-year mortgage. The acquisition of this building was a monumental shift for the college, and the transition was marked with characteristic verve. As Van Hollebeke writes,

For the final exam in Robert Rahl's class, "The Streets of San Francisco," the students walked out of the little gray schoolhouse on Marinship Way and walked up the hill, across the Golden Gate Bridge and continued, on foot, to their new home in the Mission District.... In the December issue of the *New College Gazette* [Leary wrote]: "So we move to San Francisco, the larger and more abundant camping grounds with quite unqualified joy. The City, true to its namesake, has ample vision and has room for the stranger. New College will be the newest, littlest, poorest college in town. But we shall reside in a fertile milieu, in probably the most stunning city in America, wrought with hills and bridges and white buildings and space, the ineluctable commodity."¹⁶²

The building was 10,000 square feet, two stories, allowing ample room for an expanded and improved library, administrative offices, and classrooms, and when a

final committee visited in May 1976, the college was able to demonstrate that it had “complied with every recommendation made by the Commission.... A nine month financial audit was requested and when the Commission had received it, on July 16, 1976, final accreditation was officially conferred.”¹⁶³

As this change of address was being effected, and accreditation for the undergraduate program achieved, a conflict was brewing between the college and the law school that would have ramifications for the entire institution. According to Van Hollebeke, “the law school objected to being assessed for part of the over-all administrative costs of the College..., and another conflict arose when Leary proposed a tuition increase for law students equal to that of the humanities students.” The Law School was also rapidly accumulating debt, and “by summer, 1975, it had a deficit of \$30,000. The Humanities College was forced to add this amount to its own rising burden of debt, which must have aggravated the relationship of the two schools.”¹⁶⁴ As ever, the financial footing was precarious, so Leary hired a man named Les Carr as Chancellor to help raise funds in the summer of 1976 and shortly thereafter stepped down from the presidency, though it is unclear why, as college by-laws provided for 3-year terms and Leary had won a second term unanimously in May 1974. It seems to have been less a choice on Leary’s part than it was a decision by the faculty. In conversation, McNaughton made only oblique reference to the event: “Once we took the school over in the late ‘70s, away from the Jesuit, Jack Leary, it was to be run as a collective, really, and we were to

occupy different positions. Somebody would be a dean, somebody would be this, that, because you had to, you had to have a president, someone for the accreditors.”¹⁶⁵ Carr was identified by Law School Dean Tom Mack as the man to replace Leary as president. Many on the humanities faculty did not agree, “and so, at the trustees' meeting the entire Humanities School lined up against the Law School...presenting the opposing views.”¹⁶⁶ The lawyers won the day and Carr was appointed president in July, 1977, but he would soon put the college in an even worse position than it had been when he took the helm. Carr concocted a scheme to sell “honorary doctorates” to donors of \$25,000 or more, and when the press caught wind of it, a minor scandal ensued. So Carr came up with another plan: to transfer the ownership of a building at 50 Fell Street, which the law school had acquired for its own campus the previous year, and give positions on the board of trustees “to a group of Sausalito lawyers and investors in exchange for \$400,000 to pay off the College's accumulated debt.” When Louis Patler heard about this plan, he started looking into “what it meant, what a college board can do and what it can't do,” he said. “I came upon some microfiche news clipping about Les Carr, that he had started a scam university once before. And that university was never accredited, but the keys to the kingdom are accreditation, so he had some guys involved with him, and their plan, I think, was to start an ‘independent study’-based program that was accredited from the get go.”¹⁶⁷

Rumors of other, connected, more complicated schemes abound, and Carr was eventually forced out after less than a year at the helm, in April 1978:

Millie Henry, at first thinking she would be presiding over the demise of the college, accepted the presidency.... She asked that Peter Gabel from the Law School agree to be co-president [and] a "Committee to Save New College" made up of law and humanities students raised about \$20,000 in a few months. Friends of Henry's...taught summer session classes, free of charge, from neighboring colleges, and another \$10,000 in income was realized. Jean Vollum donated \$25,000, at Millie's request.... Salaries were slashed to \$1,000 per month for everyone. Millie renegotiated all of the bank loans.... By the end of that year..., all salaries had been met, there was no budget deficit, and some of the amount owed to banks had been paid back. The next year (1979-1980) a Title III grant of about \$100,000 was awarded to the school.... In 1981, the first private grant, of \$100,000, was received from the San Francisco Foundation, along with a second Title III grant for \$175,000.¹⁶⁸

At that point the college was back on relatively stable financial footing for a time, but the damage done by Carr's actions, others' reactions and inaction, rumor, secrecy, unilateral administrative decisions and more would rebound for years to come, affecting relations between various New College factions, not least the burgeoning programs in poetics: "Shit went on among certain people there," McNaughton said. "[Eventually, in the mid-1980s] Patler and I lost the war, and we weren't the only ones, again, because it was a collective, and there were other people on the faculty who felt the same way we did, which was we wanted everything on the table, all the information all the time, and that wasn't what was going on. There were all kinds of financial matters and other shenanigans without our knowledge."¹⁶⁹

III. Preparations

The undergraduate emphasis in North American Poetry and Poetics was approved and offered officially in the fall of 1977. Funded, again, in large part by dedicated grants from the NEA, NEH, and the Office of Education, McNaughton and Patler immediately went about getting other poets from outside New College involved with a regular reading series and expanded their involvement with a poets-in-residence series to boot—“initially a month at a time,” said Patler, “then we got it put in the budget so we could bring somebody on for a semester and they could teach a whole course, which was great because it always brought new blood in”¹⁷⁰ as the undergraduate program developed and the graduate program eventually got underway.

The first reading at New College to be fully documented actually occurred several months before the undergraduate concentration officially commenced, just shortly after the move to San Francisco. On February 22, 1977, Michael McClure, Lewis MacAdams, Duncan McNaughton, and Ed Dorn took the stage by turns. McClure read from his then-unpublished essay-poem “Specks,” which McNaughton lauded as “a physiology of the soul,” as it dealt with Olson’s sense of proprioception, Aristotle’s metaphysics, and Federico Garcia Lorca’s duende, in conjunction with his own characteristic environmental and biological concerns. MacAdams read “a few

postmodern bummers,” as he called them, and a selection from *News from Niman Farm*, the then-just-published third part of his ecopoetic/ecopolitic Bolinas trilogy (after *A Bolinas Report* and *Tilth*). McNaughton read a bit of *Sumeriana*, “published about five minutes ago, in Bolinas,” he said, and Ed Dorn then read from his in-progress droll and sardonic *Hello, La Jolla*. According to a poster advertising this reading, it was a fundraiser to cover cross-country plane fare for the featured reader at the following week’s event, the first of several officially co-sponsored by New College and the San Francisco State Poetry Center, of which MacAdams was then director. On March 2, Ed Dorn gave this introduction:

I grew up in a time in America when, if you were a poor country boy, you got whatever you could get. And no further questions. That’s not to claim anything’s changed that much since—on that level. I’ve heard the warning that nothing is obvious, but some things one can extrapolate absolutely. One of the first things I learned was never to let a draft horse stand on your foot. And I never did. Other lessons were more complex. Any country boy might read the city with a certain awe. Not the slick awe of the small-towner but real, raw awe. I used to go to Chicago and I always vowed I’d go there again. Woody Herman wasn’t the thing that drew me. It was Maxwell Street, where I saw and heard the population of this country, as distinct from the severe homogeneity of my own county, for the first time. But ignorance is never complete. I sensed from my first trip that Chicago wasn’t “The City.” The City was supposed to team. Chicago merely percolated. When I finally got to The City, it was with wonderful coincidence I met a man then known by the provocative name, LeRoi Jones. He was my New York teacher for half a decade. He introduced me to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Chester Himes, as well as much else. But it’s in the details one looks for the quality of art. I once went to New York to visit LeRoi, and I was standing studying the parking meter in front of his place on Cooper Square, when he appeared with a smile on his face, and a screwdriver in one hand, and a ball-peen hammer in the other. He put the screwdriver in the slot and hit it

smartly with the hammer. And the meter took a vacation. And we got down to work. Amiri Baraka!¹⁷¹

Twelve years earlier, shaken into a complete reevaluation of his own work and life by the assassination of Malcolm X, Baraka had changed his name and left his bohemian milieu to move to Harlem, where he founded the Black Arts Movement. He'd withdrawn from the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference, asking Dorn to take his place. The Black Nationalist phase of his life and career thus initiated lasted roughly a decade before he became an outspoken communist and advocate for third-world liberation efforts. His then recently-published book, *Hard Facts* (1976), was the first major publication of this phase of his work, and it was with its introduction that he opened the New College reading:

Poetry is saying something about reality. It reflects the sayer's place in the production process, his or her material life and values. As a form, it reflects the material life and values of the society in which it exists. And in which the sayer, the poet, exists.

The various trick definitions of poetry and its uses, whatever they are, no matter how "deep," profound, obtuse, obvious, irrational, etc. reflect exactly a specific group of people and a specific production and social relationship of that group to the society in which they live and to the world.

For instance, the middle-class poetry which is most important to the American Academy is a reflection of American middle-class life and interests, petty bourgeois social and production relations. The White middle class—the Black middle class, finally, after some conflict about national oppression *can* curve into a single curve, a diphthongated yet whole "strata" of material life and values.... The interests, values and consciousness issue from a material base, absolutely supportive of, finally an "extension" of, the material base, interests, values and consciousness of the American ruling class.

Poetry is an apologia for one particular class or another and that class's views, needs and visions.

The introduction to the book, and hence to the reading, ends:

LONG LIVE THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST CULTURAL UNION!
LIBERATION FOR THE BLACK NATION!!
SOCIALIST REVOLUTION!!!
VICTORY TO ALL OPPRESSED PEOPLE!!!!¹⁷²

Baraka then went on to read a few sharp and cuttingly humorous poems from the book and some more recent revolutionary poetic proclamations, and then engaged in a nearly hour-long and often confrontational question and answer session with the audience, covering a wide range of poetical and political topics. If these were indeed the first public readings at the new New College campus on Valencia Street, as they appear to have been, they must have made quite a first impression, declaring a range of concerns—from the metaphysical to the biological to the ecological to the economic, social, and political—that reflected the founding ethic and ethos of the college and would impel both the soon-to-be inaugurated undergraduate emphasis and eventual graduate program, as well.

Among the other poets to give readings at New College in the next few years were Jim Carroll, Tom Clark, Calvin Herndon, Lawrence Kearney, Curtis Lyle, Ed Sanders, John Thorpe, John Wieners, and many others, no doubt. I've been given the impression from a number of interlocutors that there were more readings than this in those first few years, but documentation of readings is spotty, so these are all I've

been able to confirm. There is a significantly more complete and reliable record of the month-long residencies that formed a core of the classroom experience for the students in the emphasis, however. The poets-in-residence each month gave three official seminar sessions and a reading, as well as making the occasional unofficial visit to other classes and workshops. As was the case for the full- and part-time New College faculty, these guests were invited to teach whatever they wanted, with minimal, if any, input from Patler or McNaughton. In the first semester of the program, fall 1977, Bill Berkson offered sessions on "Frank O'Hara," Joanne Kyger on "West Coast Poetics," and John Thorpe on "The Horror of Being Human." The following term, spring 1978, Lewis MacAdams offered sessions on "The Politics of the Actual Dream Awake," Jim Carroll on "Rimbaud," and Tom Clark on "Biography and Damon Runyan" (alternately listed as "Literary Composition"). That summer McNaughton and Patler organized an intensive sequence of one-day workshops at the college. They included sessions by Patler on "*The Hotel Wently Poems* and John Wieners," Michael Wolfe on "Ezra Pound, An Introduction to *The Cantos*," Ted Enslin on "The Long Poem," Jerome Rothenberg on "Ethnopoetics," Noel Sack on "Gnosticism," Susan Friedland on "Don Quixote," Michael McClure on "The Craft of Writing," Richard Grossinger on "Small Press Publishing," and Alastair Johnston's "A Survey of Bay Area Fine Printers." In fall 1978, Lawrence Kearney gave seminars on "Jack Spicer" (alternately advertised as "Poetry and Lies"), Jim Gustafson on "No Money in Art," and Bobbie Louise Hawkins on "The

Voice on the Page." In spring 1979, George Butterick spoke on "The Poet as Mythologist, Historian and Cosmologist," Donald Allen on "Principles of Editing," and Victor Hernandez Cruz on "Particulars & Cosmics: Cultural Sources of the Latin American Sensibility." Coupled with the myriad readings and more informal appearances, on top of whatever standard coursework they may have been engaged in, the experience of it all must have been a bit dizzying for the undergraduates exposed to it. Though many were just then embarking on their careers, nearly all of these poets-in-residence are today immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the poetic developments of the latter 20th Century in the United States, but as Patler put it, "like so many things, in hindsight it became something real and bigger than life almost, but we were just doing what we were doing, you know? We'd be saying, 'Okay, so what do you want to do next week? Who would be a really good poet to bring in next week, because it's kind of the end of summer?' You know what I mean?"¹⁷³ As he explained it,

Occasionally...when anyone was passing through, and you let us know in advance, you could be incorporated into something, a little mini-class or a workshop or reading.... We tried to stir the pot a little, you know. We brought people who were from the emerging Language School at the time, and people from [the Poetry Project at] St. Marks, from Naropa.... There'd be a buzz, you know. Somebody or other, Ed Sanders is coming to town, or Creeley, or Jack Collum, whoever it was, and there were a few mainstays like Jack Clarke...for several years.¹⁷⁴

From the beginning, by and large, the visiting poets came from their “realm of immediate contacts, mainly McNaughton’s contacts. And for access, because we couldn’t pay very much..., it was largely San Francisco and Bolinas poets,”¹⁷⁵ but there were plenty of local poets to choose from. The San Francisco Bay Area had been a hub of literary activity for generations, but since the late 1940s, the region’s body poetic had been expanding exponentially. The poets of the Berkeley Renaissance, then the San Francisco Renaissance, and the ensuing Beat scene built up a head of steam over the course of the next two decades, making San Francisco ground zero for the literary (and non-literary) counterculture, easily rivaling New York City as site of most revolutionary foment and outstripping it as a base of utopian endeavors. In a personal/historical essay first published in 1981, just as the New College Poetics Program was getting underway, Steven Vincent traced developments in the local poetry scene, beginning from his own coming into awareness of it in the late 1950s, when he encountered a street corner reading in North Beach featuring Bob Kaufman and Allen Ginsberg, carrying on through the mid-1960s explosion of “a huge number of readings and an outpouring of books and magazines by local writers and publishers,” and affirming Kevin Opstedal’s discussion of the late 1960s shift in the political climate and its impact on the local poetry communities, writing that

The intensity of much of what happened might be seen in direct proportion to the growing resistance against the expanding Viet Nam War and the violence against civil rights activists. Although much of

the work was not directly political during this period in Bay Area history, poets who were identified with both the hermetic “text” and the populist oral traditions assumed a much larger public stance.... Behind the burst of activity was the desire to make the work as accessible as possible. An openness to the time stood in raw juxtaposition to the horror of the war and racial outbreaks in the civil rights struggle. It was a genuine reaching out to audience.... Looking back, it's hard to escape the impression of an era in which street, academic, and hermetic poets somehow magically joined to make the Bay Area light and wind vibrate with poetry in the face of violence and war.

He continued to note, however, that “by the fall of 1968, harsh and violent political struggles had replaced the pacifist and utopian anarchism proposed by the earlier poetries.” The year was so full of protest, revolt, and revolution across the globe that it would be absurd to try to summarize it here. Locally, it was marked significantly by the continued rise of the Black Panther Party, the killing of Bobby Hutton by Oakland police, the increased militancy of the broader Civil Rights Struggles, and the major strike at San Francisco State University led by the Black Student Union and coalition Third World Liberation Front, which resulted in the creation of the first College of Ethnic Studies and an at least somewhat increased ethnic diversity in faculty hiring. In the ensuing years, as Vincent wrote:

Much of what was being read was connected to a new political stance.... The language had a satiric, often savage bite. The intent was no less than to restructure radically what constituted acceptable American thought, behavior, and belief. The work was performed with and against the backdrop of intense moves and counter-moves in this country's political history. Not only was the Vietnam war raging, but events revolved around George Jackson, Angela Davis, and the San Quentin Six; the Weathermen; the struggles to bring

ethnic relevancy into schools and colleges; the initial gay and feminist protests and demonstrations; Watergate and the Nixon administration; the coup in Chile; the invasion of Cambodia, and on and on.

There was no shortage of reasons to speak, and “readings began to spring up everywhere.... By 1973 an estimated 500 to 1,500 people were attending readings each week.” This is not the place for a full mapping of the scores of venues where regular readings and talks and one-offs took place in the 1970s, but a mere glance from the single mimeographed letter-sized sheet of the first 1972 issue of the region’s poetry newspaper, *Poetry Flash*, to the increasingly thick tabloid that it became over the next few years testifies to the continued fecundity of the city as the New College Poetics Program was getting underway. As Steve Abbott noted in the November 1979 issue of *Poetry Flash*,

according to the 1978-79 Directory of Little Mags, the Bay Area now has 179 small presses and mags as compared to 148 for NYC and 23 for LA. As with reading series, however, publishing ventures ebb and flow much like the Pacific which batters our shore. The best are often, but not always, the newest. What is our scene like today? As far as readings go, The Poetry Center, Intersection and Cody’s are the oldest continuous series and seem to have the most consistent clout in getting big name poets.... SF is also famous for smaller readings directed to specific audiences and readings combined with open mike nights.... Cloud House is the oldest open series.... Cortland Corners, Mill Valley Depot, Noe News, Otherworks, El Mundo Surdo, Bound Together and The Strand (if they continue) are smaller series but make up for in quality what they lack in size. Small is a relative term, of course, as some of these series often have up to a hundred persons attending.¹⁷⁶

Abbott might have named any number of other bookstores, galleries, coffee houses, and bars that hosted readings—e.g., California College of Arts and Crafts, the San Francisco Art Institute, Small Press Traffic, Small Press Distribution, Kearney Street Workshop, 80 Langton Street, et al. —but at the end of his overview of the scene, Abbott does mention the “promising...new New College series.”

While the premier readings by Baraka, Dorn, MacAdams, McClure, and McNaughton and the subsequent readings by the likes of Herndon, Lyle, Sanders, and Wieners had announced the arrival of New College in San Francisco and firmly established its revolutionary stance—a stance reaffirmed in a less publicly visible way by the above mentioned workshops and lectures—public activities ramped up considerably in the fall of 1979, when the former Grand Piano reading series, run at that point primarily by Leslie Scalapino, Steve Lavoie, and David Highsmith, moved to the Mission campus of New College, adding McNaughton as one of its principle organizers. The series, run weekly for three and a half years, and was perhaps the primary incubator of the emerging Language writing. (A ten-volume collectively-authored “autobiography” of the scene from 1975 through 1980 was published from 2007 to 2010 by Barrett Watten’s This Press, and is well worth a look for the perspective(s) it offers on at least one slice of the explosive poetry scene.) At New College, at first, Highsmith and Lavoie alternated with Scalapino and McNaughton in coordinating readings. The former pair would eventually drop out, and the connection to the Grand Piano series would decrease over time, but Scalapino and

McNaughton continued to run a weekly reading series at New College for the next several years, ceding partial and sometimes total control at various points to students. Again, documentation is sporadic, but from the fall of 1979 through the summer of 1980 New College hosted readings featuring Ted Pearson and Tom Mandel; Steve Benson and Alan Bernheimer; Simone Lazzeri-Street and Mark Linenthal; Ted Pearson and Beverly Dahlen; Al Young and Lindy Hough; Richard Grossinger and Michael Palmer; Steve Emerson and David Benedetti; Robert Duncan and Jerome Rothenberg; David Bromige and Bob Perelman; Jim Gustafson and Pat Nolan; Aaron Shurin and Emanuel Ro; Diane di Prima and Bob Gluck; Andrew Hoyem and John Marron; Dale Herd and Victor Hernandez Cruz; Dick Bakken and Joyce Jenkins; Carl Rakosi and Tom Sharp; Stephen Rodefer and Ron Silliman; Kit Robinson and Carla Harryman; Alan Kornblum, Cinda Kornblum and Daryl Gray; David Antin and Michael Davidson; Tim Jacobs; Tom Clark and Keith Abbot; Joanna Drucker and Lyn Hejinian; Barrett Watten and Steven Lavoie; Sarah Menefee and Kimiko Miyata; Howard Hart and Latif Harris; Bobbie Louise Hawkins and Eleine Randell; Lawrence Kearney and Bob Grenier; Franco Beltrimetti and James Koller; Bruce Boone and Stephen Vincent; Beverly Dahlen and Erica Hunt; Paul Cotton and G.P. Skratz; Donald Guravich and Alastair Johnston; David Meltzer and Toby Hiller; Jeanne Lance and David Benedetti. There were also several large group readings, including a benefit for Lawrence Kearney, featuring Steve Emerson, Jim Gustafson, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, Lewis MacAdams, Joanne Kyger, Michael Wolfe, et al; a

SOUP magazine “publication buffet,” as the flier advertised it, with the promise that “all attending will receive a free cup of SOUP,” featuring editor Steve Abbott, along with Steve Benson, Diane di Prima, Robert Duncan, Kathleen Fraser, Lawrence Fixel, Robert Gluck, Thom Gunn, Lyn Hejinian, Joyce Jenkins, Ronald Johnson, Jan Kerouac, Kush, Duncan McNaughton, Michael Palmer, Lorenzo Thomas, Aaron Shurin, ruth weiss, et al.; and a reading for Cloud Marauder Press, featuring Don Cushman, Laura Beausoleil, Jerry Ratch, Beau Beausoleil, Leslie Scalapino. New College had clearly become one of the busiest reading venues in town.

Meanwhile, in fall 1979, the poets-in-residence series continued with seminars by di Prima on Ezra Pound’s economic theories, Robert Grenier on William Carlos Williams, and Michael Palmer on “Jack Spicer as Translator.” In the spring of 1980, the poets-in-residence would be Leslie Scalapino, Tom Clark, and John Clarke. I’ve uncovered no information about Scalapino’s talks this term, but Clark’s and Clarke’s have both enjoyed textual afterlives and offer suggestive entrée to the Poetics Program proper. John Clarke’s complex and wide ranging lectures would eventually form the core of his critical magnum opus, *From Feathers to Iron: A Concourse of World Poetics*, published in the fall of 1987, and serve coincidentally to bookend the first incarnation of the Poetics Program proper, which would begin with the fall term of 1980, a few months after Clarke’s talks, and end with the spring term of 1987, a few months before those talks’ publication. In the interim, John Thorpe, one of the first poets-in-residence for the official undergraduate emphasis (fall 1977) and one of the

first students in the official graduate program, worked with Clarke to develop the lectures into their final book form. In his prologue to the text Thorpe writes:

The ingredients were [Clarke's] new book of poems, *The End of This Side*, a typed page or two of notes for each talk, a small stack of books to work from, and a tape recorder.

Sitting at the first of these lectures, I was instantly intrigued by his oral style, which was both strikingly particular to him, and obviously a very long and persistently developed skill.

He's a jazz musician too—but here, over the course of twenty years, with Mythopoetics, he has found his major instrument, and really *plays* it.

He slapped down his first working fictions, gave them quick focus, and moved on. It was soon apparent that he wasn't going to go near the platitudes we'd probably heard before, but would let the unexpected pop out of the nexus.

He hardly needed "questions" since he seemed to have no difficulty in inciting himself, but whenever he was questioned, by Richard Duerden or some other poet in the audience, he seemed most interested not in the inevitable qualifications of what he had said immediately before, but in what new figures could introduce themselves in that precise context. We were introduced swiftly and openly to his canalling of missing information.

Before long every mental plane was occupied with a paradox of some sort, and each further remark would distribute more springing Kells into them all. Sometimes there'd be a Rinzai drollness, a dot-dot-dot, an illustration by hand gesture, patiently respectful of the ineffable.

He remained mild and un baffled. You had to trust him because he was trying to make it work, and because he knew about the process he was playing the instrument by. Here was someone who didn't separate being and scholarship, who wasn't hammy, who addressed one's creative life as an instrument of experience as well as literacy.¹⁷⁷

Thorpe's description of Clarke's performance, as we shall soon see, is an equally apt description of the modus operandi of the Poetics Program, writ large, as it played out over those intervening years.

The occasion for the talks Tom Clark gave to round out the academic year was the recent publication of his book, *The Great Naropa Poetry Wars*, which addressed the infamous incident at a Naropa-affiliated seminary nearly five years earlier, in the fall of 1975, when the poets W. S. Merwin and Dana Naone, then a couple, were assaulted by Trungpa's followers, at Trungpa's command. The incident did not occur during or in connection with the writing program, but "subsequent efforts by the leaders of the Jack Kerouac School [namely Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman] to defend Trungpa divided the community of poets nationwide."¹⁷⁸ The incident was covered in Harper's and *The Paris Review*, and Ed Sanders' class on Investigative Poetics at the Naropa summer writing program in 1977 compiled a dossier entitled *The Party: A Chronological Perspective on a Confrontation at a Buddhist Seminary*. In his own book, with his usual trenchancy, Clark excoriated Trungpa and his defenders, and his talks on the subject at New College were transcribed and edited by Allen Ensign as part of his work-study gig as a student in the Poetics Program the following year. "I lived with the tapes, and did the whole thing in Don Allen's cottage, in Bolinas," Ensign recalled. "Most of it [was] dull, actually, but then everything changed when Gregory Corso rolled in."¹⁷⁹ The surviving manuscript, which bears the title *The Ballgame's Over: The dialogues of GREGORY CORSO & TOM CLARK on The Great Naropa Poetry Wars* is drawn entirely from Clark's third and final talk, but is instructive both for the style and the substance, or to use the more canonical New American Poetics terms, form and content of the exchange. My

interest here is hardly in revisiting the incident itself or even Ginsberg's after-the-fact defense of his guru Trungpa's actions, but in considering the stances Clark, Corso, and various other members of the audience took in the basic underlying questions of allegiance, responsibility, and fallibility of the Poet, and observing the tenor of that discussion, as Corso left the room and returned repeatedly, interjecting contrarily with characteristic belligerence, and getting back a bit of what he dished out.

Clark's wrath is turned upon Trungpa, particularly, and generally on the cultic scene around him at Naropa, and members of the audience follow, likening Trungpa to Jim Jones and Charles Manson, comparisons Clark supports in quoting an editorial from the *Boulder Daily Camera*: "'If you don't like being accused of being a cult, don't behave like one.' The guy behaves in a wanton fashion that makes this kind of comparison necessary.... People are shocked by the comparison of Pound's radio speeches for Mussolini and Allen Ginsberg's Ziegler act for Trungpa,"¹⁸⁰ but they shouldn't be, he insists. "You look above yourself to the people that are ahead of you who've accomplished something. Therefore, you demand that those people be responsible, that's all,"¹⁸¹ Clark says, but "Corso's claim is because Allen's involved with it you can't compare it with Jim Jones."¹⁸² Clark says Corso "thinks we're here to ruin Allen.... He's not defending Trungpa. He's saying, 'Take it easy on my friend.'...[As was the case with Ed Sanders,] he's loyal to his old friends. And he feels it like this.... It was devotional in the way that religion is devotional, you know, artist to artist. This is why this is all such a big subject."¹⁸³ He argues "that the

lives of artists are to be regarded with interest, but not with blind allegiance. The fact that somebody does something, doesn't recommend it to us necessarily, just because it's Allen. You know there's a way in which Allen has a perfect right to do everything he wants to do, but that doesn't recommend the thing to me."¹⁸⁴

Corso, for his part, doesn't disagree with this last. When a student asks if he's had any "arguments with Ginsberg...about anything that goes down in Naropa," Corso responds, "No, I don't bother with that one. That's his choice. Fucking consideration. Whatever people want, let 'em take the shot man, they're not going to live very long."¹⁸⁵ Ultimately, Corso insists, "I'm not here in defense of anybody. The man [Clark] made War and put Poetry, Poesy with War."¹⁸⁶ It seems what irritates him most is the use of the metaphors of "wars" (as in the title of Clark's book) and "games" (the provenance of which in this particular context is unclear, though in the extant manuscript it is raised repeatedly by Clark, Corso, and others), which came together into "the GAME of the WARS" and "WAR GAMES" in one of Corso's final interjections. Corso points out that the incident at the core of the conflict had nothing to do with poetry, that in fact "Ginsey was never involved in that. He's not involved in it. Yet, he opened his mouth. And I understand a human opening their mouth because I open my mouth,"¹⁸⁷ in defense of a friend. Earlier he'd asked Clark, and by extension the room, "How long you going to make money on this shit?... How long you going to clean up on what you call Poetry Wars and what?"¹⁸⁸ And during one of Corso's absences from the room, Clark acknowledges his culpability to these

charges: "Gregory is a spirit of art and imagination. This *is* for gain, like he was accusing me of. Actually, I'm in it for the same reason Gregory is in it, but this ropes people in."¹⁸⁹

Indeed, the house was packed, and one of the most remarkable aspects of this rather remarkable exchange is that it occurred as part of a series of talks designed for undergraduates at New College. As with all the visiting poets sequences at this stage, it was not an expressly advertised public event, but neither was it private. By the close of the 1970s, McNaughton and Patler had firmly established the New College campus on Valencia as a locus of vital poetic activity, and McNaughton said that "during those years it was like an open door scene." He remembered "Bob Kaufman [being] around a lot. (He was living with a woman named Lynn Wildey who was a student there.... That's how I got to know him. He was in really tough shape physically, but in a certain way he was completely with it. Great guy.) And Gregory [Corso] was around there off and on a lot. Being a pain in the ass." Sarah Menefee also remembered the constant presence of Corso and Kaufman and added Jack Hirschman to the list. Menefee, on record in the transcript of Clark's talk telling Corso to "shut up," recalled that New College, in general, and the Poetics Program, in particular, were "very freewheeling." A great many poets and non-poets alike who had no affiliation with the College, much less the Program, passed through or hung around. "There was a young woman there who was basically homeless who lived on the couch in the lobby," Menefee recalled. "Something she told me got into

my book *The Blood About the Heart*.” The undergraduates in these New College classes were hardly off in some ivory tower, their eyes and minds locked to dead or otherwise distant texts. They had front-row seats to the most diverse, contested, and alive poetry scene they could have imagined, and a city with plenty of extra-poetic turmoil as well.

This seems to me one of the stark differences between the New College Poetics Program and a number of other programs and institutions to which it is sometimes justly compared, like Naropa and Black Mountain. While there are many curricular, structural, and personal links, these schools were set off from any metropolitan scene, far more isolated—veritable mountain redoubts—than was New College, seated smack in the middle of the city. While Naropa and Black Mountain had incredible minds in residence and welcomed a wide range of visitors, the fact remains these visitors and residents had to make quite a journey—one might go so far as to call it a pilgrimage—to get there, and so had to have good reason and a certain faith to do so, even if once on site the ideal and the real didn’t always jibe and conflict between strong personalities was inevitable. New College, on the other hand, was just around the corner, across town, up the coast, or across the bridge for some five-million people.¹⁹⁰ Both by design and by necessity, the school was in constant interaction with its human environs, its expressly public events and ostensibly private classrooms always ripe for confrontation. The experience was invigorating for both McNaughton and Patler, and a good number of their students

had turned out to be serious young poets, too, so as the second year of undergraduate seminars unfolded, they had begun to talk about taking their activities at New College a step further by creating a graduate program out of the rough material of the undergraduate emphasis.

IV. Propositions

Over twenty undergraduates would have received their BA in Humanities from New College with an emphasis in North American Poetry and Poetics by the end of its third year, and roughly half of those had expressed interest in graduate study in the field. At the same time, the MFA industry nationwide had been steadily gathering steam over the preceding decade, so a New College program figured to draw from that pool of candidates, as well. What's more, "many [working] poets, from the Bay Area and elsewhere, [had] already expressed genuine interest in enrolling in a program such as [McNaughton and Patler proposed], one which address[ed] their profession directly, with a minimum assumption of their prerogatives as working poets."¹⁹¹ So they began to work up what the program would look like and how it would fit into the overall college. As Patler noted:

We had to figure out if we were going to have X-amount of students projected, with what they were going to pay, how many faculty could we have, and what could we afford to cover? We were talking about salaries of, I think if you were full time, \$14,000 for the year, and that assumed we would get paid that much. That was another problem we had no control over. The bureaucratic infrastructure of New College was so wishy-washy and problematic....¹⁹²

Nonetheless, by the summer they'd established enough of a plan to prepare a formal proposal for submission to the college and the accreditation agency. The plan put forth was for a three-term—fall, spring, summer—course of study comprised of

seminars, including a continuation of the visiting poets-in-residence sequence, independent study, and “practicum” (i.e., “practical training in, e.g., printing, design, editing, layout, binding, archival work, etc., or apprenticeship on more advanced levels with professionals”), followed by a thesis. Initially, this thesis was to be either a “research-oriented or scholarly” one, “subject to the conventions thereof,” or a “creative” one, and faculty would consult with students on their “creative” work in “directed writing” tutorials, much as they did, and would continue to do, in the undergraduate program. However, as they talked further, McNaughton and Patler agreed that “it wasn’t going to be a writing program. It wasn’t going to be ‘creative writing.’ It was going to be subjects,”¹⁹³ which went decidedly against the trend in US American academia at the time, and still does.

Creative Writing as an academic discipline was really beginning to boom in the late 1970s. The budget of the Associate Writing Programs (founded in 1967) “doubled in just two years from 1972 to 1974,” according to Myers, “and then doubled again between 1974 and 1978.”¹⁹⁴ In 1975, AWP held its first independent conference, having previously convened under the auspices of the Modern Language Association, and published the first edition of the *AWP Catalogue*, which featured 81 writing programs—up from only five such programs a quarter century earlier. Then, “in 1979 the AWP issued its Guidelines for Creative Writing Programs and Teachers of Creative Writing[, which] were an explicit attempt to set the terms of the relationship between writers and their academic employers,” Meyers writes:

“Academic degrees,” for instance, “should not be considered a requirement,” the organization said. “If however a terminal degree is required, it is recommended that the Master of Fine Arts rather than the Ph.D. be considered the appropriate credential for the teacher of creative writing....” The very next year, in proposing the establishment of a degree program in creative writing, the English department at Virginia observed that the MFA had become a degree that “is often a prerequisite for employment by schools and colleges seeking to staff courses in creative writing”.... There was a clear “preferential pattern...favoring the MFA...in creative writing.”¹⁹⁵

The discipline’s effort to set itself up as a self-authorizing and self-sustaining system is clear and, judging by the continued growth of the discipline in the half-century since these first efforts, clearly has been a success. Far from unaware of the new industry standard as reflected in the AWP guidelines, issued at the very moment of their own initial planning, McNaughton and Patler proposed to offer an M.A., not an MFA, and moreover, positioned their program in contrast to, even conflict with, Creative Writing, truncating the title of their undergraduate emphasis in “North American Poetry and Poetics” to retain only that final term: “Poetics.”

Part of this decision was strategic, from an accreditation angle, Patler said:

If you put “Poetry,” the accreditation team that would have been sent out to evaluate us and our faculty and our curriculum, would all have been English department [professors], and [we] didn’t want that. [We] wanted more diversity than that because it was not an established curriculum. There was no place in the world doing a B.A. or an M.A. in Poetics *per se*, though there were lots of poetry programs from the Iowa workshop to other things...for years, [and] obviously lots of people had studied poetry and gotten degrees in it, but nothing we could find in Poetics, so [we] thought if we use that word, who knows what it is, what it means, who knows how to send an accreditation team? There’s nobody who themselves has a degree in Poetics that

can come check us out. So we applied under the aegis of the Master of Arts in Poetics. The accreditors, to confirm my suspicions that they were clueless, the evaluating committee consisted of...a theatre arts professor, a philosophy professor, [and a third] I can't remember.¹⁹⁶

It was hardly a mere accreditation strategy, however. Had they chosen to go with the trend and propose an MFA in Poetry or, more generally, Creative Writing, the accreditation process likely would have been worry-free—so many such programs were taking root all over the country—but as noted in my introduction, McNaughton and Patler were wary of “the psychological pitfalls which embarrass poetry in the name of creative writing,” disparaged the Creative Writing workshop model *de rigueur*: “One does not learn how to write in such classes. One may not, in fact, *learn* how to write at all. But one can find out how to write at least in part, in large part, through the serious study of the tradition of poetry, its practice and the knowledges brought forward by that practice.”¹⁹⁷

To hear the various historians of the discipline of Creative Writing tell it, the universities that housed such programs in the latter half of the 20th Century were little interested in those enrolled engaging in any “serious study of the tradition of poetry” or investigating and elaborating “the knowledges brought forward” thereby. As Myers writes, the university simply tended to think that “the real benefit of creative writing was that it could endow a university with prestige,”¹⁹⁸ thanks to the actual or potential celebrity of the faculty and alumni. So “the university provided

[writers] with security and time to work... [and] the reciprocal obligations were minimal," as Myers writes:

Describing Stanford's fellowship program in creative writing, [Wallace] Stegner said:

No academic requirements are made of Fellows..., they have no obligation to attend classes except the writing workshop....

Stanford's program was not idiosyncratic. In a letter, the poet Mark Jarman details his two-year education at Iowa:

We were required to take 48 hours. Each semester, then, we took 12 hours—or at least I did. They did not all have to be in the writers' workshop, but I took all mine there.... I really only wanted to write poems and was willing to slight my academic endeavors to do so.... There were no texts in the workshops except the poems written by the students....¹⁹⁹

New College, seeming on the brink of collapse year in and year out, could hardly promise "security," and as we shall see, the "reciprocal obligations" of students in the Poetics Program were far from "minimal," but more importantly, as Myers uses the phrase, "time to work" seems clearly to mean time to write poems, if one is a poet, or stories, novels, etc., if one is a writer of fiction, and time, via the workshops, to fine-tune these "works," but in the Poetics Program at New College, the "work" proposed was of a different order. Mark McGurl characterizes the workshop by students' "provisional ceding of authority to the peer group which evaluates an unpublished work while its author, by custom, listens in squirming silence,"²⁰⁰ but McNaughton's "assumption of [students'] prerogatives as working poets"²⁰¹

precludes such “ceding of authority,” because these prerogatives, i.e., rights, privileges, power, immunity, and any associated authority pertain not to the person, in the first place, but to the Office of the Poet. Here, “working poets” meant neither simple scribblers nor apprentice craftsmen for whom what mattered most was polishing out perceived flaws and shining up apparent perfections in individual poems. “Working poets” were those persons doing the groundwork necessary to inhabit that Office, investigating, engaging with, and ultimately devoted to the traditions they were writing into, and the company they were working with. This company, as Creeley often used the term, was no mere peer group in McGurl’s sense of “peer review” and proof-reading, for “there is no final proof,” as Genie McNaughton wrote in an introductory note to her husband’s second book, summing up his stance: “There is only the work. Even your best friends won’t tell you. And if they do, it won’t make any difference. Praise helps, criticism hurts, but none of it is ever final. No, you must trudge through it to the end all by yourself.”²⁰² The company was not there to evaluate or validate the poem, per se, but to provide a context within which to live a life of poetry.

For McNaughton, it had always been about such company, the *fedeli d’amore*, with which phrase he dedicates this second book to friends Ed Sanders, Lewis MacAdams, and Joanne Kyger. Translating to “faithful of love,” *fedeli d’amore* was the name by which Dante and his fellow *dolce stil novo* poets—Guido Guinizelli, Guido Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia, Cecco d’Ascoli, et al.—referred to themselves;

and Henri Corbin applied the term to a certain segment of Sufis “dominated by two great figures: Ibn ‘Arabi, the incomparable master of mystic theosophy, and Jalaluddin Rumi, the Iranian troubadour of that religion of love whose flame feeds on the theophanic feeling for sensuous beauty.” Corbin found *fedeli d’amore* to be “the best means of translating into a Western language the names by which our mystics called themselves in Arabic or Persian (*‘ashiqun, muhibbun, arbab al-hawa,* etc.). Since it is the name by which Dante and his companions called themselves, it has the power of suggesting the traits which were common to both groups.”²⁰³ For the *dolce stil nuovo* poets, the name “alludes to their Lord Love, or Amor, our Cupid, and to the epiphany of the ‘new-old’ winged daimon, Eros, whose own service to his Mother and Mistrisse is exemplary to the poets in theirs,”²⁰⁴ as McNaughton put it. For him, too, poetry was a spiritual field, to be worked and walked in, with friends, guided by Eros:

That’s as I know it, from what I came to know...from spending a lot of time in a Muslim universe, a Sufi universe—Shia, the Shia is very close to most of what is Sufi.... The Friend in that world is Muhammad, the Prophet, but there are so many instances of [the] figure: *Khidr*—you’re more apt to encounter the figure in certain Sufi or Theosophical romances or recitals or in Ibn al-‘Arabi—a kind of mystical friend you meet.... It’s almost the only thing that does make sense in the world. It’s not love, it’s not a trip..., it’s not teaching, it’s what opens one’s awareness more to what one already, and has always, known—but it takes another person.²⁰⁵

McNaughton was not interested in running a professional training program for teachers, where young would-be writers would be brought in, taught the ways and means of the discipline, and then sent out to other colleges where they would do the same with the next crop of young would-be writers, and he certainly wasn't interested in cultivating the next torch-bearers for the Pax Americana. His opposition to the MFA industry and wider Creative Writing complex hinged in part on the part they played in what he saw as a long history of rationalist marginalization of poetry, of the kind of knowledge it bodied forth, and of the spiritual ethic it embodied: "Our program undertakes to address what we see to be the character and intentions of [a] tradition of poetry," springing from pre-classical sources mainly in "the ancient East Mediterranean and Near East" and continuing to "the immediate present" despite "the advent, history and presence today of the reasoning mind as the dominant assumption of human knowledge during the past two and one-half millennia," as McNaughton and Patler wrote in their proposal: "Within that domination of reason, poetry has been secularized and socialized in order to absent it from the center of human attention; whereas, until the first millennium B.C., poetry had in great measure defined that center, as, e.g., myth, cosmologos, ritual speech, i.e., the legomenon of drama and ceremony." Rejecting "the classical perspectives of poetry as a form of imitation or representation of life, an attitude which we have inherited from Plato and, with modification, Aristotle," the proposal continues, "the New College M.A. Program in Poetics posits poetry and its tradition as a primordial,

initial act of perception and imagination which precedes and exceeds rational discourse and reduction.”

There could hardly be a more anti-academic, anti-New Critical assertion than this, but lest there be any doubt, those involved in the program would perform close readings of such intricacy and rigor that they exceeded even those of the New Critics, for in their refusal to “isolate” the technical and material aspects of the poem, they understood the technical and material to be shot through with the mystical. Their readings might be called alchemical, rather than being strictly “scientific” in the contemporary sense of the word. As McNaughton wrote in the first catalog, “Our subject is poetics, which is to say again, that which treats of the science and art of poetry in all its dimensions and questions, all of what may be said to be proper to poetry.” Acknowledging that “the endeavor is immense,” he continued, “we do not propose ourselves competent to address more than a small portion of what poetics may actually and legitimately include.”²⁰⁶ He aimed, then, to assemble a faculty of

persons who cannot be said to be in any easy or specious agreement on the terms of their vocation..., a faculty which is responsible to the subject as poets and teachers..., working artists who, while their procedural bases vary greatly, as do their respective dispositions to the tradition, nonetheless share a common commitment to open scholarship and to mature investigation of the subject.... The subject does not ask agreement. We expect division and contest to exist within this faculty, and we believe our differences can yield formal benefits for all of us.²⁰⁷

According to the proposal, McNaughton and Patler, as the only “permanent faculty,” would serve as co-directors of the program, “continuity...[being] chiefly

[their] responsibility.” Joining them as part-time faculty would be recent New College graduate David Doty, a “self-educated composer, performer, instrument designer/builder, and writer...on acoustic instruments and xenharmonics,” as well as New College faculty member, “playwright, actor, director, and theatre reviewer” Martin Epstein, whose star, just then beginning to rise, would eventually take him away from New College to New York City. The Poets-In-Residence series would continue, funded in large part by NEA grants, with three poets each term teaching “month-long seminars in subjects of their choice.” The fourth element of the teaching corps would be a series of Visiting Fellows, on semester-long appointments. As the proposal puts it:

Each semester’s Fellow will function as our program chairman for curriculum..., requesting that one or more courses be offered by the program in support or amplification of the subject(s) of the Fellow’s seminar. Such support courses will be taught by the permanent and part-time faculty in consultation with the Visiting Fellow. Our aim here is, within the limited time of a single semester, to enable each Visiting Fellow to orchestrate as comprehensive as possible an outline of his or her major concerns in poetics, and to provide students with an intense introduction to a coherently organized perspective therein.... We believe that our notion of the Visiting Fellow will afford these individuals the chance to make their tenure really matter, for themselves as teachers and artists, and for students and faculty who desire a genuine working relation with some of the finest poets now writing.²⁰⁸

The proposal dedicates a great deal more attention to these semester-long fellowships, but in subsequent discussion amongst themselves and with potential Fellows, McNaughton and Patler would quickly come to see the single semester as

far too limited a time to realize this end, and the three one-term Visiting Fellowships would grow into concurrent full-year appointments, the responsibilities of “chair” rotating. During the first year of the program, this arrangement too would prove untenable, and quickly the Visiting Fellows would morph into a Core Faculty, whose tenure would be open ended, who would collaboratively plan each year’s curriculum, and who would share the responsibility for the continuity of the program from year to year.

Considering how unorthodox New College itself, the Poetics Program, and a large part of the faculty were, especially the Poets-In-Residence and Visiting Fellows/Core Faculty so integral to the program, “we knew we had obstacles to face” in the pursuit of accreditation, Patler said. “McNaughton and I had PhDs, and his is right on the spot, but mine was off the wall compared to the subject matter.” More significantly, many of the faculty who had taught as visiting poets in the undergraduate program and might play roles in the graduate program lacked not only PhDs, MAs, and MFAs, but even BAs. McNaughton and Patler “always had in mind that it should be poets teaching poetics, not academics,” the latter said: “We wanted the absolute best minds we could [get] regardless whether they had degrees or not. If a poet of substance also happened to have a degree, fine; it wasn’t something we would hold against somebody, but it wasn’t a criteria. So we didn’t have a pedigreed faculty.” They knew that might be a real problem. “Except,” Patler said, “if we could get [the accreditors] physically there to sit in on a class, any class,

and see these people in operation, and the rigor of it, and the class syllabus, and the reading lists, we figured we had a shot. So we just pushed forward as though it were going to happen.”²⁰⁹

Patler “took on the task of trying to figure out the whole accreditation game...and relied on McNaughton to say who the candidates were and why they might fit.” As he put it, “I was like a fair witness, saying ‘Yeah, that makes sense,’ or ‘That doesn’t make sense.’ I didn’t know the world of poets enough to make many suggestions...at the point we were planning. I remember we had a wish list, if we could get anybody who would it be?”²¹⁰ Though neither Patler nor McNaughton was able to remember, or perhaps willing to venture, many names when I spoke with them, among McNaughton’s papers is an undated page of notes that are quite clearly part of an early brainstorming session, including what appears to be a list of four primary area of qualification for the candidates: “1) Quality as scholar/teacher; 2) Importance of study as a contributor to knowledge and to his abilities as a teacher/scholar; 3) Conception, definition and organization of the study; 4) Likelihood of completion.”²¹¹ On this same piece of paper, in two columns, are the following names: Ed Dorn, Ed Sanders, Robert Duncan, Anselm Hollo, Robin Blaser, Diane di Prima, and Victor Hernandez Cruz in the first column, and in the second Lewis MacAdams, Bill Berkson, Philip Whalen, David Meltzer, Joanne Kyger, and David Henderson. In a February 1980 letter to prospective student Charlie Ross, in which McNaughton announced the formal granting of accreditation, he also

declared that “[Robert] Duncan and [Diane] di Prima will be visiting faculty for the Fall 1980 term—and Duncan will be it for the summer 1981 term.... It is likely that Diane will be somehow a permanent part of the thing also.”²¹² The rest was still up in the air, he said, but he was “working on either [Ed] Sanders, [John] Wieners or [Michael] McClure.” As McNaughton recalled it some three and a half decades later,

We asked Duncan, we asked [Philip] Whalen, and we asked Diane di Prima...if they would be willing to teach in this situation.... Diane said yes, she would be into it. Whalen said no. He just said “I’ve got enough to do” with his own teaching [at the San Francisco Zen Center].... And Duncan said no, because right at that time a couple of people in the English department at UC Berkeley were lobbying to get Duncan hired there, and he wanted that. It was a form of acknowledgement finally that mattered to him, understandably... So he said no. But because Whalen said no, then the next step we took was to ask David Meltzer, and he said yes.... Then Duncan got back to me because they’d shot it down at Berkeley, whoever was there [in some position of authority] didn’t want him around, so that didn’t work.... He, reluctantly, in a sense—I mean, Berkeley would’ve meant something serious, given his history and all the rest of it; [New College] was just this little dump around the corner.... But he said yes, ok.²¹³

An Initiatory Curriculum

I. Introductions

The vast majority of what little information has been heretofore available about the Poetics Program has been so centered on the role played by Robert Duncan as to give the impression of the program having been created for his sake, just to give him a place to teach—and indeed the program has been described in such terms in several places. Some have even said that Duncan himself *founded* it. In the preceding pages, I have tried to set the record straight on that account. There was much afoot before Duncan agreed to join the program, and it would have happened, albeit quite differently, no doubt, had he not done so. That said, there can and should be no minimizing Duncan's centrality. His stature among and impact upon other poets in the city, the region, and beyond had only grown since the first flowering of the Berkeley Renaissance more than three decades earlier—and his influence was particularly strong on those who would join him on the core faculty, so all involved felt "honored that he [had] consented to open the New College M.A. Program in Poetics as the Program's first chairman."²¹⁴ Though di Prima would officially chair the spring term, Meltzer the summer, and thereafter the whole idea of a "chair" would be discarded, Duncan exerted a commanding influence throughout the first incarnation of the Program, which is the focus of this book, and his spirit would abide throughout its various later periods, as well. I hope that the ensuing pages will

make clear, however, that he was among peers, not peons, in the Poetics Program. The intimacy and duration of their relations, the commonality of their experiences and interests, and the essential agreement of their stances were the foundation upon which the Poetics Program was built. In retrospect, it is difficult to imagine a trio of poet-scholars with more intellectual and affectual sympathy with one another, and with the terms of McNaughton's original proposal, than Robert Duncan, Diane di Prima, and David Meltzer. So having detailed a bit of the institutional history of New College, the activities that immediately preceded the Poetics Program, and the program founders' own backstories, I would like now briefly to relate the backstories of the rest of the program's initial core faculty in turn.

When David Meltzer moved to San Francisco in 1957, despite being a scant 21 years of age, he quickly immersed himself in the burgeoning poetry and music scenes, developing close relationships with many poets, ranging from the likes of Joanne Kyger and John Wieners, who were a mere three years his senior, to Kenneth Rexroth, who was a full three decades older, with many others spanning that age gap, including Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, Lew Welch, Jack Spicer, Philip Whalen, William Everson, Kenneth Patchen, and of course Robert Duncan, who had returned just recently from teaching through the swansong of Black Mountain College, after short but vital stints living and travelling in Europe, to rejoin a Bay Area literary and artistic milieu he and Spicer had done much to initiate a decade earlier with their self-styled Berkeley Renaissance. Their energy in the late 1940s

extended across the bay, constructively interfering with the energies of Rexroth's Anarchist/Libertarian Circle and broader literary activity, to become what is now generally referred to as the San Francisco Renaissance, which in turn occasioned the advent of the notorious Beat Generation, when the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and others made their way across the country from New York, laying the groundwork for much of the literary—and for that matter non-literary—counterculture to come. Meltzer recalled Duncan and Spicer being “the focal points” of a recurring poetry salon, happening for a time at the East-West House, as well as the apartments of John Wieners, George Stanley, and Ebbe Borregaard, but hosted perhaps most often by former Black Mountaineers and members of the Boston Occult school of poetry Joe and Carolyn Dunn²¹⁵ in their apartment. There the two elders influenced and guided—if they did not “teach”—several key figures of the new generation. “Young poets like me and Joanne Kyger, sometimes Michael McClure, Richard Brautigan, Ebbe Borregaard, George Stanley, and Harold Dull would go and await the two maestros,”²¹⁶ Meltzer said, and though these affairs had “a party atmosphere,” it was “tempered with workshop business,”²¹⁷ according to Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian. In their book *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*, Kyger recalled one occasion early on when “George Stanley approached her...and said, ‘Some people are treating these meetings just like a party.’ The tone of his voice left no doubt that ‘some people’ included herself. She hadn’t been reading her own work at the meetings.”²¹⁸ These meetings were meant

to be fun, of course, but the business at hand was quite serious and participants' full commitment was expected. Duncan and Spicer held forth first and foremost, but everyone read—and the work of the younger poets, influenced by their elders' starkly opposed yet intimately linked poetics and bearing the marks of their own sensibilities and experience, was remarkably diverse. Meltzer recalled becoming "intoxicated by the dynamic between Spicer, who wanted to 'de-rhetorize' poetry, and Duncan, who proposed a rhetorical, lyrical verse,"²¹⁹ and Stanley recalled Meltzer himself completely "chang[ing] the tenor of the meetings by being there"²²⁰ and reading his long, serial poems, which danced between these two poles in some deadly serious and uproarious circus act.

Born to a pair of professional classical musicians in Rochester, NY, Meltzer grew up in Brooklyn, where he first exhibited the dichotomous personality that would characterize his adult work, performing on The Horn and Hardart Children's Hour radio program—"What a scene! All these grotesque kids looking like voodoo-doll adults, you know, and their horrible stage parents. I hated it."²²¹—devouring the works of William Carlos Williams, John Dos Passos, e.e. cummings, and Kenneth Patchen, attempting to write his own "history of everything," and other "huge manuscripts," while attending a special high school "for kids with monstrous IQs."²²² As his parents' marriage disintegrated, the family migrated west, to his mother's hometown Los Angeles, and so Meltzer spent his late teenage years there, working in a newsstand on Hollywood Boulevard and hanging out at the artist Ed

Kienholz's studio, which was a gathering place for many LA artists, including George Herms and Wallace Berman, with both of whom he became particularly close. When Meltzer first visited San Francisco in early 1957, it was in Berman's company. Meltzer moved there a few months later, and before the end of the year Berman had followed, as did Herms soon after. Berman and Herms returned to Los Angeles in 1961, while Meltzer stayed in the Bay Area, but they remained intimate friends and central figures among the anti-academic poets and outsider artists that made up what Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna have dubbed *Semina Culture*, with their book of that title about *Wallace Berman and his Circle*, as the subtitle has it. It's an excellent primer, sketching more than 50 individuals associated with Berman, and one another, in part through Berman's occasional, hand-made, and personally distributed magazine *Semina*. Among those profiled are several persons who would come to be associated directly with the Poetics Program, along with Meltzer, including, of course, Diane di Prima and Robert Duncan.

In his 1978 essay "Wallace Berman: The Fashioning Spirit," Duncan quotes Berman's notice, pasted on the back of *Semina Two*, about the charges, on which Berman was found guilty, of "displaying lewd and pornographic matter" at the Ferus Gallery in 1957, highlighting Berman's insistence that "the allegorical drawing in question" — a piece by the artist Cameron that had been included in the first *Semina* and subsequently included in his assemblage "Temple" — had been taken "out of context." As Duncan writes,

The question of “context” in the affair goes beyond the usual matter of context in such trials, for Berman’s very art is the art of context. From the first, the intent of *Semina* was not a choice of poems and art works to exercise the editor’s discrimination and aesthetic judgement, but the fashioning of a context.... In our conscious alliance with the critical breakthrough of Dada and Surrealism as in our alliance with the Romantic Movement at large, we began to see ourselves as fashioning unnamed contexts, contexts of a new life in the making, a secret mission.²²³

Duncan goes on to insist that this context “was not simply a counterculture. Marxist ideas of social alienation may be applicable to the course of an Alexander Trocchi or a John Wieners in their ‘abuse’ of self through drugs, but the positive social values emerging from the art of Wallace Berman must be explained by another course.”²²⁴

Michael McClure’s consideration of *Semina* “as a form or genre in itself” is apropos:

Seminas are a form of love structure that Wallace made, drawing friends together. Friends are drawn together into the assemblage of the magazine, but then the magazine is also sent to acquaintances who are drawn into the circle of friends, so it expands and becomes a larger event. Friends become respondents, that is, to Berman, and some of them become correspondents to the magazine and in that way they are included in the magazine. *Semina* has some aspects of religion, the religion of art and friends. There’s an initiation into *Semina*.²²⁵

Referencing the “Jungian concepts of psychic evolution as an alchemical process in which the *nigredo* or *melanosis*, ‘the horrible darkness of our mind,’ is the initial stage of a promised individuation,” Duncan goes on to propose *Semina* be seen “as a seeding of that ‘black, magically fecund earth,’ as Jung describes the alchemical

antimony. The milieu Wallace Berman arises as a new world...fashioned within the body of the present world,"²²⁶ Duncan says:

This fashioning of things was to be Berman's life mission, and it was our, Jess's and my, sense of his spiritual intent that, for all our avoidance of the drug culture scene so that we did not cultivate his Larkspur house, made for our lasting alliance. In the forming of things, of true goods, our two life ways were united in a deeper way....

"ART IS LOVE IS GOD" W.B. would print as his motto in *Semina Two* in 1957, following the fall of his *Temple*, his arrest and trial for displaying lewd and pornographic matter among its sacra. He was to become the artist of the outcast.²²⁷

In remarks on Berman and Robert Alexander that could easily be extended to the non-Jewish constituents of *Semina* culture, and ultimately to all the core members of the New College Poetics Program, Meltzer wrote of

their sense of art as a resistant and redemptive practice, reinforced by a belief in the counter-myths of the Artist as savior, disruptor, awakener; artist as synonymous with prophet, truth-sayer. Bound by birth to an earlier book-centered tradition, they took the immediate world as their iconic text and, through their art and lives, were often consciously aware of an unarticulated imperative to sacralize and somehow repair the broken post-war world.²²⁸

While the Poetics Program's "curricular initiative," as Ammiel Alcalay notes, "can draw very clear lines back to Black Mountain College..., and...the State University of New York in Buffalo (often referred to as 'Black Mountain II')," to give a fuller picture of the Program there are a number of additional lenses through which the light of influence cast upon it must be refracted, and *Semina* culture surely is one. This influence was as much personal, affectual, and ethical as curricular, though the

distinction is questionable in the case of the Poetics Program where the curriculum was very much inflected by the ethical, affectual, and personal histories of its faculty.

As student Matt Haug recalled:

Robert Duncan, Diane, David, they all had their Wallace Berman stories, so he was somebody people were always talking about, and they all had some of his pieces at their houses.... I think for David, he was an inspiration of how to be a creative person and live a creative life in this century, but David would also tell stories about him as a pool hustler..., among other stories he would tell about him. For Diane..., he was using the hermetic tradition in a contemporary way as an artist—and that was something they all were really interested in. She had this big green stone in her house with an aleph painter on it that he'd given her, along with some prints hanging up.... [At a later date, di Prima said,] "This person wasn't a 'painter.' They were magicians, they were doing magical work. The painting was just the artifact of that work."

It may have been at the Larkspur home of Georges Herms that di Prima and Meltzer first met. Meltzer's own recollections were vague: "We'd been in touch for many years, through the magazine *Floating Bear*, and mutual friends and so on. But the first time I met her in the flesh, so to speak, was the first time she came to San Francisco, testing the waters, [in 1961],"²²⁹ as he told David Hadbawnik. In recounting this trip in her own memoirs, di Prima only mentions, on the penultimate day of her visit, sitting "at Vesuvio's in North Beach one last time and talk[ing] with poet David Meltzer over Italian coffee."²³⁰ A few days earlier, she'd attended a "New Sense" party in the mudflats thrown by Herms to mark his eviction, his large assemblages "having been officially declared a public nuisance."²³¹ It's of no great import, ultimately, but even though Meltzer recalled that "I met her through [Joanna and

Michael McClure],” I’d like to imagine Herms’s “New Sense” party as the context of their first in-person encounter. Meltzer surely would have been there.

Duncan, as his remarks attest, probably wasn’t, but di Prima’s first meeting with him occurred earlier on this same trip, at the McClures’s, where she stayed. As she told it:

Michael has invited Robert Duncan to meet me. He comes for breakfast for some reason—perhaps he is very busy, or I, the editor of *Floating Bear*, but not otherwise noteworthy, am not important enough to waste a lunch or dinner time on. I am sleepy and we are having a desultory and mutually disinterested conversation, when I take down my thigh-length hair to brush it.... Robert’s voice raises an octave and he says, all in a single phrase “You have the most beautiful hair I’ve seen, will you come to lunch?”

I accept, but even at that age know better than to be flattered. Know that at any rate he wants to show me to Jess, or at best, I embody for a minute the image of the woman who leads one to poetry.

It is the beginning of our friendship.²³²

That friendship thereafter would deepen exponentially, especially so upon her return in 1968 to live permanently in the San Francisco Bay Area, work with anarchist group the Diggers, and study Zen with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. Thirty years later, when Meltzer interviewed di Prima for his book *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*, she would say:

It sounds odd, but I think Robert was probably one of the closest lovers I ever had, even though we never had a physical relationship. I learned a lot of different kinds of things from him. One of the things I learned—in a way no teacher of Buddhism ever showed me—was how precious my life was. How precious the whole ambience of the time. A real sense of appreciating every minute. He used to come and

do Christmas with us and eat hash brownies and talk. All Christmas morning. He would come up and stay with us in Marshall on Tomales Bay, and there was something about that—more than all the exchanges which were about hermeticism and one thing or another. Something about this ineffable quality of time and the energy that was there—I can't describe it.²³³

According to Meltzer, di Prima repeatedly attested that “the two men in her life that she completely trusted were Robert and Suzuki Roshi,” adding, “I'm sure they would have gotten along famously, if they could have understood each other.”²³⁴

When Meltzer died, on the last day of 2016, photographs of three old friends graced his writing desk, as they had since their own deaths: Wallace Berman (d. 1976), Robert Duncan (d. 1988), and Philip Whalen (d. 2002), whose demurrals, incidentally, had made space for Meltzer to join Duncan and di Prima in the Poetics Program in the first place, in 1980.

In the two decades and more between their first meetings and their coming together on the core faculty of the Poetics Program at New College, the three had all grown closer, both in person and in print, spending countless hours in one another's homes and the homes of mutual friends, sharing the stage, and sharing space in the audience at readings and other events, too many to enumerate here; and their work appeared in many of the same publications, too. Duncan and Meltzer were both included in the seminal 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*, from which di Prima was conspicuously left out (only to be added twenty years later to the later revised edition, redubbed *The Postmoderns*, in 1982), but the three poets also kept

company in the pages of many little magazines, including (but surely not limited to) *Beatitude*, *Big Table*, *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, *Semina*, *Synapse*, and *Yugen*, as well as di Prima's *Floating Bear*, and Meltzer's *Tree* and *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*. They shared publishers (Oyez, Auerhahn, Capra, and others) and also published one another's books (Duncan's *Play Time Pseudo Stein* and *Poetic Disturbances* were published, respectively, by di Prima's Poets Press and Meltzer's Maya Quartos, for example). Any number of poets also shared space with these three in print and in person, of course, and any number had similarly close emotional ties, but one thing these three had in common with one another that was less common among others who might be named was their lifelong refusal of academia. Even among the decidedly anti-academic ranks of the New American poets, Meltzer, di Prima, and Duncan were uncommonly anti-institutional and intellectually anarchic.

Patler and McNaughton "always had in mind that it should be poets teaching poetics, not academics," the former said: "If a poet of substance also happened to have a degree, fine; it wasn't something we would hold against somebody, but it wasn't a criteria. We wanted the absolute best minds we could get regardless whether they had degrees or not. McNaughton and I had PhDs, and his is right on the spot, but mine was off the wall compared to the subject matter." A few others with PhDs would teach in one capacity or another over the course of the Poetics Program's initial incarnation, as would several others with MAs and/or MFAs, and

many with BAs would, too, but none of the three poets they hired to round out the core faculty had achieved even that modicum of formal academic accomplishment. It wasn't by any means an inability or failure on any of their parts, however; it was a refusal.

Meltzer had been something of a child prodigy, as noted above, "going to school in Brooklyn in an accelerated program...[that] covered a year in one semester," he said, "and by the time I was fifteen or sixteen, I was ready to go to college. The University of Chicago had given me a scholarship,"²³⁵ but when he moved with his family to Los Angeles, instead of finishing high school and going off to college, he just dropped out:

I went to movies and got a job in an open-air magazine stand on Western Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard. I became involved in a whole culture of horse-race gamblers, gay hustlers, vegetarians, psychics, people who were after one thing or another. Without knowing it, I was finding teachers everywhere by not going to school. I think my sabbatical from school lasted a year or more....

When I was about seventeen, I decided to go back to school and get my diploma so I could go to college, under the assumption that maybe college was better than high school. I went to Fairfax High School, which is on Fairfax Avenue. That was great because suddenly it was like being back in Brooklyn. There were Communists, folk singers, people in black stockings, old people talking Yiddish, so I felt great. But I was getting on in age, and still a sophomore in high school [because the Brooklyn credits didn't count as "accelerated" in L.A.], with tons of writing, arguing about Kafka and reading *Finnegans Wake* for the second time. Imagine how I was at parties!²³⁶

It was then Meltzer met Berman, Herms, Alexander, Dean Stockwell, Dennis Hopper, and "so many of the artists and the acting subculture of L.A.,"²³⁷ so he

dropped out again, and a couple of years later moved to San Francisco, where he fell in with Duncan, Spicer, and the other poets, as we've seen. "For me, it was much better than going to school—I'd found that out earlier. I had tried going to school again. I went to L.A. City College for a year, and outside of meeting Idell and Lee Romero there, it didn't stimulate me. Then I spent a semester at UCLA. I had only one teacher who did anything for me: Hans Meyerhoff.... But that was it. Two years of going to California's finest, and I was deeply uninterested."²³⁸

Like Meltzer, di Prima had been in an accelerated secondary school in Brooklyn, where she'd had "very encouraging" teachers, most "very interesting women teachers dedicated to teaching women." She graduated early and went to Swarthmore College, not yet 17 years of age, but what she got there was "the opposite of encouragement," she said:

I wanted to major in Greek and Latin. I'd gotten a city prize for Latin translation. I was in the top two percentile in math and physics. There was a lot of propaganda that the U.S. needed scientists. So their little claws were out: come and be a scientist. I majored in physics at Swarthmore. However, they weren't equipped. They were teaching nineteenth-century physics; nobody was teaching relativity. So it was very boring and didn't work, and I dropped out of school a little more than eighteen.²³⁹

Of her feelings at the time, di Prima wrote, "I have no problem with leaving school. It is a hated and unfulfilling place, where I am studying nothing I care about. Where there are no powerful women teachers. No powerful teachers at all. No ideals, intensity of intellectual life. Nothing I'd hoped for."²⁴⁰ "It was just too straight

and precious and protected—class-conscious and definitely not my class, not my kind of place,”²⁴¹ as she later said, “The only use the college was to me really was they had a bookstore.... I found Auden on the shelf there..., and then I found Pound. And everybody had a charge account at the bookstore,” so she “charged...*The Cantos, Spirit of Romance, Make It New*, and cummings, and Eliot, of course,”²⁴² and left. Back in New York she charted her own course of study across several of the city’s colleges, but “with no special plan,” as she wrote:

Only to study what I had a mind to. Though I still did it “for credit,” with some vague thought of someday pulling it all together. I went to Hunter, to Brooklyn College, to the New School for Social Research. Snuck into graduate math classes at Columbia.

At Brooklyn College, found myself the only woman in integral calculus class. And was somewhat sneered at until the midterm, when I got a perfect test score—the only one—and the men grew wary. There was fierce competition among them, but they couldn’t quite see how to extend it to me. How to talk to me, even. I stuck it out, but felt more and more cut off.²⁴³

Her education from then on would be her own, self-guided, or guided by self-selected teachers, well outside any academic setting.

Meltzer was nearly 40 years old when he got his first teaching job in 1975 at Urban High School in San Francisco, where he taught for one year, producing a one-off letterpress magazine, *Out of the California Job Case: A Collection of poems written & printed by the students at The Urban School in San Francisco, April 1975-June 1976*. The following year, Oyez published his *Two-Way Mirror: A Poetry Notebook*, a wide-ranging collection of riddles, aphoristic notes, anecdotes, and quotes from poets,

songwriters, mystics, linguists, anthropologists, and ancient texts. I regret never having asked Meltzer about the origins of this book, but in the bio note in his 1973 anthology, *Birth*, he wrote: "I am preparing a poetry primer for Ballantine Books, *Handbook of the Invisible*."²⁴⁴ It seems quite reasonable to assume what was to be *Handbook of the Invisible* became *Two-Way Mirror*, and that he would have used much of the material contained therein, some of which would make its way into his New College curriculum, to teach at Urban and his next teaching job, which arose out of an appearance as a guest poet at Vacaville state prison in 1976. "It was a very powerful experience for me," Meltzer said: "I really felt like I couldn't just go there and do the hit-and-run kind of thing, so I said I wanted to do a writing workshop. I got a grant from the California Arts Council. Jerry Brown's Art Council. Gary Snyder and Peter Coyote were on the board at that time."²⁴⁵ The grant enabled Meltzer to begin an official, on-going workshop at the prison, out of which would emerge several anthologies of inmate writings from across the California prison system. Entitled *About Time*, the first volume was published in 1980 with an afterword in which Meltzer writes:

After participating in several writers' workshops in Vacaville, we found out (again) how our assumptions about "inside" and "outside" were incorrect. Concepts like "law" and "justice" are flat, one-dimensional, and like all preconceptions they are limitations which encourage defeat and small thinking.... What is "outside" remains equally as dangerous as what is "inside." How man survives confinement is no different from how man survives freedom.²⁴⁶

Meanwhile, Meltzer also continued to teach at various public and private schools as part of the Poetry in the Schools movement, and then he got the call from McNaughton, asking if he'd like to join Diane di Prima and Robert Duncan as a Visiting Fellow in the fledgling New College Poetics Program. "I was sort of gob-struck," he said: "The word 'poetics' was very serious. And Robert Duncan?!"²⁴⁷ He'd never taught or studied in any context at all like what was being proposed, but of course, neither had Duncan or di Prima.

The latter was much more active than Meltzer had been as a teacher in the decade preceding her participation in the Poetics Program at New College, but she taught as she studied: whatever she had a mind to, when and wherever an appropriate opportunity presented itself. Like Meltzer, di Prima taught in a number of prisons, and, as part of the Poetry in the Schools movement, various reform schools and reservations, mostly in Wyoming, Montana, Arizona and Minnesota.²⁴⁸ She also lead workshops in visualization, magic, developing images from dreams, and erotic writing for women, and gave lectures on "individual poets including William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Gertrude Stein, and H.D."²⁴⁹ such places as Napa State Hospital—for which she received an "Arts-in-Social-Institutions fellowship from the California Arts Council," as Meltzer had for his workshops at Vacaville prison—as well as Esalen Institute, the California Community Arts Center in Point Reyes, Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco, and elsewhere, including her own home and rented or

borrowed others' domestic spaces, but always on a short-term basis. Even her teaching at Naropa, despite her co-founding of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, would remain intermittent. "I would only come in the summers," she said. "The terms were too oppressive."²⁵⁰ She only joined the Poetics Program because it was "a *completely* off-the-wall kind of program," as she later described it: "[New College] was a place where you could define your courses: make them up and teach them. But that was awful enough because we still had faculty meetings, and of the five of us, I was the only woman—it still had its drawbacks."²⁵¹

In an interview conducted sometime in 1980, Duncan had the following exchange with Ekbert Faas:

EF: Some people think of you as the future Academic poet who is going to be read mainly by students.

RD: Luckily, I am at the present moment. That is where most of my income comes from. They use my books in courses. At least a thousand copies of *The Opening of the Field* and *Bending the Bow* are sold every year. And they also use *The Truth and Life of Myth*. And these books were doing very well because there wasn't going to be a new one coming out too soon.

I think we write for college seminars because that's where the money is. Poets wrote for the stage when the money was there, or, like Donne, they wrote sermons because the money was there.... Only one generation before Herbert, all the poets were in the theater and when the theater collapsed, they were all out on their ass. So today it is the university and in that way we write very good seminars.

EF: But then, think of your lifelong feud with the university.

RD: But do you think Shakespeare didn't criticize the plays or the stage? As a matter of fact, it barely survived him. And my critique of the university goes both ways. Yes, I wonder how long they are going to last. I mean, the Church had a slight collapse by loading itself with all those earnest Protestant ministers.

EF: So it's more like writing for the university in order to explode it.
RD: Well, scholars have problems long before poets do. Hannah Arendt and several others have observed that the intellectual life couldn't survive in the university.²⁵²

Duncan whole-heartedly agreed with Arendt's estimation. Indeed, he did have a "lifelong feud with the university," a feud first touched almost as soon as his feet touched the grounds of the University of California, Berkeley, in 1936, arriving just as the "German troops were on the march in Rhineland, and Spanish Loyalist forces were battling General Franco's fascist Nationalist front," as Lisa Jarnot writes: "Duncan found a new political consciousness...[and] joined the American Student Union (ASU) on campus,...[which] sought numerous reforms, including 'federal aid to education, government job programs for youth, abolition of the compulsory Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), academic freedom, racial equality, and collective bargaining rights.'"²⁵³

In the first chapter of *The H.D. Book*, Duncan wrote of these Berkeley politics and his education by his female companions. He recalled afternoons spent outdoors reading James Joyce's poetry with Cecily Kramer and Lili Fabilli. Like his fellow male students, Duncan was required to participate in ROTC drills twice a week, a prelude to the impending U.S. involvement in the Second World War:

In the jostling streams, lower classmen, some in uniform, some still to change into uniform, went...toward the gymnasium. It was the hour for R.O.T.C classes that impended....

"You don't have to go," Lili commanded, raising her hand in a dramatic gesture that had been delegated its powers by the conspiracy of our company. "Stay with Joyce."...

Turning from the authority that the requirements and grades of the university or the approval of my teachers had

once had over me to a new authority in the immediacy of what I had come to love, I came into a new fate.

His interest in coursework would quickly fade and he would leave the university in his junior year, at the end of 1938, very nearly becoming a student at Black Mountain College:

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 seemed to me much the enemy as Franco was. Or was it — the question always lingered in my memory of that unhappy time — unstated, back of that term “unfit,” because they had recognized that I was homosexual?²⁵⁴

Barred even from this most untraditional school, Duncan went on his merry way, living in Philadelphia and then in New York, where he fell in with the circle around Anais Nin and began to establish his literary and political reputation, publishing his landmark essay *The Homosexual in Society*, which occasioned his confrontation with the university-ensconced New Critical establishment, in 1944. The following year he returned to Berkeley. He re-enrolled in the university and began to work more concertedly toward a degree in the Civilization of the Middle Ages program, studying with Kantorowicz and Paul Schaeffer in the spring of 1948, but as Jarnot writes, “his reason for returning to classes was simple: ‘Most people do not go to college for an education.... I was going back for an education.... This is almost

impossible to explain to a university. [It's like saying] I like banks because I want to take money home.' True to his word, Duncan received an education, but not a degree.²⁵⁵ Again the complicity of the university in the nationalist military-industrial complex would make it impossible for him to continue:

In 1949..., the Board of Regents of the University of California imposed a requirement that all University employees sign an oath affirming not only loyalty to the state constitution, but a denial of membership or belief in organizations (including Communist organizations) advocating overthrow of the United States government. Many faculty, students, and employees resisted the oath for violating principles of shared governance, academic freedom, and tenure. In the summer of 1950, thirty-one "non-signer" professors — including internationally distinguished scholars, not one of whom had been charged of professional unfitness or personal disloyalty — and many other UC employees were dismissed."²⁵⁶

Among them was Kantorowicz, who wrote and published a pamphlet decrying the oath, noting "both my professional experience as an historian and my personal experience in Nazi Germany have conditioned me to be alert when I hear again certain familiar tones sounded."²⁵⁷ Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer, who were then working as teaching assistants, also refused to sign, losing their posts and leaving Duncan without his closest collaborators and most admired academic model and mentor. "When Kantorowicz left Berkeley," Duncan said, "I had about 12 units to finish and I said, 'Why?' The adviser I had to go through every time said, 'But you only have these units,' and I said, 'What purpose has a poet got in —'"²⁵⁸ He officially withdrew in the spring of 1951, and as he put it in 1980, as he embarked upon the

New College Poetics Program, "My education then was very much my own and...my formulations in poetry, of course, were completely free from the formulations I would have had if I had been teaching English..., [or] history.... I was not unconvinced that I couldn't have been both a historian and a poet. I mean, I was a poet, but I had done papers and certain work in seminars. Things got straightened out; I am an artist."²⁵⁹

Still, Duncan would teach in various capacities throughout his adult life and more often than not in relation to some college or university, with invitations to read his work, present papers, give lectures, and teach seminars accumulating steadily from the middle 1950s, through the 1960s, and proliferating in the 1970s, as Jarnot's exhaustive and at time exhausting rundown of his calendar shows, but he remained a visitor, a guest. His most significant and most enduring association was with Black Mountain College, where taught during the spring and summer of 1956, just before it gave up the ghost. That experience would influence all of his future teaching, not least at New College a quarter-century later, when McNaughton invited him to join the Poetics Program.

It's worth noting that Duncan McNaughton, the youngest of the group at 37 years old when the program began, had met Robert Duncan while the former was a PhD candidate at SUNY Buffalo, in the late 1960s; and he'd gotten to know Meltzer and di Prima in the early 1970s, so they were hardly strangers. Still, for the latter,

who were 43 and 46 years old, respectively, the 61-year-old Duncan had been both an archangel of their poetics and a central figure in their personal lives for a significantly longer period. Nonetheless, for them all, there was not only a basic respect for their colleagues' works and intellects, but an active entwining of each with the others, and it was this active entwining of their poetical works, intellects, and lives that most marks the founding core faculty of the Poetics Program as a kind of magic circle, which not only enabled but empowered these poets to teach a subject matter taught nowhere else, in a manner nowhere else employed. As McNaughton's proposal has already shown, the Poetics Program was to chart an unabashedly anti-rational but intellectually rigorous course of study, rooted deeply in an individual poetic mysticism and a collective poetic magic, both of which were fundamental to these poets' own lives and works, each in their own way.

II. Diane di Prima: Hidden Religions in the Poetry of Europe

The faculty got together for detailed planning sessions on several occasions in the spring of 1980, and as it seems one or another member of the faculty was unable to attend any given meeting, some were recorded. Happily the tapes were preserved, so I was able to listen in, past the clatter of dishes, background chatter, and frequent roar of a motorcycle or city bus, and begin to develop the picture I mean to present in the coming pages of how the first year of the program's curriculum came together. Unable to attend the first meeting, Diane di Prima had met previously with Duncan that he might speak on her behalf when discussion turned to her contribution to the curriculum, and so he did, stating bluntly that di Prima would be "focusing on magic." Allowing, however, that "we don't have to put the word 'magic' out front," Duncan said, "we certainly are in it when we get into these elements, because they work exactly that way," citing from his initial conversation with di Prima her concern for a certain "quality of feeling..., spaciousness & space & movement..., [i.e.] the poem as an orientation, that any poem reorients the person writing it, but reorients the person reading it[, too]. All of this is [about]...form as body..., body & space," and as he put it, di Prima would deal with "the mythology and operation of the poem..., that the poem operates emotionally on the people around and that it operates potentially, as I point out about *Maximus*, that this is really a big magical proposition to force a change, a total world."²⁶⁰

As di Prima would put it in a lecture on H.D. at Naropa in 1988, “poetry is magic.... [I]n the last years of this century, it seems clear to me that there is nowhere left for art to go than magic...the suffusion of spirit, drawing down of god forms, or drawing down of particular energies or powers, with the will to make change, this is what magic—this is what art—is for.”²⁶¹ Indeed, her memoir, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*, is perhaps foremost the story of her coming to this unshakeable understanding, beginning with her earliest memories of the formative “world of enchantment” she found with her grandfather when she was a child:

My grandfather and I had our secrets—as when we listened to Italian opera together. Opera was forbidden Domenico because he had a bad heart—and so moved was he by the vicissitudes and sorrows of Verdi’s heroes and heroines that the doctor felt it to be a danger. We would slip away together to listen—I was three or four—and he would explain all the events extraordinaire that filled the world. All that madness seemed as natural as anything else to my young mind.... He told me stories. Terrifying stories, fables whose morals seemed to point to the horror of social custom, of emulation. Or he read me Dante.²⁶²

Her grandfather was an atheist and an anarchist, her grandmother a devout catholic, but, di Prima writes, “struggle for truth bonded Domenico and Antoinette. Her rosary, his Giordano Bruno. Fierce, luminous, and coexistent.”²⁶³ These were all great entwined influences on di Prima from an early age: music, magic, religion, revolutionary politics, and poetry.

Writing of an adolescence spent with “many maverick women friends...—the ‘Branded’ as we loved to call ourselves”²⁶⁴—a group that included the poet Audre

Lorde, she recalled her first true discovery of that magic, hinted at by her grandfather's Bruno, in Jean Cocteau's film *Blood of a Poet*:

I watched an unprepossessing man at an easel kiss a mouth in the palm of his hand. There were speaking statues, a black angel with improbable insect wings, corridors with locked doors, behind each of which dreams were being played out.... At some point I "got" it, a gift straight from him to me: Magick has to do with the relation of light and time. Bending them. Light and time and the movement of the mind. That simple.

It was Magick I had found, in the dark. In the black and white light gleaming off the screen. Some way to play with reality, bend it to your will. Neither space nor time so solid as we had been told.

Magick I sought and found, too, in the poets. Long evenings in my room in Brooklyn.... Long evenings with the Branded, spent "calling up" the ghost of Byron—a cross between concentration and Will.... Trance sessions we invented, a state between sleeping and waking: half-woken we answered questions for each other. Telepathy experiments we held. "Sending" words or images across the boroughs of New York, at the appointed hour of a weekday night. Checking in with each other the next day, before we read our new poems: what had we "gotten?"²⁶⁵

She would also describe taking her first trip to the West Coast, to San Francisco, a decade later, as "doing magick..., breaking a spell.... As the plane moved slowly west it snapped a cord / tore through a taboo, a curse I didn't even know I was living under."²⁶⁶ She recalled meeting Philip Whalen on this trip and finding him "a little terrifying in his knowledge of flora and fauna (in New York it was all just 'a tree' or 'a bird' —we never bothered with these occult designations)...., pointing out and naming the natural world for me as we went, a magical incantation that brought out all the special qualities of this land."²⁶⁷ As noted above, she'd stayed the majority of

the trip with Michael and Joanne McClure, and it is via a New York Poets' Theater production she helped mount of Michael McClure's play *The Blossom* (for which George Herms made the set) and a production of Kenneth Koch's *Guinevere, or the Death of the Kangaroo* that di Prima articulates the difference between the New York art world she would soon leave behind and the California one she would soon join:

If you wanted to put two pieces side by side which compared and contrasted where the two coasts were in 1964, you couldn't have chosen better examples.

Guinevere, or the Death of the Kangaroo was witty, urbane, upbeat, silly, irresistibly charming, easy on the eyes. Gorgeous in fact. One came through delighted, with one's sophistication intact. And *The Blossom*? Dark, charged, romantic, existential, awkward, cosmic, grappling with questions to which there are no answers.....

The split goes deep down, close to the root. Art as magick, or art as entertainment. Not that there *had* to be dichotomy at all, but that there *was*. At least in people's minds. There was no getting around it.²⁶⁸

For di Prima, the more powerfully alluring art was art "that was also a ritual. That magickally 'did' something. Transformed something. It seems so simple now. But at that point many of us were groping our way backward to art as magick."²⁶⁹

When she returned to the Bay Area in 1968, growing more intimate with Duncan, Meltzer, McClure, Whalen, and others by the minute, di Prima also commenced a concentrated period of study with Shunryu Suzuki at the San Francisco Zen Center, which lasted until his death in late 1971. She studied thereafter on an occasional basis with a series of teachers, including Chongyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who would found the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, in 1974, where di Prima, Allen

Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, and John Cage created, at Trungpa's request, an at-first-unaccredited, non-degree writing program, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. Over the course of the 1970s, di Prima taught many workshops visualization, magic, and a variety of other subjects,"²⁷⁰ and short-term classes at wide variety of venues, including, of course, the fall 1979 residency at New College, when Duncan McNaughton invited her to join the Poetics Program. Though she had declined to become a core member of the Naropa program as it developed in Boulder, preferring instead to remain a frequent guest, the opportunity presented by the New College Poetics Program, in her adopted hometown, was impossible to pass up. Here she could extend her teaching beyond the workshop, short-term course, and one-off lecture without needing to relocate, and yet remain alongside friends and with the freedom and faith to focus on her decidedly anti-academic concerns for the visionary and the magical.

These ideas would manifest in the two courses ultimately announced for the spring semester, the first of which quite proudly "put the word 'magic' out front." The fundamental proposition of this course, Poetry and Magic: Creative Imagination and the Magical Will, was that

High art is an area of magic, as magic is one of the arts. This course will explore the interface between poetry and magical practice; and begin to define their differences; invocation in the poem, and invocation in ceremonial magic; necromancy and the elegy; the direction of the Will in the creative act and in the magical act. We will look at the texts of the Golden Dawn, A.A., and O.T.O., as well as the

works of a variety of poets including Pound, Shakespeare, Donne and the metaphysical poets, H.D., Sophocles and Greek tragedy, the Homeric hymns, and some of the alchemists.²⁷¹

This was to be paired with “Vision and the Visionary Poem: Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Nerval, Paracelsus, Rumi, Shelley, Yeats,” concerned with

Modes of seeing. Varying relationships between the imaginary journey and astral travel. The hypnagogic journeys of Keats and the heavenly encounters of Blake. Tang travel and Sung conceits. Heavenly space and inner space. The visions of opium and hashish and the visions of revolutionary ecstasy. Travel and the psychedelic vision: the extension of the horizon of possibility.²⁷²

These were then to be followed in the summer by a course called “The Encounter: The Beloved, The Angel, The Guide, The Landscape,” which asked

What does it mean to meet your angel? How do you recognize the muse? Blake says that the gates of heaven open twice a day to every man and woman. We will here study the opening encounter, the agent of revelatory moment, actual or visionary, as wellspring of poetry. This is necessarily a poetics of devotion: Dante, Cavalcanti, Ibn Arabi, Chandidas, Ramprasad, Zen stories and Tantric hymns; as well as the poems of opening inspired in recent times by the American landscape.²⁷³

As di Prima put it at the outset of the 1980s, it was the poet’s task “to begin the shaping and visioning of the new forms and the new consciousness when no one else has begun to sense it.... I think that the job for us is to get the vision clear and transmit it in its purity.... The visions of the new forms of consciousness are the visions of the artists.”²⁷⁴ She insisted:

Poetry is not a place where you can bluff. So you speak direct to the hearts of people. People are hungry for that directness. It’s like the

days of dying in the desert yearning for a glass of water, for any speech that's speech of the heart. And there's way too much speech of the brain, and there's way too much information about what's going on and not anything of the gut and not anything of the heart happening. So whatever else we do, the first thing is to reactivate the feeling, we reactivate the possibility of living a life of emotion and of the flesh, as well as of the braid.... Because without the livingness of the words, there's no living of mind consciousness.²⁷⁵

As indicated by her course descriptions, for di Prima this "reactivation" depended not only on visioning, meditation, or other exercises of the creative imagination, but also on an true understanding of the tradition that had be deactivated. In terms quite sympathetic to those of McNaughton's Poetics Program proposal, di Prima, in her 1988 lecture on H.D. at Naropa, said:

we're in the position that we've always been in with our great minds, of wanting to take part of the package and leave the rest, like let's take Newton's laws of mechanics and forget his alchemy. Let's decide that poor John Dee was a great mathematician, but he must have gone crazy when he started conjuring. And to just bring them into the light of day, because I feel that we can't afford to go on ignoring that part of people's lives and work. I think we're at the point where this magic, or the spiritual, whatever you want to call it, the part of ourselves that we have been keeping out of the spotlight because of being caught in a few hundred years of Rationalism Civilization, has got to come back into the work.²⁷⁶

The following year, in another talk on H.D. and Robert Duncan, "R.D.'s H.D.," di Prima elaborated:

We have been told so often that we of "the West" come from a broken, an incomplete, tradition, that we are frequently blind to lineage where it does exist, as in the arts, in the history of thought, etc. In our European/American poetry in particular there is a precision of lineage, and it is often told, addressed by the poets themselves. It can

be traced as accurately as the Soto and Rinzai masters of Zen. Only, we have not paid it that attention....

And lineage works on us in two perpendicular planes or fields which converge in the poet. There is the influence, the Ear-Whispered Transmission through time: Greece, Alexandria, Venice, the Christian Renaissance...Moravia, Elizabethan England, 19th century magic. And there is also mouth-to-earness of our own era, what touches our living ear (flesh) through the moving air: the parents, teachers, friends and companions on the quest, the lovers, enemies, students of our own slice of time.... The poem stands at a juncture of planes—of whatever lineages have become manifest at a given point.²⁷⁷

Such was the “juncture of planes” at with the entire New College Poetics Program stood, and the historical lineage given quick articulation here was the subject of what would become di Prima’s signature course. Curiously, it goes unmentioned on the surviving tapes of the spring 1980 planning meetings—perhaps there are other tapes, lost or as yet to come to light, or perhaps mention of it simply escaped recording—but almost twenty years later when Meltzer interviewed di Prima for his book *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*, she related another part of her early curriculum-planning conversations with Duncan, in brief:

I said, “Robert, I think you should do a course that covers nonorthodox threads of thought in the West, maybe from the caves to the present. Give us a sense of continuity, how it all relates to one another, Gnosticism and the heresies and this and that.” He said, “I think you’re supposed to teach that, dear.” I said, “Robert, I don’t know anything about it.” He said, “Well, that’s why we teach, isn’t it?”²⁷⁸

And so, as she put it, “he trapped me into a whole field of study.”²⁷⁹ As we have seen from her other course descriptions, it wasn’t at all true that she didn’t “know

anything about it" at this stage. She had been reading in the field for twenty years or more and at the very least knew enough to say what she wanted to learn more about. In 1961, the year of her first trip to the West Coast, she'd purchased, as a birthday gift for herself, the twelve-volume edition of Sir James George Frazer's *Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* and "delved deep" into it over the next two years,²⁸⁰ following the thread through Robert Graves's *White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. In the early 1960s, she also began what would be a lifelong study of both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, spurred on by encounters with Shunryu Suzuki in California and the 11th-century texts of Milarepa in New York, respectively. She would take up Sanskrit, and study Hinduism, too, a few years later. In 1964, she was commissioned by Felix Morrow, publisher of a wide range of occult material from Milarepa to Aleister Crowley under the University Books imprint, to write an introduction for a new edition of A.E. Waite's translations of Paracelsus. It seems safe to assume the assignment didn't come completely out of the blue, but that Morrow must have had some sense of di Prima's preparedness to undertake the task, even if she claimed to have only "vaguely heard of Paracelsus, the fifteenth-century alchemist," at the time, as she later wrote in her memoir:

Now, given the assignment and having the books in hand, I read the two volumes straight through. I didn't guess that Paracelsus would change forever my way of seeing the world. When I actually began to read him, there was that part of me that recognized even what was most obscure in those pages as inevitable and *true*. It was the same organ of recognition that is at work when one's whole being says "yes" to a painting, a piece of music, even though it is like nothing

we've known before, even though it takes an incredible stretch to stay with it, to actually *hear* it, or see it. There is some infallible mechanism in us, something like a dowsing rod of the heart, and it moves in us sometimes—moves seldom, but with total authority.

I wasn't at all sure then what alchemy "meant"—if indeed it meant anything that I could ever express—but I *recognized* it, and I knew from then on it would be a part of my life.²⁸¹

She would soon translate Robert Fludd's Rosicrucian texts from the Latin and dive deeply into the work of Cornelius Agrippa, Giordano Bruno, and John Dee, writing a preface to an edition of the latter's *Hieroglyphic Monad* in 1975 for publisher Samuel Weiser. At Naropa that same year, di Prima gave a talk entitled "Light / and Keats," in which she tied Keats and other Romantic poets into this very tradition.

If you think of the Romantics, you've got to think of a certain way of conducting your life, or taking control of your life, which at that point was desperately necessary; because the first Industrial Revolution had already occurred. England was rapidly becoming the ugly empire. They were at the same point, in a lot of ways, that we were at during the fifties. Maybe. So that what you have is you have this incredible burst of heart energy against the mechanization of human society, whether it's Shelley, or Blake....

According to the history books, Gnosticism was wiped out by 500 A.D.—one more piece of bullshit that we've been taught, like Europe being a "continent." If Gnosticism was ever wiped out, it was much later; it was the Age of Enlightenment. The so-called Age of Enlightenment, when we forgot almost everything we ever knew in Europe. What happened till then was it went underground and kept changing its forms and every time heresy surfaces, a so-called Christian heresy surfaces in Europe, it has some of these same characteristics. The largest movement, the Anabaptists, in the Brotherhood of the Free Spirit that Hieronymus Bosch belonged to, in the early Rosicrucians, in William Blake—over and over everywhere and it's still in the European blood and head.²⁸²

This was June 1975, already five years before the point at which di Prima humbly claimed she “didn’t know anything about” this history, and a full ten years after she’d written her “appreciation” of Paracelsus for the A.E. Waite volume. All of this is closely tied to her studies of magic and more, of course. As David Stephen Colonne’s recent book, *Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions* makes abundantly clear, she knew quite a bit about what she would come to call casually “the history of heresy.”²⁸³ Officially titled “Hidden Religions in the Poetry of Europe: The Continuity of the Gnosis,” the course was described in the first catalogue thus:

We are the inheritors of an unbroken tradition whose roots are lost in antiquity, and which has always stood outside the orthodoxies of Christianity, Islam, Judaism. In historic times it manifests in the Manicheans, the Gnostics, the “heretics” of the Christian era: Anabaptists, Hussites, Cathars, etc. It came into its own during the early period of European tantra (11th-13th century) in the Love Courts, the written Kabbalah and the Grail myths, and it blossomed in the renaissance concept of the Magus as lived by Bruno, Dee, Paracelsus. This way of seeing the world continued through the dark age of Reason and came into prominence again in the 19th century: both in popular “occult” fiction and in the latter-day secret societies that are the inheritors of the oral traditions. This body of experience has served as source for much of the poetry and art of the world, and produces its own resonances in us even when we are unaware of the reason. We will seek to trace the ancient gnosis in the literature and art of Europe, and bring it more fully into conscious recognition.²⁸⁴

The course was originally planned as a single semester in the fall, followed by the above-mentioned courses on “Poetry and Magic,” “Vision and the Visionary Poem,” and “The Encounter,” but that single semester proved to be far too short to track

“the Continuity of the Gnosis” as she’d identified it, and so the course would expand to a three-term sequence, offered somehow intertwined with di Prima’s other closely related courses that first year. It would then become di Prima’s sole focus in the second year, with pre-history to the 13th century covered in the fall, the 14th century to the 18th century in the spring, and the 19th and 20th centuries in the summer. But after two years, di Prima said, some of the other faculty were begging her to quit teaching it, so in the third year of the program (1982-1983) she would teach courses focused on specific aspects and figures in the field, rather than offering broad surveys. In the fall of 1982, she taught *The Grail*, “concentrat[ing] on the texts of the tales, as they were told from the 12th to the 15th centuries[:]. . . *Lancelot* by Chretien de Troyes, Wolfram’s *Parzifal*, various versions of *Tristan*, and selections from Malory and from *The High History of the Holy Grail*[,] wherever possible. . . examined in their original language to gain some sense of their sound & form.” In the spring of 1983, she focused on Paracelsus, John Dee, and Giordano Bruno, “three pivotal figures in the transition from the magical worldview to the modern, so-called “scientific” one[,]. . . men [who], while differing greatly in personality and outlook, share[d] in bringing a sense of spaciousness to the intellectual climate of 16th century Europe, and in their powerful evocation and use of the creative imagination.” Finally, in the summer of 1983, she turned to the Texts of Alchemy, considering alchemy’s proposition of “the ultimate perfectibility of both matter and spirit. . . [as] a serious attempt to heal the gap between these two.” As the catalogue description notes, “the

alchemical literature abounds in rich and evocative images. Although some work will be done in the history and precise language of alchemy and the structure(s) of the alchemical process, we will mostly be reading these texts for their resonances: how they work in us." When the Poetics Program ceased to offer a summer term in its fourth year, di Prima returned to her original scope, only now packing pre-history to the 14th century into the fall term and the 15th to the 20th century into the spring, and offering it again in this format in the sixth year of the program. Between these reprises of the Hidden Religion course she offered a two-semester course, in the fifth year of the program, on "The Poetics of the Romantic Movement" — "Wordsworth, Coleridge and the Early Byron" in the fall of 1984 and "Byron, Shelley, and Keats" in the spring of 1985 — presented as one more part in that "continuity of gnosis" as she had articulated it a decade earlier in the aforementioned talk on "Light / And Keats" at Naropa.

The several years di Prima taught in the Poetics Program at New College hardly allowed her to exhaust this territory, but it did avail her of the opportunity to explore more concertedly and more thoroughly this fertile field of her longtime intellectual investigation and poetic inspiration. Such was the case with David Meltzer, as well, who was encouraged by Duncan, enthusiastically, at the March 1980 meetings, to come in "on your home ground" of the Kabbalah, an extremely fertile ground Duncan himself had exposed to Meltzer, almost by accident, fifteen years before.

III. David Meltzer: Kabbalah, or the A, B, G of Reading

As Meltzer often told the tale, one day, circa 1964, while working at the Discovery Book Store in North Beach, Duncan came in, as he occasionally did, to use the rest room, and when he emerged, he was irate, waving a book in the air, flabbergasted that someone had left such an important text on the back of the toilet. Needless to say, Meltzer's curiosity was piqued, and this first encounter with Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* set him off on a study of the Kabbalah that would be intimately linked with his practice as a poet for the rest of his life. The first time I heard this story, I was incredulous—not at the tale itself, but that Meltzer was not already well versed in the field when these events occurred, considering his close friendship with Wallace Berman, whose work from the late-1950s on was heavily inflected by what Meltzer later termed “an intuitive Kabbalah”²⁸⁵ and prominently featured the Hebrew alphabet, particularly its first letter, Aleph—denoting a glottal stop or hiatus, but in itself, silent; as Scholem writes, the Aleph “represents nothing more than the position taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel”²⁸⁶—as a central motif. Circa 1990, Meltzer wrote:

Perhaps, in retrospect, what Wallace obliquely taught me was the mystery of reading. I read novels, poetry collections, occult books, art books Wallace gave me like I later found out kabbalists enacted their rite of reading, grounded in the faith of discovery. Intuitional, improvisational, flexible and in continual flux; allowing a word or phrase to bridge out and into a lit-up network of connections and

associations. A heady moment-to-moment activity whose finale often came in an exhale of astonishment.²⁸⁷

Writing specifically of Berman and Robert Alexander, but by extension the whole of *Semina* culture, Meltzer went on to say that “their relation to art was comparable to the kabbalistic concept of *tikkun*,” which he expounded thus:

Isaac Luria, the Ari, the Lion, 16th century kabbalist, expounded a compelling new mythology to the Jews of the Diaspora: in the time before the Creation, He-She-It/YHVH, concentrates itself into a line, an empty space within which it becomes possible for the world to unfold. The basis of the world is “Ain Sof,” the Limitless, entering into existence through the medium of pure Light. The Sefiroth, the Vessels, the spheres constituting the fruit of the Tree of Life, shatter, unable to endure or contain the divine substance. Through the breaking of the Vessels, evil and a state of chaos are produced. The Lurianic teaching redirects the primordial creation back to the human who must perfect the soul, the community, to improve all worlds. To be aware that sparks from the shattered vessels landed everywhere and could be in anything or anyone. The human task was to find all the fragments, mend them, return them to the moment before Creation.²⁸⁸

The echo of Duncan’s remarks about Berman’s “Fashioning Spirit,” cited above, are clear, and this spiritual relation to art was very much his own, as well, but Meltzer said he had resisted direct involvement with anything “too Jewish”²⁸⁹ until Robert Duncan’s 1964 outburst in the Discovery Bookstore changed that stance.

He spent the second half of the decade diving deeply into Jewish lore and the Hebrew language. Over the course of the 1970s, Meltzer published more than twenty books and pamphlets under the Tree imprint, along with five thick issues of the journal *Tree*, “where Kabbalistic texts in new translations are placed beside the

works of contemporary European and American authors and poets,” as Meltzer notes in a 1974 prospectus of the press: “It is hoped that this interaction of disciplines, histories and cultures provides an intense and useful matrix for the further exploration of Jewish mystical symbolism and theosophic concepts.”²⁹⁰ As Christine A. Meilicke writes in her useful article, “The Forgotten History of David Meltzer’s Journal *Tree*”:

This little magazine foreshadows certain future trends in American Jewish culture, in particular a strong interest in kabbalah and Jewish spirituality. It also represents one of the first attempts to constitute a body of writing that could be termed “American Jewish poetry.” In the *Tree* journal, Meltzer creates a new American Jewish aesthetics grounded in the counterculture...., [but] because Meltzer’s journal does not support any obvious political or religious cause, it cannot easily be instrumentalized.... The journal emerges from a community of poets—in particular the intense friendship between David Meltzer and Jack Hirschman—while simultaneously bringing about such a community. Yet this “community” is non-institutional in character. What unites the different voices is a “sense of shared concerns and identity. *Tree* elicited responses from diverse communities of hermetic and occult practitioners, kabbalistic and orthodox Jewish players, as well as unorthodox assimilated folks yearning to dive into the ‘60s potency of Mystery.”²⁹¹

Among others, Meltzer published two books by Orthodox Jewish poet Rose Drachler and first books in English by Yiddish poet Malka Heifetz Tussman (Marcia Falk’s translation) and Egyptian-Jewish poet Edmond Jabés (Rosemarie Waldrop’s translation from the French), along with books by such contemporaries and colleagues as Nathaniel Tarn, John Brandi, Jerome Rothenberg, and Jack Hirschman, who as Meilicke notes was a particularly close collaborator, sending his own

translations of many old texts for the journal and for individual volumes of writing by such mystics as the twelfth-century Kabbalist Eleazer of Worms and thirteenth-century Kabbalist Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia. Meltzer also gathered some of Hirschman's translations, along with those of many others, into *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah*, which was published by the Seabury Press in 1976 (reissued in 1997 by Barrytown/Station Hill). In the introduction to that volume, he wrote:

Much of what is of utmost significance in the Kabbalistic tradition never approaches the page. Its deepest secrets can only be set free beyond the page. The oral transmission of Kabbalistic mysteries remains a series of moments between a master and his disciples, moments that transcend the limits of written language.

Many of the selections included in this book were not written to serve the continuity of a literary tradition; instead, they take the form of notes for the actual teaching which takes shape only in the context of a sharing-of-breath experience between teacher and student. With few exceptions these texts remain as the aftermath of the actual teaching—they are shadows, ghosts.²⁹²

The Poetics Program would avail Meltzer of the opportunity to bring some of these ghosts to life—though forever humble in his erudition and insight, even after thirty years of teaching at New College, when I got to know him, he would never have characterized his relationship to his students as one of master to disciples, even if many of his students over the years have seen it that way.

Meltzer's own master, Robert Duncan, encouraged his former protégé to "come in on [his] home ground," in March 1980, citing the Kabbalah as an example of a particular "tradition"—one which "happens to be marvelously filled in at the

present time" — "and how immediately it changes and is useful in poets.... There'll be places where you see it changing [into] a poetics, so you show how a body of ideas that has nothing to do with poetry when it's proposed [can be used by poets]." The point was that "every bit of it will be unwinding the poetics. You're not giving them an order to join the local synagogue," he said — eliciting a chuckle and firm "No" from Meltzer — before he continued: "It should be conceived as a model how you can go thoroughly through a set of a tradition...so they can identify, within a tradition, heresies and so forth, and they're prepared to go through Catholic Christology, or anything else they want to do. Buddhism. Mickey Mouse." As Duncan put it, "this would form a model for how does Freudianism come in to poetics, or how does Jungianism come into poetics, the interrelation between them.... It would bring in as a context how you follow through and the imaginary poetics that come out of it." Duncan suggested Meltzer "call the thing a poetics in the Kabbalah or whatever," and that he start by "offer[ing] a basic preparatory course of some of the history and some of the ideas, and how they work as metaphors and ways of reading, too, approaching texts."²⁹³ Later, Duncan would also note, in a brief essay for the program's second catalog, that "ciphering and deciphering go back to primary biological functions of reading the environment in trial and error toward vividness and depth in life-time and life-space, toward resonance," so that Kabbalistic "ideas and encounters with the letters of the alphabet itself...lead back to the primary religious ground that is suggestive indeed in relation

to...the field of Poetics.”²⁹⁴ In the March 1980 meeting he said, “This in a way stands for the Tradition, it stands for the part that [the students] are used to, called Literature, and how do ideas affect poetry, but we go the other way around, we ask how does poetics immediately find itself, find its content, in advancing material.”²⁹⁵

Listed in the first catalogue simply as “Kabbalah: A, B, and G” (Gimel being the third letter in the Hebrew alphabet, after Aleph and Bet), though appearing in other advertising with the subheading “Correspondence, Tradition, and Translation,” the course was described as “a three-semester survey of the history and development of Kabbalah alongside with the poet’s use of it as a symbol system and a creative matrix.” Meltzer would repeat this three-term course (Fall, Spring, Summer) in the second year, and continue to teach variations and related material throughout the first manifestation of the Program. In the third year, it would be “Letter, Word, Sound, Number”:

A two-semester course surveying the significance of letter, word, sound, and number mysticism in a variety of cultures. // Divine origin myths of alphabet, writing, number. Letter, word and number creation myths. // Elements of alphabet history. // The power of sounding, of utterance. Magic syllables, vowels. // Function and construction of amulets, talismans. // Words of power: invocations, incantations, spells. // The Kabbalah’s approach to letter, number and word. The *Sefer Yetzirah*, *The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiva*, and Abraham Abulafia’s techniques and texts. Gematria, notarikon, temurah. // The mysteries of inscribing and the scribe’s sacred tasks. // The quest for the universal alphabet during the 19th and 20th centuries. Occult symbol-structures fashioned from the roman alphabet in 19th and 20th centuries. // The use of letter, sound and word mysticism in poetry; e.g. Rimbaud, Khlebnikov, Smart, etc. // Number as force, as mystery, as foundation. // Alphabet and genetics. // Name, names, and naming.

// And, time allowing, other areas linked with letter, word, sound and number mysticism.²⁹⁶

In the fourth year, he would condense the original three-term Kabbalah course into a single term, and follow it with “a reading of *Genesis* and a study of how the text has been read and interpreted,” in a course called “In-Beginning.” The latter would be repeated in the fifth year along with a one-term variation on “Letter, Word, Sound, Number,” this time called “Sound, Letter, Word, Name.” In the sixth year, “Kabbalah and Language” was followed by “The Prophets,” “a study of the prophetic tradition, its relationship to the history and mystery of poetry, along with an alternative reading of some key Old Testament prophetic books,” and in the seventh and final year of the original manifestation of the Poetics Program, “Letter, Name, Word,” in Fall 1986, would be topped off in Spring 1987 with “Words Worth,” “a preliminary philo-poetic venture into creative lexicography and etymology..., examin[ing] and address[ing] key words (and locked words) from the public and private vocabulary, unfolding histories of meaning and unmeaning,” in which the only required text was *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*—“any edition of it, as long as the appendix contains a listing of Indo-European roots.”

As he recalled in conversation three decades later, “teaching the Kabbalistic material was in a sense equating it to contemporary hermeneutics and so forth, just to show this ground and lineage for this process of receiving text and having your

way with it, you know.... The idea was to make the poet aware of lineage."²⁹⁷ He wanted to give students "an overview of the history as it pertains to certain ideas,"²⁹⁸ trying to impress upon them "that this didn't all come from [Ezra Pound's] *ABC of Reading*.... 'Context' [was] the main word I learned as a teacher, so called. Always be aware of everything else, not just the uniqueness of the subject. It didn't just spring out of somebody's ear."²⁹⁹ So his teaching was "chronological and also [covered] concepts like alphabet and word combinations, the use of language,"³⁰⁰ he said. "In the context of the mystical, and the Kabbalistic, well, Wittgenstein was saying a lot of the same things as these 13th Century and 16th Century writers.... Wittgenstein came out of an upper class German Jewish family, and you're sure something seeps in [from the tradition] but you don't *know*."³⁰¹ Meltzer and his students also explored the interface "of the Kabbalah and critical theory..., deconstruction."³⁰² They looked at such texts as the *Sefer Yetzirah*, "the Book of Formation, which is a slender book that proposes Yahweh created the world by writing as opposed to the earlier oral tradition, by sounding..., therefore investing great power into the alphabet itself. And that was very relational to Derrida and the act of inscribing."³⁰³ As Meltzer put it, "I always found that *On Grammatology*, once you got past Spivak's mind-numbing introduction was in that kind of spirit, again, the mystery of letter, sound, meaning. I always felt he either knew it intuitively or culturally because it was on that level and I recommended it to student who were interested in the alphabet, and writing systems."³⁰⁴ "*Of Grammatology* could've been written by a Kabbalist with some shift

in vocab, but the same kind of wave, privileging the gesture and the act of imprinting and then the alphabet itself...," he said. "And we just went on.... [We used] very big readers.... They just grew,"³⁰⁵ as Meltzer continually added material. "It was only basically towards the end that I began to sort of reach [the feeling that I had] 'done that.' It was really a very interesting couple of years of working with this subject matter and trying to equate it to other, contemporary thinkers, [Walter] Benjamin, [Gershom] Scholem, [Theodore] Adorno even, his dialectic insistency, and Ernst Bloch, not so closely aligned, but all within the same intellectual circles; they all knew each other."³⁰⁶

Having been a part of such vibrant intellectual and artistic circles for his entire adult life, as we have seen, Meltzer was deeply appreciative of the permission, encouragement, and motivation they provided the individual. In the Poetics Program, too, there was a great deal of mutual interest, overlap, and crosspollination between the core faculty's courses, and many of the visiting faculty's, too. Faculty participated in one another's classes regularly, sitting in for individual sessions or auditing the full course, as di Prima did for Meltzer's first year in the Kabbalah and Duncan did later on, and as Grundberg recalled:

It definitely felt like all the different classes were resonating with one another.... [Meltzer's] working with letters, with consonants, like sacred language, generative language, the whole universe com[ing] out of letters and words...would completely feed into what we were hearing from Robert and Diane.... She had a real vision about how these hidden traditions percolated through the history of Europe and inflamed people's imagination and how that came into poetry.

Sometimes it was like, “How does this relate to poetry? We’re learning about the Cathars and the Brotherhood of the Free Spirit?” But again we would learn this stuff and it would all sort of start to resonate. You’d go to Robert’s class and there would be things he’d say that would fit in perfectly with things Diane said.³⁰⁷

Though incredibly energizing, at times, and perhaps in the end, as we shall later see, this constant feedback also could be paralyzing in its intensity, because the individuals—Duncan and di Prima, in particular, according to a number of students, though not only they—could be overwhelmingly, terrifyingly intense in their own personalities and pedagogies. While he was as intensely engaged as any of others in the material he was teaching, inside the classroom as outside of it Meltzer was famously both impish and gnomic—a personality fitting his physical aspect: small, thin man, with large, thick glasses, a substantial mustache, mid-length hair in these years. “He was hilarious,” Steve Dickison recalled: “It was so much fun. He had all these jokes. It was such a delightful way to study something that was a pious, masculine discipline, this tradition of commentary and commentary upon commentary of the Kabbalah, the interior readings and such, but there was so much play involved in David’s version of that.”³⁰⁸ “He was just a brilliant teacher, Mary Margaret Sloan said: “It was wonderful just to be in the room with him. The warmth, the humor, and the erudition all mixed together was extraordinary. His humanity. He was just wonderful.”³⁰⁹ “He was so brilliant and he was such a story teller.... Just give me a taste of David to lift my spirits..., but he had an edge behind that smile. There were plenty of edges. You just have to read the work to know that,” remarked

Sarah Menefee: “He would come to class with *pages* of typed-up lecture—totally planned, typed up, *pages* of it—and he’d read through it, lecture through it, in his wonderfully relaxed way, but he was not off the cuff. He was totally prepared, and you got all this intense material and background. He knew all the details.”³¹⁰ His decade and more of research and editing had taken him deeply into the material and its history and brought him into contact with its foremost scholars, including Scholem himself, with whom Meltzer had a significant correspondence. Matt Haug recalled Meltzer telling him “that he had a really rare edition of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, that was impossible to find—he said there was one copy in the country at the National Library or someplace in DC. —and he told me Gershom Scholem came to visit him once in Berkeley, and he gave him the book. And I said, ‘You gave him the book?’ And he said, ‘Well, I Xeroxed it first, of course.’” In class Meltzer was “very systematic,” Grundberg recalled, “but he had this real impish, elfin quality, too.... He would write out these lecture notes and just read them—these amazing eloquent dissertations on these different topics...—and then at a certain point he would just put his pieces of paper down, and say ‘Oh, OK, harrumph.’”³¹¹ “I remember him reading from things at length sometimes, but I also remember him reading, and then he’d put it down and push his glasses up on his head and go off,” Todd Baron said: “I think really good teaching is always very much like jazz, and that’s what I think of with David, more so than anyone, even much more than Robert. He could prepare—he had his music out in front of him, so to speak—but then he could just go off.... It

was pretty cool, amazing, really. To be in David's class was very warm and inviting, but also like watching a performance."³¹² Dickison likewise remembered Meltzer using his lecture notes "like charts that he would improvise off of. They'd be laid out, and you wouldn't really see it."³¹³

The association with jazz is apt. The music had always been a major part of Meltzer's personal and poetical makeup, from his childhood in New York when he drank 25-cent Cokes at Birdland, Bop City, and the Royal Roost, listening to Charlie Parker and the rest of the new music makers, and from his adolescence in Los Angeles hanging out on Central Avenue, listening to Wardell Gray and his compatriots, in the company of such artists as Robert "Baza" Alexander and Wallace Berman. Gray's murder in 1955, about a year after Meltzer befriended these artists, had an impact on them all, because these young Jewish outsider artists shared "a common bond not only to the music but with the culture of struggle and estrangement it expressed and resisted," as Meltzer wrote, quoting Alexander, who said:

[The atom bomb] was the final touch in terms of human misery, devastation, and destruction in a world that had just seen the ugliest war in the history of mankind.... [Some] people were lucky enough to come out of it with their skins intact, their minds almost intact, and their emotions pretty well ripped up. I know mine were, and I know Wally had his private hell about the whole deal. We were sustained by the literature of people whose history is a lot older, who endured much more than we did on a continuing basis, who were more at ease with their passion in describing their feelings about hard times, the pain and the suffering of being a creative, sensitive person living in a society; while at the same time isolated from that society by virtues of

your feelings about the status quo. In our case the French poets, (and later) the Surrealists and Dada, gave us continuity at a time when, without that body of stuff plus our own jazz and blues, I don't think any of us would have made it.... Wally and I probably both had our lives saved by jazz. (We identified with the world of jazz and blacks), the pain, the roots. We shared persecution.³¹⁴

As I've written elsewhere,³¹⁵ when Meltzer came to San Francisco in 1957, the Jazz-Poetry reading scene was still new and in vogue, and he participated actively, though in a mode surpassing what seems now — and seemed to him then — the quaint, canned recitation of written words over background cocktail comping, which was the modus operandi of most poets on such occasions. One performance was captured on a 1958 recording, released in 2005 as *David Meltzer, Poet, with Jazz*, the liner notes for which include a 1959 letter Meltzer wrote to the original producer describing his method of collaborating with the musicians as an actual part of the band on the bandstand, not just the bard on a stool out front:

The poems on this record were written especially for presentation & interaction with a jazz group. They were written in a tentative language that would, when the music began, improvise & alter & revise & invent new words in dialogue with the music's sound & purpose. I'd bring a skeleton poem — a 'head arrangement' of words — & then would fill it in in performance, improvising in the same spirit as the players.

The poet has to reinvent his poem in the same way the horn-player invents his solo. I write the bare-bones poem before I recite [it] with the music; it's like a lead-sheet. It's an inside job, listening or reading.³¹⁶

Much of his published poetry seems to writhe with a similar spirit, even if it is more carefully edited and arranged. In “Notes For Asaph: A Work in Progress,” Meltzer writes:

ASAPH (or Asaf or Asof) was David’s chief musician.
A cymbal player.
 Play the cymbal
 David, the symbols, poet
 each breath a chance,
 a change born of pulse.³¹⁷

Recalling this poem, Matt Haug said that while Meltzer’s lectures were, as others have said, deeply researched and intellectually rigorous, and while every book he assigned his students to read was “a pretty heavy text”:

on the other hand it was really a class in how to be a creative person. How to think in a creative mode. That’s what you got from the class. It was also historical, but he has a line in one of his poems, like “Play the symbols, David” and he would kind of teach you this language of the symbols and he would want you to improvise on it and see what you could come up with. That was kind of his basic thing.... Once I wrote a long thing about some letter, I think it was Shin, ך, which is fire—there are all these different associations with it—and he really liked it and then he said to me, “OK, next time you want to write a poem, use that material. Once you have all the associations of the Kabbala in your head, then you can use it in the creative mode.”³¹⁸

This creative, improvisational mode characterized his own poetry as well as his teaching, and not incidentally, but intentionally. In remarks to his class on The Prophets, at the end of the spring 1986 semester, Meltzer said

I’d like to explain to you (as well as myself) how inseparable teaching/learning is from any other real or imagined work or play I signify in my life as “creative.” Often enough to have its own truth we

hear the standardized opera or operetta whose male or female center mask is a writer or poet or artist who teaches (as we ironically spell it) “for a living,” losing touch, with the creative continuum and becoming empty inside, Eliot’s “hollow man” metaphor made real. What is implied is that teaching is not creating. Or that creating is not teaching. If it isn’t, then “teaching” as a word takes on the dense weight of a darkness-exploding bouquet, petals or pages of sad and sinister meanings. I teach because I want to learn. I teach because I want to know always more about those subjects I teach. I do not teach “subjects.” We are all “subjected” too much. Actually, I’m not really a teacher because I am always learning what it is I’m teaching.³¹⁹

So for Meltzer, the classroom was as much a woodshed—to borrow from the jazz lexicon—as it was a bandstand, and both practice and performance were ultimately collaborative and improvisatory. Jazz was not only an ethical or modal underpinning of his teaching, however. It was also a “subject” in the Poetics Program’s first summer session, when Meltzer, as ostensible chair, taught alongside Kabbalah G a class called Jazz Myth, Jazz Life and Poetry, in which he addressed the “mythic histories of jazz. The archetypes. // The poet’s involvement with jazz. A survey. Musical and verbal examples. Sounds.” He opened the course with “something like a head-arrangement of what [its] six lectures [would] deal with.”

Myth, history, poetry, improvisation are basic themes. We’ll see how they work in and out of an approximate time-zone starting in 1945, the official birthdate of be-bop, and ending in 1959, the year Lester Young died. Essentially, our focal point is the artistic/cultural renaissance or revolt that jazz grafted onto our world picture. Jazz has been called America’s only indigenous and authentic art form.... Afro-American Classical Music is how Ortiz M. Walton describes it. The blackness and whiteness of jazz is a recurrent theme, one of several sub-plots in this course. Another: the life-style, language, folklore of the bopster, hipster. The particular impact be-bop had as a

musical vision and, simultaneously, as a cultural possibility on the outlook and work of poets, writers and painters of the post-war epoch in America. We will deal with specific masters of the art both as archetypes and through examples of their work. An important part of the myth of jazz is that it is tied-up into a series of mysteries that the initiate enters into and out of. Not unlike occult initiation, the jazz savant works his way up the degrees of mystery, a rite of passage subordinate to the more important progressions, ascensions, of the jazz improviser.

Jazz paradoxes abound and we'll have to face them throughout the course. Its history has been, for the most part, predominantly archived by white fans, critics, sociologists, etcetera; it's a black-sourced music whose presence and history remains outside of black culture. It's perhaps one of the purest of "the pure products of America" and yet it is cherished, systematically documented, its legacy painstakingly preserved in recordings, discographies, monographs, biographies, etc., by the Germans and Japanese, as well as the English, Italians and Swedish. Its history, the available evidence of its art, exists essentially in records and in America, the record industry being what it is and has been, enormous portions of the history of this art is either out-of-print, unreleased or unavailable.

Listening, of course, interspersed with personal, historical, and musicological commentary, comprised a large part of each session, but in addition to the music found on the records themselves, Meltzer drew on their liner notes, record reviews and magazine profiles, radio broadcasts, critical surveys, individual biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs. The researches begun in preparation for, during, and in the aftermath of teaching this course would eventually result in a tandem of critical anthologies *Reading Jazz* and *Writing Jazz*, published by Mercury House in 1993 and 1999, respectively. The former "was a negative critique of white culture's shimmy with black jazz" collecting texts "written in the main by white American

and European writers, presenting in a collaged fashion the cultural colonization and reinvention of jazz as a white discourse," whereas the latter "represent[ed] African-American perceptions of jazz as a subject and practice"³²⁰ with "equal attention paid to both criticism and lyrical art..., encompassing voices from the Spirituals and the Blues to Free Jazz and the Black Arts Movement."³²¹ Though these anthologies were assembled over a span of many years, with the first published more than a decade, and the second almost two, after Meltzer taught his summer course on Jazz Myth, Jazz Life and Poetry, the anthology materials themselves and the substantial paratexts to the two volumes give a good indication of the mode and meaning of that seminar. As Meltzer wrote in the "Pre-Ramble" to *Reading Jazz*:

This work explores the literary and critical use of jazz during four historical moments of cultural transition. It presents aspects of the ways jazz was mythologized, colonized, demonized, defended, and ultimately neutralized by white Americans and Europeans. This is about the white invention of jazz as a subject and object....

While the music is the creation of African-Americans, jazz as mythology, commodity, cultural display is a white invention....

Conflicting racial perspectives dominate and play into the uses of jazz as subject and object. The perception that jazz is simultaneously primitive and modern circulates through many of the texts. Myths of Eden collide with myths of Progress.³²²

Following up on these remarks in the "Pre-Text" to *Writing Jazz*, Meltzer wrote:

[*Reading Jazz*] was stridently polemical in its choice of texts.... I saw the anthology as a historical sourcebook of intentional and unintentional racism; of purposeful and accidental racialism. It was clear that American culture operates as a white supremacist invisible empire....

In *Writing Jazz* there's more emphasis on oral transcriptions of musicians talking to interviewers, folklorists, autobiographers than in the first

anthology.... I'm cognizant that many of the scribes, like those of nineteenth-century slave narratives, were white—though often it's hard to discern who is master and who's the slave in these encounters.³²³

With this caveat then, "*Writing Jazz* represents African-American perceptions of jazz as a subject and practice." As Meltzer wrote in the "Pre-Ramble" to *Reading Jazz*, "In essence, a jazz performance is a real-time utopia, a collaborative effort supporting individual expression.... It's stand-up composing of the highest order, it's given away. The record is the 'text,' while the performance is the mythological moment,"³²⁴ much as the extant texts of the Kabbalah were, as Meltzer saw, only "shadows, ghosts" of the "actual teaching." Meltzer's tenure at New College would, as I've noted, extend nearly thirty years, as he taught both in the Poetics Program and, from the 1981-1982 school year, the undergraduate Humanities department, as well. "There've always been good students, both during the first years and during the rest of it," Meltzer said, "but the program, just as education in general, seemed to be more and more deficit in *educating*, by the last two or three years, well, each new cohort that would come in to the MFA program would know less and less and weren't even vaguely interested. They just wanted to get their manuscript together and get the degree, which was the antithesis of the initial impulse that created the program."³²⁵ Those first few years were their own "mythological moment," offering the 46-year-old di Prima and 43-year-old Meltzer their first extended classroom opportunities to explore their respective fields of intellectual investigation and poetic inspiration; offering the 37-year-old McNaughton a more intensely charged milieu in

which to further pursue his own; and offering the 61-year-old Robert Duncan an opportunity to revisit, revise, and reinvigorate a field of inquiry and instruction he had worked in for decades.

IV. Robert Duncan: Ideas of the Meaning of Form, Use of the Basic Elements,
and the Nature of Persons Proposed in Poetry

In a statement for the Poetics Program's second catalogue, Duncan wrote:

It's at the level of the basic elements: in oral and in written poetry alike the sounds and silences of language, telling patternings and depatternings of consonants and vowels, the articulation of syllables in measures and utterances toward and from sentences, lines, stanzas—where rime, rhythm, and ratio originate—that creativity in language works. And it is here that poetics must begin....

The simplest task of examining phoneme by phoneme the microstructures of the poem, relating to the structures of language itself, painstaking as this procedure must be, tasks the student's patience. Few, I find, can carry it thru. The map is not the territory, and, in turn, the territory is not the landscape: but without the procedures of a geological study—an investigation and imagination of what is going on in the "scene"—the description of the territory remains impressionistic or expressive and no more.³²⁶

At the Poetics Program's first orientation, on 17 September 1980, Duncan would offer several other metaphors for the task he meant to set his students: "Duncan said that poetics is to poetry as medicine is to the body or as botany is to flowers, and that real information was equally as scanty in those other disciplines, as needful of inquiry," as David Levi Strauss recalled: "He said it was only the recent 'observable collapse of craft' that had brought him back to teach, that it was like when dangerous machines break down (a car with a leaky exhaust, or a poorly constructed bookshelf that falls on someone's head), and all of the people who make these things feel responsible."³²⁷ Carl Grundberg also remembered Duncan bemoaning "a noticeable,

evident collapse in the craft of the poem. That people just didn't know what the materials of writing a poem were anymore, they'd just sort of write down their thoughts and break them into lines and call that a poem. So he wanted to meet that situation and provide some remedy.³²⁸

In March 1980, Duncan proposed to teach, as chair for the first fall semester, a pair of complementary courses he called "Ideas of Meaning in Form" and "Structure of Rhyme 1 – Basic Elements." Advertised under a number of variant titles, the former would appear in the catalogue as "Ideas of the Meaning in Poetry: A series of lectures on the idea of revelation of meaning in poetry from the doctrines of seeming truths and true creations in Homer, Hesiod, and Parmenides, through the composition of contradictions in Shakespeare in a theatrical magic, to the presentation of 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' proposed in the work of Pound and Williams."³²⁹ Grundberg recalled the Ideas of Meaning course as a "wide-ranging and indescribable class where Robert would just get going in his inimitable way."³³⁰ Aaron Shurin said,

[Duncan] was so in his power then, in his absolute power, and it was astonishing to hear him deliver lectures, overpowering, completely, and everything poured out of him and came together in his monumental circumlocutionary jags, which went on and on and sucked in the universe. They'd start somewhere and then they'd expand and just when you thought you were going to fly out, like you had lost gravity, gone beyond gravity, he pulled something in and it was coming back and you returned from your space voyage and you couldn't believe you'd returned—you couldn't believe where you went and you couldn't believe you returned and some

circumnavigation of the history of poetry had taken place and you were there for the ride. And this happened every day.³³¹

As Susan Thackrey put it:

The flow of his words was a natural stream of vitality, of water, air, that was dense and then transparent, reflecting of other entities, then completely private, stammering as he struggled against an obstacle of thought or perception that would not yield to the rush, moving out of some occluded channel with a thought or even a word dropped, bereft of associations for the moment. But listening carefully you would always find the obdurate or unarticulated brought back, not as a remembering or a clarification, but as a relation to some new element that would make its appearance. Robert's curriculum was one of fits and starts, of trial and error, as in moods and beginnings, as in trial by fire in knight errantry. On any given day Robert might be performing that flow, or, in one of his own favorite phrases, be beside himself, so that he too was a student, as well as a teacher, in its midst. And this too was instructional. Often he would catch himself at the end of an hour and a half, at class break, or at the end of the three hours. "Duncan never shuts up," he might say.³³²

David Levi Strauss offers this list of topics, "on many of which Duncan expounded at length," over the course of the very first session of the Ideas of Meaning seminar, on September 24, 1980:

The Pearl, back of Langland / Pound's "The Serious Artist" / Coleridge's *Biographical Literaria* (fantasy & imagination) / Plato, Bk 10 of the *Republic*, *Phaedrus* / Hesiod, Homer, Parmenides—trance poems, poetic seizure / Freud, Chap. 6 in *Interpretation of Dreams*, poem is a rebus and the perfect rebus-reader is Joyce / Longinus, *On the Sublime* / Aristotle, *On Poetry & Style* / Jung's specious division between imaginal and imaginary / *Gate of Horn* / Shakespeare, mystery plays / Wieners, Whalen, di Prima / Pound & Shelley / Williams & Keats / Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, nature of passion in poetry / Marlowe / Frances Yates (Dr. Faustus was an attack on John Dee) / Hermetic/Kabbalah / *Edward II*, *Tamburlaine* "Every your queen should see this" / Dante, *De Vulgaria Eloquentia*, *Convivio*, *Tenth Epistle*

/ Shekinah / Corbin, Dante's base in Islam / Alchemy & Poetry / Blindness of Homer / Memory / Nietzsche (the child must work to become the Child) / Chaucer / Herbert / Milton / Blake / Emerson & Carlyle / Whitman / Dickinson / Chomsky (against the creative minds of Sapir & Whorf) / John Stuart Mill and liberalism / Abraham, Jacob & Issac / Zohar / Solomon erecting altars to Ishtar / Midrash / Frank O'Hara / How the Virus changes all that stuff about "species purity" / Miscegenation / Germans, Scythians, Eurasians / Disease / Deceit (as integral to mind, "How do we take deceit into the New City of Truth?") / Have you ever been so in love that you didn't know if the Other was angel or human? / Pain / Sappho / Craft / Lore

That was the first lecture. He started precisely on time and quit on time and left. We just sat there, stunned, drifting into despair. I think eventually someone came in and told us to leave.³³³

Duncan confessed, in an undated letter to McNaughton, that in his own view "the 'Ideas of Meaning' course of the Fall 1980 term was a disaster course in my own failure to anticipate the level of young students. None, I think, were prepared to deal w/ Poetry as an Idea of Meaning in the History of Ideas."³³⁴ The students, however, as unprepared and overwhelmed as they may have been, hardly saw the course as a failure. Strauss said, "You knew you were...going to have to...think about it for the next ten or fifteen or thirty years," and indeed many of the younger poets such as himself, Shurin, Thackrey, Grundberg, and others enrolled in the course would do just that. They could hardly have asked for anything more. It had been about 25 years, incidentally, since Duncan himself first proposed to address the subject in this way when he taught, ever so briefly, at Black Mountain College in 1956. Duncan acknowledged in March 1980 that both of his first semester courses at New College were developed out of the material he first taught at Black Mountain, though now he

had another quarter-century of reading and writing to inform them, or to contend with, depending on how one looks at it. On the earlier occasion, he had likewise offered twinned courses under near identical frames: "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," which lead five years later to his 1961 essay of that title, and a workshop on "basic techniques." Duncan had conceived the former as a "general" lecture course (though with elements of the "bull-session" mixed in) on "the concerns of the writer or the painter, or the musician, or the actor; and above all our own concern with this thing called FORM," while the latter was diametrically opposed in the particularity and specificity of its "study [of] techniks" and as a discussion-based seminar (though Duncan allowed, "from time to time, I will read short lectures either as introductions to the work at hand, as hypotheses arising from the work we have done, or as summaries of what we have done").³³⁵ So it was to be again at New College, with the latter appearing in the catalogue simply as "The Use of Basic Elements":

An advanced study of surroundings, interrelationships of vowels and consonants, stress and syllabic count, junctures and disjunctures, phrasings, complex structures and functions of language as making for poetry. The course is designed to explore and to extend ideas of form in poetry with reference to propositions made by poets from Dante with *De Vulgare Eloquentia* to the theory and practice of contemporary poets of the order of Olson and Zukofsky. The work will be to make a descriptive catalogue or grammar of elements advanced by poets in the European tradition and to raise propositions of new possibilities.³³⁶

As Duncan put it in March 1980, the course would be concerned with the "transformational grammar of the poem..., describ[ing] and stud[ing] intensively the

state of the art proposed in poetry at its highest development[, along with] potential developments arising in contemporary music, spatial arts, as well as theories of language.”³³⁷

In describing the Basic Elements course, Grundberg said,

there was a sense almost like if you're teaching an oil painting class, teaching people how do you work with oil paints as opposed to water colors, instead of just having a nice idea of a picture you'd like to make. Somehow language is considered to be completely abstract, like there's no tangible material there, whereas if you're a musician you always have to deal with sound, the limitations of sound, and the promises of sound, and if you're a painter you have to get to know your medium, whether it's acrylics or whatever. So it was somewhat of the same approach that Robert was getting us into in the Basic Elements class.

In fact, Duncan acknowledged the influence, albeit indirect, of the former Bauhaus artist and theorist Joseph Albers on his own “basic techniques” workshop at Black Mountain, where Albers had been the most “dominant figure” from 1933 to 1949, as Duberman notes. Even “those who weren't enrolled in Albers's courses not only heard about them constantly...but still more, saw and heard Albers himself in community meetings, at mealtimes, [etc.]... His views were continually quoted and argued about.”³³⁸ Though Duncan would not come to teach at Black Mountain until seven years after Albers had moved on to Yale—Charles Olson had surely become the “dominant figure” at Black Mountain in the interim—Albers's ideas continued to reverberate, influencing Duncan's own. As he told Ann Charters in 1969, “perhaps thinking of the work Albers had done earlier at Black Mountain, my idea was to

work with the materials of poetry, when a technique applies, and everything else would be their own account"³³⁹—an insistence Duncan would make in March 1980 for New College as well: "It isn't our affair what kind of poems they are [writing]; it's our affair how they *answer* for their poetry."³⁴⁰

In a 1971 interview with Mary Harris, he said, "I just had what would be anybody's idea of what Albers must have been doing. You knew that [Albers's students] had color theory, and that they did a workshop sort of approach, and that they didn't aim at a finished painting.... I thought, "Well, that's absolutely right."³⁴¹ Duberman writes that "Albers tried to make his students see that the life of an object involved its inner qualities, its external appearance and, finally, its relationship to other objects,"³⁴² and to accomplish this pedagogical end, "first he gave his students direct contact with material—wood or string, wire, paper, stone. To get them to handle the material thoroughly, he initially forbade the use of tools...and he would deliberately choose unusual materials whose properties were not widely known or had not been systematically applied—straw, corrugated cardboard, newspaper—in order to discourage students from imitation and repetition...."³⁴³ Albers "alternated exercises on the essence and interrelationship of materials with others that dealt with the external appearance of materials—what he called *matière* studies"³⁴⁴—and in his drawing class, Albers instructed his students, "Only draw what you see...and train the pencil to do what your eye sees. Don't worry about 'self-expression.' That will take care of itself. Style will follow. What I want to find out now is if your hand is

capable of following your eye. If you can *draw*." Toward this end, "sometimes the exercise would simply consist of drawing page after page of lines, freehand straight lines, in order to train the hand to be steady."³⁴⁵

Duncan's own courses at Black Mountain and later at New College had a great deal in common with those of Albers. He treated language as Albers treated paper, as a material, investigating the vowels, consonant clusters, and syllables of poems with at least as much intricacy and intimacy as the New Critics, whose infamous close reading techniques so influenced the Creative Writing Workshop, but he did so with an entirely different intent and with an entirely different mode of attention. Duncan told his students at Black Mountain that he wanted them to approach poems "as detectives, not judges,"³⁴⁶ in other words, not to evaluate, but to investigate, or "to explore the rhythmic organization of a poem," as he put it about the first formal workshop he taught in 1954, under the auspices of the Poetry Center at San Francisco State University, "beginning with technics but I had better say physics..., beginning with the kinds of motion and levels of motion in poetic language: accentual, syllabic, by breath phrase, periodic, by repetition, development, variation, contradiction, disassociation, etc. That rime, meaning, images, color, texture, etc. should be considered as aspects of motion in a poem."³⁴⁷ As he told his Black Mountain students, "Week by week we will study...vowels, consonants, the structure of rime,—these are the elements of tone in writing both what we call poetry and what we call prose. Then three weeks on elements of movement, what is often

called 'metrics.' The syllable, the word, the phrase, the line, the paragraph, and the sentence."³⁴⁸ His assignments, he later said, "were exercises, not instructions or information I had to give them,"³⁴⁹ and just as Albers's exercises "didn't aim at [students' producing] a finished painting," Duncan's were not designed for the production of "finished" poems or even necessarily "poems" at all, rather more like "page after page of lines," as in Albers's drawing exercise—only instead of "freehand straight lines" drawn with a pencil, these were lines built up out of the minims of language. As Duberman notes, "one never had an 'advanced' course with Albers—moving, say, from Basic Design (*Werklehre*) to Advanced Design, or from paper to wood to plastic. The advance was from paper to more paper, the challenge focused on how to give new language to familiar material, each time aiming at greater intimacy. And when the exercise was over, back to the beginning."³⁵⁰ So it was with Duncan. There were no Intermediate or Advanced Elements courses to follow Basic Elements. The classroom was neither factory nor finishing school, but an open field, to use a familiar Duncan trope, the task a continual turning of the earth. Hence the shift, as I see it, in Duncan's diction away from "Technics" and Basic "Techniques" to Basic "Elements" and "Physics," emphasizing the process-oriented, experiential aspects of the poet's working in language as the sculptor works in wood, stone, etc. Confronted with the inherent limitations and implications of the material, the questions were not how to dissolve the knot, fuse the fissure, etc. but how to work with these imperfections, attend to them, and follow their

suggestions for the sake of a better understanding the material itself. Such an understanding would presumably impact the poetry students wrote, but that poetry was neither the subject nor the object of Duncan's workshops, seminars, or lectures.

In his foundational teaching at Black Mountain, "no [student] manuscripts and no [student] poems were read at all during the semester," Duncan said. "They could show me poems, but it would be in the same way they were looking at poems themselves"³⁵¹—as detectives, as explorers, not as judges critiquing their peers' work, or craftsmen refining their own. At New College, students did not show their poems to Duncan at all in the course of their study, and even the earlier Albers-inflected workshop exercises were put aside in favor of a concerted and collective inquiry into the basic elements of language and ideas of meaning. As Strauss recalled, "Rather than an introduction or a survey this was to be an *inquiry*, so Duncan began by asking the question: what *are* the basic elements of poetry and of language? and we began to make a map:

Mode & mood	series & sets
junction & boundary	open & closed forms
rime & reason	letter/word/sound/number
vowel & consonant	sound-letter-syllable-word-sentence
sound & silence	
phonation & audition	line-syntax-stanza-page-text
phoneme & morpheme	
seme & hyposeme	segments & coordinations
metaphor & metonymy	
speech & writing	writing/conditions
pronouns & persons	topos/trope/type ³⁵²

Grundberg added:

He forced us all to learn the IPA [International Phonetic Alphabet] so we could all take any section of a poem—he did this in class to a certain extent, like he had some lines from Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, “unarmed Eros the long day’s task is done,” and he would translate those into sounds, into the IPA, and look at it with “Robert Duncan eyes” in the IPA and see all the rhymes and call and response that was going on there.³⁵³

Strauss remembered that “Duncan insisted on the importance of phonetic transcription as the entrance into any understanding of sound and sense in language.... We did fill notebooks with phonetic transcriptions of Spencer and Shakespeare and Donne and Verlaine and Dorn and Alice Notely. This was a first step. After we had the phonemes then we could look for vowel and consonant constellations noting sounds tone-leading of vowels and line by line phrasings and other features.”³⁵⁴ As Strauss wrote elsewhere, “Duncan was convinced the IPA was a real breakthrough in comparative poetics and translation, allowing one to move around from one language to another, recognizing rime. At one point he said ‘The IPA makes Babel obsolete.’ We applied the IPA broadly, for analysis, and narrowly, for recording how someone was speaking.”³⁵⁵

This study of the Basic Elements was meant to remedy the more technical aspect of that “noticeable, evident collapse in the craft of the poem” Duncan lamented, but lest it be forgotten, Grundberg also said:

The other part of basic training that Robert gave us was what he defined as “Langland to Yeats.” The other thing he thought was that poets these days don’t know their own tradition. They don’t have their own energy storehouse, because they don’t know all these inspiring works that have happened before and can’t draw from them or learn from them, so he told all of us to get the Auden-Pearson anthologies [*Poets of the English Language*, in five volumes: Langland to Spenser; Marlowe to Marvell; Milton to Goldsmith; Blake to Poe; and Tennyson to Yeats].... I learned a tremendous amount just reading in these anthologies and discovering all this stuff that I’d maybe heard the names before but never really read – [e.g.] some of the really early anonymous medieval lyrics, which were wonderful. That was another simultaneous track that we were all expected to sort of bone up on.³⁵⁶

During that first fall term, as I have noted, Duncan complemented such detailed technical and pointedly traditional study with the wide ranging Ideas of Meaning course, which he ultimately deemed a failure; however, Basic Elements, which he described in March 1980 as Structure of Rime 1, was meant as the first part of a two-course sequence, to be followed by Structure of Rime 2: Persons and the Universe of the Poem, where he wished to “straighten out problems of the writer, [i.e.] where is the writer in the poem and all,...also conceived of in terms of rhyme.”³⁵⁷ Listed in the catalogue as “The Nature of Persons Proposed in Poetry,” the course is described evocatively there as “a series of lectures on divine powers, daemons, guides, commands and instructors, as poets have named them; on the identity of the poet and his office; on the pronominal persons – the I, the you, the it, the he, she, we and they; on specters and chimeras; on archetypes and allegorical entities; on personae; on remembered and imagined persons; as impersonations and depersonalizations; on the World as person.”³⁵⁸

There are clear resonances here of the course on *The Encounter* that di Prima would offer in the summer, and in March 1980, Duncan related his course to her offerings in the spring term, which she was to ostensibly chair, though he insisted, “I am not getting into the role that Diane is very strong on, and that’s the borderline in which you have a personal mythology—and poets all have a personal mythology”—meaning certain figures and stories from various historical mythologies with which they identify or on which they draw in their work—as di Prima’s course put it: *The Beloved*, *The Angel*, *The Guide*, *The Landscape*. He acknowledged, actually, “in part I will,” but continued, “while I’ll be centering on what...poets have to say about the poem, I’m going to also be pointing out that they each developed—and this is another part of the thing, what we sometimes think of as their personality, and think, ‘gee, that’s a poet’—they do build, they become heroes, victims, a whole series of things and there’s a fate to it.”³⁵⁹

According to John Thorpe, when the Poetics Program began, Duncan feared,

on the basis of American poetry in the 1970s, that poetry [was] about to be identified with vehicles for expressing personality in view of a great many reactions to depersonalization..., technologies, simulation, popularity, wisdoms offering to transfigure or heroicise anyone mechanically and vicariously and so on. He didn’t decry needs to assert or expand personality in poetry whatsoever, but had us inspect them at numerous levels—at least on four: one, ourselves; two, the pronouns and loss of pronouns in English grammar; three, the figures recurring regardless of epoch in poetry; and four, the figures of other poets as guides allies or companions. These were all personae in the Browning sense. To be confronted and developed in parallel ways, but not to be confused. He thought that treating the

presences in oneself as an identity threatened full articulation....
Duncan felt, I think, that in almost all writing about poetry a
voyeurism had blighted the connection between noun and pronoun
and form itself. The initial engagement in his atelier meetings then,
was to find out who the poets were and who their elements were and
who our own variable personal agencies were as they collided with
him.³⁶⁰

The course had its perhaps most immediate antecedent in a paper written for the
MLA conference in San Francisco, December 1979, where he joined a session (along
with Robert Creeley, William Spanos, and Warren Tallman), dubbed "The Self in
Postmodern Poetry," which title the essay shares. In it he traced "the play of first
person, second person, third person, of masculine and feminine and of neuter, the 'it'
that plays a major role in recent work, [as] noticeably active in the multiphastic
proposition of voice in my poetry,... impersonations, personifications,
transpersonations and depersonations,...from the earliest levels of development in
my language"³⁶¹—"so far back that it has lost its trace for me of its derivation—a
children's tune..., a popular song?—there is a trinity, Me-Myself-and-I, three
persons in one"³⁶²—to early work like "The Years as Catches," in which the word
"catches" means "the musical form in which the first person, second person, third
person, and 'it,' in a round, singing the same line, produce telling changes in its play
of meanings,"³⁶³ through mid-career work like "Adam's Way," "with the changes
between 'your Self,' where Self is no longer pronomial but a person, counterpart of
your angel, and the second yourself, where the ego is banished from the work, or
rather is commanded to lose itself in the work,"³⁶⁴—all the way to "And a Wisdom as

Such,” where “the Me-Myself-and-I trinity is dissolved”³⁶⁵ (with recourse en route to Shakespeare, Emerson, Whitman, Freud, Jung, the Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Hinduism, Socrates, and more).

Aaron Shurin remembered *The Nature of Persons Proposed in Poetry* being comprised of “rehearsals of pronouns, literally. We had to write papers on I, We, You, etc.,” and these papers were duplicated, bound, and distributed to the members of the class, each in turn, beginning with the papers on the first person pronoun, so that all members of the class might get a glimpse into each other’s “I” before beginning to write of the “We” and the “You.” All persons and pronouns were intertwined, and each riven, dispersed. In a published extrapolation of these exchanges, Susan Thackrey echoed Duncan:

Like many of us who speak an American dialect, my first really conscious use of the many words referring to my small first-person self was due mostly to their sublime smart-aleck magic:

“I’m going to the playground.”

“Who’s going with you?”

“Me, myself, and I.”

One was turned into many, but many were still one, and best of all, one could really do all the things that had formerly seemed to...require accompaniment.³⁶⁶

Classmate Ken Petrelli observed in his turn that “the self, by virtue of being everything that is not ‘other,’ is a very limited description of what the poet brings to the poem. A mythopoesis—the process of making a personal myth—is involved.”³⁶⁷ Shurin added, “Part of the shiftier nature of pronouns is that they are always shifting

the emphasis according to the person at hand. Carl [Grundberg] agrees here: ‘the “I” in “You-and-I” is not the same as the “I” by itself. Susan mentions how the “I” and “You” “dress” themselves up for each other.’³⁶⁸ Indeed, Thackery remarked,

“You” conditions the words, and causes them...to be put in order.
“You” are this person for and to whom my words are properly arranged; they are a mask made fitting for you. It is already clear from this that the boundary lines between “I” and “You” are obscure. Since I am “you” for you, you must also be busily fitting your words to me. This is more than psychology’s term “projection,” which suggests that the confusion can be cleared, and the business of living an “individual” life gotten on with.

It’s noteworthy that Freud’s formulations lack a “you.” “You” is consigned to “reality.”³⁶⁹

In light of this reality, Grundberg offered a distinction “between two types of We found in poetry”:

The first may be called the Hermetic We. It is contractile in nature, a cartouche. The second may be called the Congregational We, expansive in nature, inclusive....

The hermetic We evokes a militant appearance of a We where the most stark and isolated I would be expected. Here is a case where what is most strange is most familiar.

In contrast to the hermetic We is the We as congregation. In the hermetic We the We leads the I through the poem. In the congregational We the I leads the We through the poem. The hermetic We calls the I to its strangeness, and therein lies the danger that the I, relying on exoticism, will hide away from itself. The danger with the congregational We is that I may assume that We, on whose behalf I am speaking, feel the same way I do.”³⁷⁰


First, finally, and most fundamentally, as Thackery pointed out:

“Person” itself comes from the Latin word for mask, and perhaps, beyond that, from “per,” through, and “sonare,” sound: to sound through. Both of these derivations reveal to us that ‘person’ is a function of speech, and cannot be defined without speech.

But notice what is happening in speech itself: it exists, or more properly, manifests itself, at least on the human level, only through invention. There is no “true” self in “person.” Only the mask beneath the mask is discovered. We speak only as first, or second, or third person....

Speech tells fictions, since it must come through the mouth, always, of a persona.

The transformations are endless. I, you, he, she, it, all exist in interior speech, image and conception, in daydream and sleep, as aspects of myself. Perhaps this is what makes poetry, with its acceptance of transformation, the most precise speech.³⁷¹

As we shall see, such generative, complicating intimacies of exchange, quite the opposite of groupthink, would characterize much of the work done in and around the Poetics Program, throughout its initial incarnation, but seems to have its most articulable genesis here in Duncan’s Structure of Rime sequence, which he would repeat the following year, Basic Elements again in the Fall, the Nature of Persons again in the Spring, leaving the “disaster” of the Ideas of Meaning course behind. 

To round out the first academic year, in the Poetics Program’s first summer session, 1981, Duncan proposed to teach a class, initially called What Is at Stake in Poetics?, on Walt Whitman and Charles Baudelaire, specifically *Leaves of Grass* and *Fleurs du mal*, “the proposition [being] that they do the same thing,” as he put it in March 1980. Duncan would soon add Emily Dickinson into the mix, making it “Three Nineteenth Century Poets” in the catalogue:

A series of lectures alternating with seminar sessions for discussion and presentation of papers, on the poems of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Charles Baudelaire, as they present the idea of life-work. While key poems will be designated as selected from *Leaves of Grass*, *Fleurs du mal*, and assembled poems of Emily Dickinson, the

course will encourage extended reading of these three poets. Baudelaire will be studied in French, but the student who does not “know” French will not be handicapped, for the course will be directed in all three poets read to how we, between the original language of the poem and the translations, including our own interior readings of the poem, arrive at a sense of the underlying poetics.

Duncan had been studying Whitman for fifty years—Jarnot’s biography finds him reading Whitman intently as an undergraduate circa 1940, in the early 1960s considering the New Left as “heirs to the evolving democracy Whitman championed,”³⁷² annotating Whitman’s poetry while beginning work on his own seminal essay, “The Truth and Life of Myth” during the Summer of Love, among other occasions—and the 1970s were bookended by the two major essays, “Changing Perspectives in Reading Whitman” (written in 1969 to mark the bard’s 150th birthday and delivered at New York University at a symposium likewise marking that occasion), and “The Adventure of Whitman’s Line” (delivered at the Walt Whitman Poetry Center in Camden, NJ, at the end of 1978). Baudelaire, too, was an early and oft-touched touchstone for Duncan, who’d first read his work likewise as an undergraduate, with many happy returns—perhaps happiest in the late 1970s when he began to study French in earnest, wrote a set of poems “To Master Baudelaire,” and traveled to France for an extended stay. By the summer of 1981, Whitman and Baudelaire were both old, intimate friends—it is with Baudelaire’s words, in fact, that Duncan closes the poem “Let Me Join You Again This Morning, Walt Whitman,” which itself closes his essay on “The Adventure of Whitman’s Line” —

but Duncan confessed in a letter to Robert Adamson, "It's the first time I have read Dickinson in depth—some 1775 poems in the Variorum...—I don't know what will emerge as the experience of her transient structures/passages of configurations, that I relate to 'ideograms,'...she dwells on visitations and loses (thefts, weathers, loves) contrasting with the systemic structures of Whitman and Baudelaire."³⁷³ Duncan's willingness, even eagerness, to challenge himself in this way in his teaching recalls his admonition to di Prima, when she initially resisted teaching her signature course on Hidden Religions, because she didn't "know anything about it": "Well, that's why we teach, isn't it?"³⁷⁴

V. Supplements

Going into the first year of the program, Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer were still ostensibly “visiting” faculty only for those first three terms, and it is unclear at what point their “visits” were extended, or for how long, or when they came to be understood as open-ended, or permanent—at least as permanent as anything at New College could be understood to be. Toward the end of the first year, after a reading to mark Gay Freedom Week on June 24, 1981, Duncan and di Prima told *Poetry Flash* reporter John Bryan “they both hope to again teach poetry courses next year at San Francisco’s New College,”³⁷⁵ which seems to imply it wasn’t a sure thing. A year later Duncan would take a visiting appointment at Bard for the 1982-83 academic year, which left McNaughton questioning whether or not Duncan would return to New College, but an undated letter McNaughton sent to inquire clearly indicates his hope and desire that Duncan would do so, and Duncan’s reply of 11 October 1982 states unequivocally and emphatically, “Yes, I will be back in the program Summer-Fall 83; Spring, Summer etc. 84.”³⁷⁶ It’s impossible to say what the source of any uncertainty at this stage might have been: the core faculty’s commitment to the program, the program’s commitment to the core faculty, the college’s commitment to the program, or some combination of the three. In the end it is of little consequence. These exchanges serve only to underscore the seemingly constant precarity of the whole venture.

In March 1980, when the faculty gathered to set the first year's curriculum, they first hashed out various logistical details, not least of which concerned the program's finances—still uncertain six months out from the actual launch of the enterprise. It seems several grant applications were either still in preparation or had only recently been submitted to the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, San Francisco Foundation, and Hotel Tax Fund, but there were some difficulties in seeking funds for the Poetics Program independent of the College as a whole, and other difficulties in depending on the College, as we've seen. Moreover, the final accreditation report wasn't expected for another six to eight weeks yet, so they would have to wait until then to officially put word out about the program and see if their target minimum enrollment of twenty full-time-equivalent students at \$4500 a year was reasonable. Even then, as McNaughton noted, historically at New College they never knew how many students they'd have until the first week of the term, and sometimes later, as much as a month or more into it. There were perpetual cash flow problems. The faculty likely wouldn't get their first paychecks until November, some six weeks after the semester had begun, at the earliest. On top of that, health benefits still needed to be negotiated with the administration, as normally these were provided only for full time faculty and Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer would all be teaching officially on a part-time basis. They would earn \$2,000 per class, but for two of the three terms, each would teach only one class. They would take turns as "chair" of the program, and during their

term as chair, they would receive an additional \$2,000 for fulfilling that role, while also teaching a second class at the same rate, bringing their pay that term to \$6,000, and their total pay for the academic year to \$10,000 each, for four classes taught, and one term chaired. Needless to say, \$10,000 doesn't go very far today, but even then it was a paltry sum.³⁷⁷ On the March 1980 audiotapes, however, there seemed surprisingly little concern about the financial marginality. Duncan even remarked that "in a way we are volunteering..., because we're at home...don't have to secure our residences, etc...!" They all seemed to understand, as Duncan put it, that "this [would be] a model of what a program [might be]. In the course of teaching we would build up the model," and so it was ultimately "an experiment," he said. There were no guarantees.

Though they voiced no objection to these remarks, it is impossible to say how wholly the others shared Duncan's financial unconcern. Duncan and his partner, Jess, had no mouths to feed other than their own, and though by no means wealthy, Duncan's invitations to read and teach had proliferated throughout the 1970s, as Jarnot's exhaustive rundown of his calendar shows, and as he told Ekbert Faas in 1980, "most of my income comes from...[the] use [of] my books in [college] courses. At least a thousand copies of *The Opening of the Field* and *Bending the Bow* are sold every year. And they also use *The Truth and Life of Myth*. And these books [are] doing very well."³⁷⁸ Meltzer, on the other hand, had three teenage daughters, at least one of whom still lived at home with him, his wife Tina, and their very young son, and he

had little royalty income from the twenty-odd books he'd published to date and no steady employment elsewhere. Likewise, di Prima had four children at home, with a fifth, her eldest daughter, for whom to look out as well, and though her private workshop and other reading and teaching income may have been somewhat more substantial than Meltzer's, she had no regular gig, either, and similarly slight royalties. It may have been the very precarity of their situations, however, halfway along the walks of their lives, that allowed Meltzer and di Prima to join Duncan in this most precarious venture. The program continuing to offer a place for these poets to teach from year to year may have been as uncertain a thing as the timely delivery of paychecks from month to month, but it seems that all felt if the experiment were to fail, it would be no skin off their noses. They weren't giving up particularly gainful employment elsewhere, after all, so why not throw themselves into it alongside their longtime friend and mentor?

For Duncan, who had begun to tire of the busy travelling schedule, and whose health, though as yet without any major incident or diagnosis, had already begun to fade, continuing to teach in a more consistent and close-to-home context appealed to him, and though lesser in prestige (and financial remuneration) than the appointment at UC Berkeley he'd been lead-on to expect, the Poetics Program at New College would find Duncan in far truer company, of both students and fellow faculty, than he would have had across the bay. Whatever history he may have had with that university and whatever friendships and affinities he may have had with

Thom Gunn and Ron Loewinsohn, who were then teaching there, in Diane di Prima and David Meltzer, as we have seen, Robert Duncan had a complement of core faculty members with whom he shared far longer and much more intimate relationships, and moreover whose own poetic practices and areas of intellectual engagement were far more attuned to his own. So the trio of Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer, regardless of their official status, and irrespective of any guarantees, agreed. They would be responsible from the outset for the core of the curriculum of the graduate program, and the rest of the program's offerings would be conceived as supplementary and supportive of their teaching. I've noted above the founders' concern, in first drafting the program proposal and pursuing proper academic accreditation, over their core faculty's anti-institutional histories, and I'd like to elaborate those histories a bit further on, but here it seems apropos rather to address how McNaughton and Patler sought to simultaneously shore up the program's academic credentials while also supplementing the peculiar core curriculum, by drafting a few members of the extant New College faculty as adjuncts.

Lynn Luria-Sukenick, who held a BA from Brandeis and PhD from the City University of New York, had taught briefly at a number of universities, before joining New College in the late 1970s. She had also published essays in several academic journals, three books of poetry, and a short story she wrote collaboratively with her husband—the writer, Wallace Stevens scholar, and founder of the American Book Review Ronald Sukenick— which appeared in one of the latter's own

collections of fiction. Judging by the tone and content of a few letters she sent to McNaughton as the program was getting underway, she was happy to participate, but her personal investment in the program was slight, as was her ultimate role. In the summer of 1981, she taught a course called *The Uses of the Eye*, which focused on “the poetry of Wordsworth and [Wallace] Stevens, their practices as poets and in particular their practices as philosophers of the visual.” As the catalogue description put it, “We will investigate a variety of kinds of visual attention and image-forming, including mimicry in nature, dream theory and theories of painting, and will study our own image-making habits and capacities in some detail.”³⁷⁹ In addition to the work of Wordsworth and Stevens, Luria-Sukenick turned to Marion Milner’s *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Jerry Mander’s *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Roger Caillois’s *The Mask of Medusa*, and Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*. I’ve gathered no other information about this course, and it appears to have been the extent of her contributions to the program, though she continued to teach at New College in other departments for some years. I mention it here mostly for the factual record. However, it is also worth noting that while Meltzer and di Prima were both inveterate collage artists themselves, deeply influenced by the likes of Wallace Berman, George Herms, and Jess, with di Prima also working notably in watercolor, Meltzer in pen, and Duncan in crayon, among other mediums, and while these members of the core faculty would indeed incorporate reference to their own practices and to the many artists important to them into the course of their teaching,

as would the occasional visiting poet, the visual and plastic arts, as such, seem to have occupied precious little space in the curriculum of the Poetics Program.

Theater and music, on the other hand, did from the very start. Poetry had, of course, begun as song; and, of course, many of the great poetical works, particularly those of antiquity, were meant for dramatic presentation. In March 1980, the core faculty all agreed that these were key aspects of any study of poetics, though none had the desire to teach either subject themselves.

While Martin Epstein and David Doty had actually been included in the original program proposal, before Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer were brought on board, their courses in theater and music, respectively, which seemed quite simpatico with the core faculty's own experience of these arts and their implications to their own poetics, were welcome supplements to the curriculum.

Martin Epstein first joined the New College faculty at the same time as Louis Patler, in 1972, after receiving his BA in Literature and Creative Writing from the City College of New York and his MA in Drama from San Francisco State University, where he also taught briefly. He'd since established himself as a playwright, actor, and director, having co-founded the Encounter Theater and acted as Associate Director of the San Francisco Actor's Workshop. He wasn't present at the curriculum planning meetings, where McNaughton noted only that Epstein wanted to mount a production and thereby offer students certain practical information about the

theater, but the first catalogue description of his course, *Poetics and Theatre: Theory and Practice*, would express a deeper concern with “the theatre’s cyclical shift between ‘mythic’ presentation and ‘naturalism.’ Plays by Sophocles, the French Surrealists, Artaud, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Cocteau, Brecht and Genet will be eaten alive. We will also use as much Bay Area ‘live’ theatre as lends itself to our quest.”³⁸⁰ In the second catalogue, the course was described as

an intensive examination of the relation between the craft of poetry and the manifestation of *the poetic* in drama. The course will focus on the transformation of the word to “flesh”, on the ways in which the poet’s vision may extend traditional ideas of plot, character, dialogue, thought and spectacle into new dramatic forms. Representative poets and playwrights will be studied, and students will be encouraged to develop a “poetics of space,” particularly as it involves the use of ritual, myth and mask.³⁸¹

This description would be repeated verbatim in the third catalogue, and there is much here that sounds in tune with the concerns of the other faculty and echoes the original program proposal, which defined poetry in part in reference to “myth, cosmologos, [and] ritual speech, i.e., the legomenon of drama and ceremony.”³⁸² The resonance with Duncan’s course on the Nature of Persons Proposed in Poetry is clear, too, but Aaron Shurin said his “what he was teaching didn’t quite dovetail with that everybody else was teaching.”³⁸³ For some, Epstein’s class was a welcome respite from the often overwhelming intensity of most the core faculty’s courses. Kerry Tepperman recalled

Martin's classes were in the evenings, I think..., and they were a mix of graduate and undergraduate. We read a lot of plays, and they were kind of wide ranging. You could read Beckett and then you could read something completely different. I loved it because I'd always read plays, even in high school, so I felt at home. He would lecture, and there was a fair amount of very comfortable conversation. He would ask questions, and it felt like you could give a spacious answer. I think in some of the other classes there was a feeling that whatever you said had to be encapsulated and concise.... None of us waxed on much. Most classes tended to be more teacher-centered, and Martin wasn't like that. Nobody revered him. He'd already had his big breakout play, *Autobiography of a Pearl Diver*, and it had been a big hit, had been at the Magic Theater in the city and also had a nice run in New York, and he was about 40, but anyway nobody revered him, so it was more relaxed and everyone in the class felt like you could talk in a more spacious way yourself.

She said, "He was like a regular person, so I could hold up my end of a conversation." She also appreciated the fact that Epstein "did get us writing. We would write these little plays and come in and read our little play. He would give us little set-ups for our short plays—very short, he'd want a page and a half, something that resolved in a page and a half, but with a beginning and a middle and an end."³⁸⁴ Epstein would teach Poetics and Theater for three years in the Poetics Program before the association was severed, for reasons unbeknownst to me. I have been unable to get in touch with Epstein himself, and no one I've interviewed has offered any clear memory, only the suggestion that his star had perhaps begun to rise in the theater world, taking him away from the classroom, and perhaps San Francisco. In the end, Shurin said, "his class was fine, but it wasn't of the same order as the others."³⁸⁵ It seems appropriate to offer some thoughts on the importance of the

theater to at least two of the core faculty, namely, di Prima and Duncan, as a way to continue to articulate the particular ethos of the Poetics Program, as I've come to understand it.

Duncan had experimented with the masque early in his career, with works like "A Poet's Masque" (dated "Hallowe'en 1948") for example, but most notably *Faust Foutu: A Comic Masque*, in 1955, of which Michael McClure wrote:

The actors in the presentation, seated at a long table on a little dais, [were] friends, actors, experimental film-makers, poets, painters, and playwrights. Poet Jack Spicer leaned towards the audience at moments with intensity and almost boyish innocence of expression and near harshness of diction. Larry Jordan, the film-maker, had been encouraged by Duncan to just sing loudly and naturally letting his untrained voice carry Faust's songs. Painter, and life-friend of Duncan's, Jess Collins, spoke his lines with immense clarity and irony. The play was being tested on the ear, there was no acting-out as Duncan did in his solo performances, this was to be heard.³⁸⁶

Two years later, when Duncan got to Black Mountain, where theater "was a core," as he told Ann Charters—"When I was there, it seems people could feel most at home taking theater."—he continued to work on *Faust Foutu*, along with new works *The Origins of Old Son*, which poked fun at Charles Olson, and *Medea at Kolchis*. Duncan wrote the latter play "as the actors rehearsed it, embellishing the script to conform not merely with his developing sense of the play's characters but with emerging personality traits of the actors as they grappled with their roles.... The play came to fit the actors, as Eric Weinberger [said], 'like a much-too-tight glove'; it was difficult to perform roles that the cast knew embodied Duncan's view of *them*—difficult

because Duncan was a perceptive man."³⁸⁷ As Duncan himself put it in "Another Preface. 1963/1965" appended to 1965 Oyez edition of *Medea at Kolchis*, "When the play came into its own, it came from a cast of its own.... I began...drawing from the actors lines and masses of a picture I had not previously conceived. Then there were dramatic entities that came forward from my own phantasy to play upon the stage."³⁸⁸ Duncan continued, "We did not have a regular stage at Black Mountain. We improvised a theater area in a large hall, having the space of a small auditorium but no raised platform or proscenium arch. The play was not conceived then in terms of curtains, realistic scene changes,"³⁸⁹ but rather in terms of

the primitive theater of each of us in our own lives, the nursery where infantile and puerile passions are enacted in play; for the persons of my stage are playing house, playing elves, playing the eternal return of Jason and Medea. It has seemed to me that all man's psychic and spiritual life arises in such play with physical realities, using his actual body as it uses his actual world about him to enact its drama.

Scenes and properties of this stage then should be made up as children make up palaces from colored blocks and mountains from sand, or men make up sphinxes from women and raging wars from religious or political or economic phantasies.³⁹⁰

Speaking to Charters in 1969, Duncan recalled Black Mountain theater teacher Wes Huss's "idea [of] working out from people," as an encouragement, along with "Charles [Olson]'s fascination with stance...[which] was I'm sure related to Huss's actual use and exploration of the stance you can take as an actor: I mean, you can stand one way or another, by posture, and how totally different the whole situation will be dramatically when you are merely and entirely standing. For Charles this

stance was not merely metaphor.”³⁹¹ Nor was it for Duncan, whose stance was that the play ought to be entirely participatory, derived from the actors themselves, and dependent upon their very presence in the present. For his *Medea* Duncan said, “I could get a cast of six...and there were just barely more people in the audience than there would be in the play. Out of it came the idea of having a play with everybody in the play, and no audience at all. It’s another possibility. We didn’t do that but it’s a lingering idea from Black Mountain days.”³⁹²

It was only a few years later that di Prima, Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), Alan Marlowe, John Herbert McDowell, and James Waring founded the New York Poet’s Theater, in 1961; and di Prima’s revelation, or affirmation, of art as magic in contrasting Poet’s Theater productions by Kenneth Kock and Michael McClure relates directly to Duncan’s thoughts on the participatory masque. Poet-scholar David Hadbawnik, himself a student of di Prima’s, several decades later wrote:

It seems to have been a remarkably creative moment.... Not only were different disciplines brought together—in addition to artists like Herms, dancers from Merce Cunningham’s troupe often took part—but poets from various backgrounds mingled, contributed, and acted in each other’s plays. To me, that’s the essence of what Poets Theater can do; it’s what I find so magical about the still-thriving events in San Francisco, a space in which temporal, geographical, and aesthetic differences are temporarily dissolved, and poetry is enacted as both confrontation and entertainment, in ways that break the bounds of the traditional journal or reading format.³⁹³

The musical theory supplement to the core curriculum also appeared promisingly in step with the thinking of the core faculty, but similarly endured only three years, and only during the first year was it a full-scale course, taught by David Doty, who had been one of three students (with Henry Rosenthal and Dale Soules) to enroll in a class at New College in the mid-1970s taught by composer and pianist John Dinwiddie, himself a former student of Karl-Heinz Stockhausen and Black Mountain affiliate John Cage, though he later made his living as an engineer, leaving New College and New Music far behind. All three students were interested in New Music, “but we had no shared skill set that would have permitted us to perform any existing form of music, new or otherwise,” as he writes in a retrospective on his website.

I played recorders and had composed a number of pieces in pseudo-medieval style; Dale had played French horn and sung protestant hymns; Henry...played rudimentary rock guitar and had achieved a certain notoriety at New College by performing a piece involving a loaded revolver in a previous Dinwiddie music class.

Given our lack of suitable skills for playing any known form of notated music, it was decided that we would work on post-Cageian- or Fluxus-style improvisational formats—pieces with verbal rather than noted scores that tended to be very strict in a few parameters and completely free in others....

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1975, I attended Lou Harrison’s “Intonation in World Music” class at the Center for World Music in Berkeley and performed in a concert on Lou and Bill Colvig’s first justly tuned American gamelan (AKA, “Old Granddad,” the set of instruments for which Lou composed *La Koro Sutro* and the *Suite for Violin and American Gamelan*).... My studies with Lou Harrison gave me a clear understanding of the fundamentals of Just Intonation,

and my experience of performing in the American gamelan fired me with a desire to create and compose for similar instruments....

[We constructed] a set of diatonically tuned tubular metallophones...from brass tubing from a scrap yard in the Mission district of San Francisco..., [other] justly tuned instruments consisting mainly of aluminum-bar metallophones, spanning a range of five octaves..., a rosewood marimba, a set of brass tubular chimes ("liberated" from the New College pipe organ) and various drums.... [We] spent almost every available hour that summer cutting, filing, and testing aluminum bars in the New College art room (the former embalming room of the Mission-District mortuary where the school moved in January 1976).³⁹⁴

Doty graduated from New College that year and began teaching at the college in a variety of areas of contemporary and world music, while also enrolling in graduate studies at the Mills Center for Contemporary Music. His course for the Poetics Program was a two-semester sequence initially called Tuning: Interval as Ratio of Numbers, the Identity of Pitch and Rhythm, but revised to Musical Proportions: Microstructure and Macrostructure for the catalogue, where the first term was advertised thus:

Number can be used to describe music at all hierarchical levels, from the minimum perceivable event, to the largest aspects of structure. This course will begin with a brief introduction to the basic principles of acoustics and psychoacoustics which govern the production and perception of sound. This will be followed by an examination of the art and science of tuning, from its ancient (Sumero-Babylonian, Chinese, Greek) origins to the present. Rhythm and pitch will be viewed as two aspects of a single continuum.³⁹⁵

The second term, by way of a quote from Lou Harrison—"The song and dance conjoin at cadences and bow to form."—proposed to consider "mode as determinant

of melody and harmony; periodicity as determinant of measure and rhythm. Their interaction as determinants of phrase and form."³⁹⁶

Doty would teach only for one year in the Poetics Program, for reasons that are unclear. I have been unable to get in touch with him, though I've tried, and no one else I've spoken to had any specific recollections as to the reasons for his leaving. Regardless, in the second and third years of the program another acolyte of Lou Harrison and participant in the Cabrillo Music Festival would take Doty's place—though as poet-in-residence, not as full member of the faculty. In the late 1970s, San Francisco native and longtime Santa Cruz resident Christopher Gaynor participated in an improvisational band started by Michael McClure:

Dubbed the Elegant Buffoons, the group modeled itself after "a traditional Fukanese or Taiwanese poet's band, in which poets got together and played brass drinking cups, and bells, and castanets and whatever traditional instruments they knew how to use." [Robert] Duncan manned the percussion section, equipped "with a rubber drum, a coffee cup, and woodblock." Michael Palmer played in some sessions, as did Ron Silliman, who recalled, "McClure was the leader..., and it took place at his house...[but] Chris Gaynor...was also key (the actual leader of events, as such)."³⁹⁷

Gaynor also composed music for McClure's *Goethe: Ein Fragment* in 1978, and McNaughton recalled that he may have been "setting things of Duncan's to music, or there was some flattery involved. It was stupid.... [Robert Duncan] wanted him on the set..., [but] Gaynor was a jerk. Oh Christ. Yeah, and at some point Duncan understood that was the case too, but we were stuck with him for a year or two.

Idiot.”³⁹⁸ Others I spoke to snarled similarly when I raised Gaynor’s name, but none had specific stories to tell that might explain their sentiments, and I’ve been unable to track down Gaynor himself for his take, so I’ll have to leave it at that. It was hardly the only conflict to arise among the faculty, as we shall presently see, but this seemed more a conflict of personality than a conflict of principle.

As the Poetics Program began at the start of the 1980s, Louis Patler found himself the youngest member of a faculty again, just as he had at the outset of his teaching career aboard the boat of World Campus Afloat at the start of the 1970s, and he was by far the least versed, relatively new as he still was to the whole world of contemporary poetry and poetics his fellow faculty represented, and to the peculiar traditions they recognized. He was again closer in many ways (e.g., in age and degree of exposure to this world) to the prospective students of the program than he was to the other faculty, so, as he noted in curriculum discussions, “thinking of what *my* needs are” was akin to thinking of what the students’ needs might be. This approach was wholeheartedly endorsed by the others and would remain his impetus throughout his tenure in the Poetics Program:

It was quite conscious an effort.... [When I was a child,] I always loved playing with the bigger kids, the kids who were better than me, and that’s how I felt here, and so I would just work extra hard to try to play catch up. That was it. I just poured myself into this, reading, and taking notes, folding dog-eared pages. Fortunately, from my end of it at least, I didn’t perceive that any of the other core faculty ever held that against me or begrudged how far behind I was. They were very kind and would always offer me—“Oh, you finished that one,

well here's another one you can read." Or you know, "you might want to be aware of such and such a person," or whatever, so they were mentoring me at the same time that we were peers in some other ways.³⁹⁹

Patler had similar relations with many of the program's students, both as administrator and professor, though here, of course, he was peer and mentor, not mentee. Sarah Menefee recalled her first experiences at the college as an undergraduate, which actually began with auditing Patler's Visiting Poets/Introduction to Poetics class in 1978: "He would give me books, like Charles Olson, and say read this." She would read it, return it and be given another, until eventually, "he said why don't you come and enroll, but I said I couldn't afford that! But back then there were all these grants, so they hooked me up to some money, and it was enough to actually pay tuition and some left over."⁴⁰⁰ Dawn-Michelle Baude recalled contacting Patler at the behest of Michael Davidson, then her professor at the University of California, San Diego, to inquire about the program, "and Louis sent me *Letters for Origin*, by Olson. Sent it to me and said read this and come to New College!" She didn't do so then, but a year later, "Louis wrote and said ok your money came through, we got you money, and I couldn't turn it down.... And then I returned the book, *Letters for Origin*, when I got here." Stories of Patler's generosity abound—"Louis was just this presence *always* facilitating things, *very* helpful for people who had any trouble with the administration, or whatever," as Carl Grundberg recalled. "And his classes were probably a little more normal and doable

than the other classes, because they'd be smaller, and you know,"⁴⁰¹ he was only far enough ahead of the curve, as it were, as he needed to be to plan the course and lead it, which he hardly did from some position of great authority.

When Patler spoke of the first class he ever taught at New College, nearly a decade earlier, The Place Class, he noted that "this was before [he] even knew the name Charles Olson," but by this time he had begun to investigate Olson's work and to appreciate its importance to contemporary poetics and its relevance to his own abiding interests, so he proposed to teach a two-seminar sequence he called Place and Image, asking and attempting to answer the question "Is Place an Image?" through "studies in myth, topography, poetry, and anthropology." The first term would "examine two worlds having their correspondence in place: 'field' and 'cave'" as the catalogue description notes. "As a starting point we will use the works of Charles Olson and Robert Duncan which shall lead into domains larger than their immediate works and wider than matters proper to poetry per se. Mythology, cosmology, geography and anthropology will make contributions. Readings will be extensive and varied," including numerous works by Olson and Duncan, as well as works by John Wieners and John Clarke, along with Marcel Griaule's book on Dogon cosmogony and myth, *Conversations with Ogotemmel*, and others. The second term would be "a separable yet continuing exploration of simultaneity of 'place' and 'image,'" adding the third lodestar of Black Mountain poetics, Robert Creeley, as

well as the 28 fascicles thus far published in the aforementioned *Curriculum for the Soul* and such works as Kerényi's *Dionysos* and more.⁴⁰²

Though Patler had begun writing poems himself with increased seriousness commensurate with his deepening study, and had published two slim volumes by the beginning of the program, his relative vernality allowed him to offer courses that would serve as the curricular bridge between the great lineages traced by the other faculty and their own work and that of their peers and subsequent generations of poets. Parallel to his Place and Image sequence in the fall and spring of that first year, moreover, Patler offered a course he called Poetics at Hand, "a reading course wherein the writings of faculty poets [namely di Prima, Duncan, McNaughton, and Meltzer] will be the 'subject' of a student's inquiry. Each student will be expected to select one poet whose work will constitute a text for the semester. The poetics will be provoked by the poems and we will examine the extensiveness of the seemingly local."⁴⁰³ It was an important opportunity for Patler and his students to investigate the correspondences between the other professors' endeavors in the classroom—their subject matter and personal manner, both—to those professors' poetical works. Patler's courses addressed a basic need among the majority of the Poetics students when faced with the delirious erudition of Duncan, the hermetic historicism of di Prima, the amused mysticism of Meltzer, and the deadpan devotion of McNaughton. How did these particular, peculiar, spectacular poets connect themselves to their own peers and contemporaries (e.g. the other New Americans), as well as to their

predecessors of recent (e.g. the various Modernists), more distant (e.g. the Romantics), medieval (e.g. the *fedeli d'amore*), and more ancient vintage (e.g. the foundational Epic poets)?; and how were the young poets who studied under them to trace sympathies across these great expanses of time and space, through their teachers, and unto themselves, to define a ground out of which to bring their own work, not as academics, but as poets? This was the task the Poetics Program proposed. It wasn't a matter of the style or character or quality of the poems the students may or may not have been writing. As Duncan put it in the first planning meeting, "It isn't our affair what kind of poems they are [writing], it's our affair how they *answer* for their poetry."⁴⁰⁴ Moreover, it wasn't a question of answering for that poetry in such a way as to satisfy Duncan himself, or anyone else. He insisted it was a question of "answering for yourself,"⁴⁰⁵ which was a much more difficult task, if taken seriously.

Duncan included the demand in both his Basic Elements and Ideas of Meaning courses that each participant "research...the work of one contemporary poet—'contemporary' being defined as under fifty years of age"—along with the set of great precursors that were the core concern of these courses, and the other faculty made frequent reference in lectures to the work of friends and peers, but most often these were asides and additions, not at all the main emphasis. Indeed, in the early curricular planning stages, Duncan noted the need for a "contemporary poet course as a way to balance the Great Poet course—the latter [being] impossible to approach

without preconception, whereas the former, [students] have to read for themselves.”⁴⁰⁶ This was his encouraging response to Patler’s tentative proposal of following his Place and Image seminar sequence with a course, opposite Duncan’s Baudelaire, Whitman, and Dickinson, in the summer of 1981 ultimately titled Reading the New Poem—John Wieners: “Dark Eternals of the Night.” Patler and his students would “look at the complete works available by [this] singular poet..., giving over particular attention to issues beyond the scope of traditional measures of what constitutes ‘poetry.’ The attitude is thus neither critical nor analytical. We will read poems by others whose work affects Wieners, day and night.”⁴⁰⁷

Patler’s courses throughout his tenure in the Poetics Program would track his own ongoing education under the tutelage of Duncan, di Prima, Meltzer, McNaughton, and the many poets who visited the Program, opening windows onto diverse poetic traditions and lineages and challenging him to reconcile these with the poetics of the New American Poetry of the 1950s and 1960s and its development in the 1970s and into the 1980s. In the fall of 1981, he taught The Evident Poetic Community, which proposed that “the evident makes itself seen and a poetics which is one is common. The persistence of the poem and corresponding ways of falling upon it will occupy our attention as poets reading poems. // The continuity needn’t be addressed sequentially and/or chronologically.” Readings included “Aristotle’s *De Anima*; Plotinus’ *Enneads*; Longinus’ *On the Sublime*; selected Blake, Wordsworth, Keats; Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius*; snatches of Pound, of Williams, of Creeley, of

O'Hara, of Duncan; Vico's *Scienza Nuova*; Coleridge's *Poesy or Art?*; Joubert's *Pensees*; Olson's *Projective Verse*." The following fall of 1982 he taught Standard Texts in Poetics, revisiting "Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Campion, Daniel, Sidney, Wordsworth, Poe, Whitman, Peacock, Shelley, Coleridge, Vico, Olson, Joubert and Pico della Mirandola." In 1983-1984, he taught a two semester sequence on Primary Texts in Poetics, splitting off the 20th Century in the spring from everything that preceded it in the fall, "Pre-classical—19th Century," then made an effort to wed the 20th Century to its more recent past in the fall of 1984, "reading works in pairs, chosen for obvious reasons of sympathy and/or antagonism between them. For example: Shelley/Peacock; Sidney/Scalinger; Aristotle/Longinus[, with] a "modern" work...juxtaposed upon each twosome. For example: Shelley/Peacock/Olson; Sidney/Scalinger/Spicer; Aristotle/Longinus/Williams." Along the way he also taught a course in the spring of 1982 he called 20th Century Compositional Poetics,

the premise of [which was] quite simple: A poetics may be found within poems and need not be considered as formally separate. Many 20th century poets have little or no writing on poetics apart from that which their poetry, *per se*, discloses. The work of a few such poets (e.g. Philip Whalen, Gregory Corso, John Wieners, Ted Berrigan) will be the subject of our examination. Individual students will be asked to read the complete works of one poet, with a view to excavating implicit or encrypted poetics. Two poets, selected by the class, will be read by the entire class and will provide the basis for class discussion.

In the spring of 1985, he taught a course he called Poetics In Correspondence, "an unencumbered reading of person to person correspondence of espoused and/or

encrypted poetics. Letters as publications, questions of reading, the emergence of poems during letter writing, and issues of discourse and 'public address' will, no doubt, arise." Readings included "the Keats letters; Olson's *Letters for Origin*; and selected Mallarme, Flaubert, Pound, and Spicer. Dante, Stein, and Creeley [were] also be read for style and grace." In the following year, 1985-1986, "the 75th year after the birth of Charles Olson, it seem[ed] appropriate to spend a full year reading selectively his contributions to poetics," so Patler taught a two-semester sequence focusing first on "works from *Call Me Ishmael* to the closing of Black Mountain College," then on Olson's post-Black Mountain work. Taking advantage of the wealth of Olson-influenced poets around him, Patler invited various visitors to talk with his students, as had been both his and McNaughton's wont from the earliest poetics classes they taught at New College.

If Patler's courses reflect a relative novice's attempts to map the texts he encountered under the tutelage of this fellow faculty members, to define those encounters with some more or less academic rationality, and to trace routes along which others of similar inexperience might have like encounters—all of which seems to amount to a pretty good teaching philosophy—McNaughton's courses reflect an initiate delving ever more deeply into mysteries of a vivid spiritual and historical—i.e. poetical—world view. Each of the first two summer sessions of the program, he taught courses concerned with Ibn Al-Arabi, Rumi, and Sufi Tradition and

Comment. The first iteration didn't make it into the program catalogue, for reasons to be made clear shortly, but the second iteration was described as

an introduction to certain elements of Sufi tradition, literature and metaphysics, through primary texts in translation and through secondary works and commentaries. This will be an elementary course whose purpose is to alert students: a) to the existence of a huge, complex body of literature of great interest and power, of which but a tiny fraction is available to us in English; b) to the profound and exacting discipline of the Religion of Love; and c) to the congruences and evident direct continuities between Sufi literature and teaching and that of Western poetry during the past several centuries.

We will concentrate mainly on the works of two authors as they are currently available to us: Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi. In addition, readings will include works of e.g. A. J. Arberry, Henri Corbin, Louis Massignon and others.

This tradition and these interpreters of it would continue to play important roles in many of the courses and would continue to be keystones for McNaughton well beyond his New College days. In the spring of 1983, he would use texts "drawn from the so-called Arabian Nights; from the tales of Muhammed Mrabet; and from the works of William Blake" to teach "Story. Measure." — "studies in two Ur-needs of imagination.... What is meant by 'story', what by 'measure'? For that matter, what is meant by 'imagination', what by 'need'? // Since the basic grasp of 'imagination' here is Sufi, there will be some supplementary readings in that commentary." The following spring of 1984, he taught *Comus*: "Studies in Dante, Balzac and Milton. The Divine, the Human, and the other one. The course will address the background rather more than the literary foreground of the texts; that is, the Muslim Sufi ground

for Dante; the Seraphitan ground for Balzac; the Dionysian for Milton's *Comus*." Beginning in the fall of 1984, his multi-term Blake course was fertile terrain for the seeds of Sufi tradition, as well. There will be more to say about this extended Blake study later on, its mode, material, and duration, but at a length of two full academic years, it wasn't the even the longest course McNaughton taught at New College. His Shakespeare course went on a whopping five years, from the Poetics Program's first spring term in 1981 until the entirety of Shakespeare's oeuvre had been read, if not, of course, exhausted. There will be more to say about this extended study, as well, but here I want only to remind the reader that McNaughton's dissertation had "proposed a form of 'personal spiritual exegesis'" of Shakespeare's sonnets, "heavily inflected by 'Corbin's study of the *ta'wil* of the Muslim spirituals,'" and that this dissertation, submitted in 1972, had been a key text for the year-long undergraduate course McNaughton taught on the sonnets at New College two years later. When McNaughton embarked upon his consideration of Shakespeare's entire oeuvre another six years on, and as that consideration continued, Corbin was a constant companion.

McNaughton did offer a few courses without any substantial reference to the Sufi tradition, of course, including perhaps most significantly a two-semester sequence he led in the second year of the program under the heading "Preclassical and Classical Sources." The fall 1981 term focused on the figure of Eurydice, while the spring 1982 term focused on that of Hermes. The course descriptions are nearly

identical, so I offer the first here with the slight variations of the second inserted in brackets:

The course will be conducted as a research project, with students asked to submit one paper at the trimester's conclusion. With a minimum of direction provided by the instructor at the outset, students are asked to address and to track a single figure, Eurydice [*or* Hermes], through whatever texts and references they can make available to themselves. The aim is to secure at least the outline of the action of Eurydice [*or* to secure a beginning appreciation of the dimension(s) which Hermes subsumes in his person and exploits] – what she [*or* he] is; then, who she [*or* he] is. Class meetings will be held to discuss students' findings and the progress of their respective researches; and to assemble data gathered in relation to poetry, sexual mystery and the interior secrets of the underworld [*or* in relation to poetry, the nature of the worlds Hermes mediates and the journeys over which he presides]. There are no required texts for the course.

None of the courses McNaughton would eventually teach were mentioned in the initial planning meetings, when in general terms McNaughton had proposed only to teach a course concerned with some of the great world epics—a proposition Duncan enthusiastically endorsed: “Certain things are not to be forgotten!”—and also, somewhat hesitantly, to teach a more or less traditional, Prosody course to compliment both Duncan's highly idiosyncratic teaching on the “transformational grammar of the poem” and perhaps Doty's music theory course. He was concerned that it might be “redundant,” but Duncan insisted it wouldn't be, though they would have to “coordinate.” McNaughton welcomed that, admitting that while he would surely teach “metrics,” as from the Greek, “after that I'm at a loss and would like for you all to make some suggestions.” I don't know what suggestions they made, if

any, but Prosody would become an important course in the first few years of the program—though not under McNaughton’s direction.

VI. Substitutions

Sometime in 1979, when the pieces of the graduate program were still coming together and it was, as yet, no sure thing, McNaughton had applied for a Fulbright to teach in Alexandria, Egypt, where he wanted to go for “various reasons,” he said, “a lot of them having to do with Lawrence Durrell, things of that kind,” and of course continued study of the Islamic traditions that had informed his own thought for years, from his abandonment of the orientalist Princeton program, through his dissertation work on Shakespeare’s Sonnets, on into his early teaching at New College. No posting in Alexandria, as it turned out, was available.

So the Fulbright people called me up, because I’d asked to be in an Arab, Muslim country, and they said, “Well, we have an available spot for a Fulbright in Juba.” And I said, “I don’t have any idea what the word Juba means.” ... We were living in Bolinas and we knew... an Australian anthropologist, who was visiting, had a girlfriend, I forget what the score was, but a couple of days after this he came walking along in Bolinas and I said to him something like, “Know anything about Juba?” and he said, “Why do you ask?” So I told him and he said, “Actually, I just left there” – two or three months before – “because of an outbreak of Green Monkey Disease.” ... I said, you know, “What the fuck is that?” And he told me. It’s this fucking disease [Marburg virus, the clinical symptoms of which are basically indistinguishable from Ebola], it’s fatal, and there was no cure for it, and all the foreigners that were around cleared out, and some of them got back to London and died. Juba was this little river town... on one of the Niles [the White Nile], but it’s Black African [South] Sudan, [not Arab]. Anyway, so I wrote back to the Fulbright people, [declining the Juba post]..., and they said, “Well, what about Damascus?” And I said yes.⁴⁰⁸

So, on August 8th, six weeks before the first term was to begin, Patler and the other members of the Poetics Program threw a party, preceded by a reading, at the Valencia Street Campus to wish McNaughton a fond farewell from San Francisco. A few days later, McNaughton and his son flew to Damascus, but his wife, Genie, “had other plans,” he said.

She wanted to go back to school. She had a BA from Vassar in Philosophy and she was a graduate student in Philosophy at NYU when we met. She quit that. But what she’d always wanted to study was biology, so she said, “Ok, I’m not going anywhere near Syria anyway, because I’m a Jew and I don’t want to deal with any of that shit.” Not into it. Plus, her decision was to go back to school in 1980, which she did. So she and the two girls moved down to Santa Cruz, and she went to UC Santa Cruz to get a second degree.... I was to be in Damascus for a school year, teaching in the university there. But I lasted until the end of November or something like that and cut it short.... There were a lot of things. My marriage was fucked up in a serious way, and I was therefore fucked up because of that. Damascus was a scene and a half that would take all night. Anyway I landed back [at New College] halfway through [the first term].⁴⁰⁹

Since he had planned to be gone the whole year, however, he’d had to make arrangements to fill his place in the Prosody course he’d initially committed to teach: “I substituted, in some sense, [Robert] Grenier for myself, for that,”⁴¹⁰ for the first term, and he enlisted Michael Palmer for the second semester. They hadn’t budgeted for McNaughton unexpected return, so there was no money for him in the Poetics Program, neither as faculty nor administrator, so he taught for free—the first sessions of his extended years-long Shakespeare sequence, which continued to be taught free of charge to the students by a teacher who was unremunerated for its

duration—and “piece[d] together some stuff at the college,” he said. “I was assistant librarian, foreign student advisor, two or three other things that made up a kind of salary.” It wasn’t the last time McNaughton would have to cobble together a paycheck for himself out of minimally remunerative odds and ends, and to complicate things further for him upon his return,

Genie and everybody were living in Santa Cruz, and I couldn’t be working four days a week, five days a week here and living in Santa Cruz. So for that spring Leslie and I, Leslie Scalapino, we were friends, she had a place in Berkeley that she wasn’t in much of the time because she spent much of her time with this guy named Tom White she was with and so I stayed in her place maybe three nights a week, then I’d go to Santa Cruz for the weekend. Got through the spring semester that way. Then the following year me and all the kids went and lived in Bolinas and I did it that way for a year. And Genie was down [in Santa Cruz]. She stayed until ‘88, ‘89 because she didn’t realize she was going to do a PhD. So I got a place by myself in Berkeley, and I’d be there during the week and go down to Santa Cruz on the weekend, through ‘82 to ‘86.

Such burdens on his family life, combined with the financial and political burdens of running the program at New College would eventually take their toll and chase McNaughton away, precipitating the program’s collapse, but that eventuality was yet unforeseen when he returned to witness the program’s first flowering, and watch his two Prosody replacements at work.

Both Harvard graduates (Palmer held an MA as well as the BA from Harvard; Grenier the BA from Harvard and an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop) had taught as poets-in-residence at New College the previous fall of 1979—Grenier on

William Carlos Williams; Palmer on Jack Spicer—and each had proven himself a more than competent teacher. Grenier had previously taught for a year at UC Berkeley (1969-'70) and a year at Tufts ('70-'71), before spending five years teaching at Franconia ('71-'76), a small, experimental college in New Hampshire with no formal departments, no required courses, no grades, and degrees conferred upon demonstration of competence. Franconia, like other colleges of its ilk, had severe financial difficulties and shut down due to bankruptcy not long after Grenier left, so he was no doubt well prepared for that reality of New College, and, as some of the course descriptions cited below indicate, his was a consonant spirit. By all accounts, Grenier had “an amazing ear”⁴¹¹ and was an excellent teacher, serious, though not overly dry, “so smart, and so funny in a way,”⁴¹² even a bit impish at times—his final exam in the Prosody course consisted, at least in part, of a prosodic analysis of the following quatrain: “Beans, beans, the musical fruit, / The more you eat, the more you toot, / The more you toot, the better you feel— / So let’s have beans with every meal!”⁴¹³

Michael Palmer took over the prosody course in the spring, as he recalled, at Robert Duncan’s behest, though this is somewhat unclear. He’d been invited by McNaughton the year before to give his talks on Spicer, and Duncan had nothing to do with New College at that point, but at this stage Duncan surely would have had McNaughton’s ear in the scramble to fill the Prosody spot. Regardless, Palmer said, “I had a long relationship [with Duncan] going back to the early seventies, and it

was a discussion of poetry and poetics, and so on,” as he put it. “And the others were somewhat friends of mine..., certainly David Meltzer, who I met in 1963 when he was working at the Columbus Avenue bookshop, Discovery Books..., and I knew McNaughton, and I knew the others, not all that well at the time, but we were all sympathetic. We were all part of a kind of ‘outside,’ so to speak, tradition.”⁴¹⁴ Palmer had taught “from time to time..., here and there,” he said, and

Whenever I’ve taught..., in a creative writing program I’ve been astonished that people don’t know, have never learned anything about measure.... So often they’re writing shit that is of no dynamic consequence in relation to language, and they can’t hear it. I don’t mean they should be suddenly going back and writing iambic quatrains or something like that, but you can learn something from both linguistic prosody...and classical prosody..., something about sound, organization of sound, that it’s not just flopped on the page. Sometimes people have that instinctively, and that’s great, but a lot of people don’t even have an idea of what makes the dynamics of a poem, the back and forth conversation among the lines.... If it wasn’t “dum-da-dum-da-dum” —Robert Frost—people didn’t know there was a measure there, a variable foot, so to speak.

His prosody course at New College was designed to be “very technical..., introducing people to classical prosody and linguistic prosody..., particularly given there was this cloudy thing of ‘oh you guys write “free” verse,’ [which attitude] always stung [Duncan] because there was a discipline—it was no freer than metrical verse; it was just a different sense of articulation of the discipline of it.... And so, what is a variable foot? and how is it that we can look at cadential verse like Whitman’s and verse like Emily Dickinson’s with the same ear, in a sense, and know

what's going on....?" He was pleased to find that his New College students "often had a sense, [though] maybe not [always] the most thorough sense, of a tradition, or counter-tradition in American poetics and models, such as Black Mountain, that provided something else."⁴¹⁵

Grenier returned to the head of the prosody class again in the fall of 1981, drawing on a range of poets from Wyatt, Milton, and Shakespeare, to William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Louis Zukofsky, to Larry Eigner, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, and Leslie Scalapino. The following term, spring 1982, he taught a course on the Poetics of the Personal Voice in American Poetry, c. 1950-1975, which began with "a kind of generative misreading of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* as 'one of the first confessional poems' and conclude[d] with a look at some recent American verse that doesn't presume/use voice." As the catalogue described it, the course consisted of

In one sense, close readings/discussions of a number of markedly different texts, by some of the poets whose divergent 'voices' shaped American verse for the time: Berryman, Lowell, Plath; Ginsberg, O'Hara, Ashbery; Whalen, Kyger; Olson, Creeley.

Aim: to practice hearing as exactly as possible how/what is said, by tracing the poet's voice back through means of its registration—scoring on the page, readings on tape.

In another, more comprehensive/speculative sense, a consideration of the 'personal voice' as a characteristic American phenomenon of the post-WWI: 1) as literary history, analysis of speech-based prosody structurally grounded in the work of W.C. Williams, with roots in romantic theories of organic form as self-expression, coming to exist in reaction to certain aspects of modernist aesthetics (1913-45); 2) in American intellectual/cultural history, as examination of voice in context of the value attributed to personal act/gesture in a time dominated by corporate mentality's large-scale

destruction of the world via imposition/replication of anonymous abstract design; 3) politically and spiritually, inquiry into the meaning of the emphasis placed on the development of individual voice as a typical modality (?) of late industrial capitalism— anachronistic rationalization, merely scam, ‘cover’?— what are the values and limitations of personal gesture, as a structural base for poetry in our day?⁴¹⁶

Grenier was a key figure in the program for a number of students in those first few years, not least for the introduction he gave them to the poet Larry Eigner, who lived with Grenier and his partner, part time Poetics student Kathleen Frumpink, along with her son and his daughter, in Berkeley during these years—but more about that to come. Such contributions and his qualities as a teacher, however, were not enough to ingratiate him with the other core faculty. Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer were “a kind of cabal,” McNaughton said, and they didn’t like the terms on which Grenier was engaged to teach in the Poetics Program. “[Palmer] was fine,” McNaughton said, “you know, a close friend of Duncan’s, very good teacher, responsible cat and so forth,”⁴¹⁷ but as McNaughton noted, “this was sort of at the height of the Language school stuff,” a group with which Grenier was closely, though somewhat ambivalently, aligned, “and di Prima and Meltzer and Duncan were as antipathetic as you could imagine to anything like that. And for very good reason, really. It wasn’t that I was interested in the Language poets. I just knew Grenier.”⁴¹⁸ They had been neighbors in Bolinas, of course, in the late 1970s. When McNaughton announced his departure for Syria and arranged Grenier and Palmer as replacements, Duncan thought it a good thing that the former would teach in the

fall, followed by the latter in the spring, because, as he put it, rather harshly, “Palmer is a subtle mind; Grenier is a simplistic mind,” so students would graduate, as it were, from a simplistic to a subtle prosody over the course of the first year, and then McNaughton would presumably return to take the reins in the second year. On these terms the cabal accepted his involvement, but when Grenier was invited back to teach in the second year of the program—albeit not as a “core” faculty member, but not as a mere visiting poet-in-residence, either—Duncan and company weren’t particularly pleased.

From the start, the core faculty had all agreed a certain degree of antagonism to their own teaching would be a good thing, so long as it was “intelligent antagonism,” as Duncan put it in March 1980, as they discussed possible candidates for the poets-in-residence series. As a way to “bring in new blood” and “stir the pot,” Patler said, that series had been an often exhilarating ancillary aspect of the undergraduate program for the previous three academic years, and would now serve as a sort of bridge between the undergraduate and graduate levels. It paid only \$400 at this point, and so would necessarily continue to draw on the local scene, by and large. Duncan opened the brainstorming session by citing key Language writer Ron Silliman as an example of an intelligent antagonist, as opposed to his comrade Barrett Watten, who Duncan said was rather “dense,” then other candidates to be named by the various faculty were Anselm Hollo, Steve Benson, Nathaniel Mackey, Victor Hernandez Cruz, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Michael Davidson, John

Taggart, Jerome Rothenberg, and Kit Robinson, listed here in order of appearance. Duncan then exclaimed that there were no women on their list, and so Rosalie King, Leslie Scalapino, Joanne Kyger, Lynn Lonidier, Helen Lester, and Malka Tussman were raised as possibilities. The range was wide, but while McNaughton and Patler both insisted the poets who eventually came were finally chosen based more on their availability than on any other single factor, it is impossible not to note a certain tendency to hire already established allies. The exceptions, as ever, really only proved the rule.

Though the program's first catalog states that the poets-in-residence series would continue with "two or three month-long residencies for guest faculty during each term," I have encountered neither record nor remembrance of any poets-in-residence in the fall of 1980. What with all else going on as the program got under way, it seems both likely and quite reasonable that there were none during that first term. It has also been suggested that McNaughton and Patler may have used any moneys previously earmarked for the poets-in-residence series to help pay their new core trio of Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer—as noted, the formal status of these three poets at the start of the program was somewhat uncertain—but it's of little importance in the end. In the spring of 1981, there was at least one *sui generis* resident poet. Per a notice written by Aaron Shurin and published on the front page of the February issue of *Poetry Flash*:

Helen Adam is coming to town. She'll be reading Friday the 13th of February at the San Francisco Art Institute..., and will be writer-in-residence for three sessions as part of the Poetics Program at New College...February 2, 9, and 16, 4-6 pm. She can give you a real grue, and raise the hairs on your neck. She can have you clapping your hands and rocking with glee, binding her spell with immaculate wit and craft. Adam is a poet of an old order—a Last Poet you might say—born in 1909 in Scotland and raised on Scottish border ballads and ancient Celtic narrative tales. She brings these old forms howling into the twentieth century, and you cannot see the seams....

She moved to San Francisco in 1954, joined Robert Duncan's Poetry Center Workshop, and formed particularly close relationships with Duncan, James Broughton, and Madeline Gleason.... Since the late sixties she has lived in New York....

Her work, only obscurely available for many years, is finally being brought to light. Three volumes have appeared since 1977..., and in 1981 San Francisco's Aleph Press will be bringing out a compilation of songs and ballads with accompanying musical note transcriptions and guitar chords.⁴¹⁹

Aleph publisher and Poetics student Carl Grundberg recalled "just about levitating at the end of the evening" when he first encountered Adam reading alongside Robert Duncan at Naropa a few years before, after which occasion he "corresponded with her and broached with her the possibility of doing this book, because she sang at her reading—she didn't just recite—and it was incredible music, and I thought somebody should be transcribing this." Grundberg himself was "a folk musician," he said, "and I knew how to read music, so I kind of fudged up the guitar chords and had a little electronic keyboard so I could tap out, follow the cassettes of her singing and tap out the notes and write them down."⁴²⁰ Unfortunately, the book was not nearly ready in time for her visit. It would be delayed until

Grundberg had finished his coursework in the Poetics Program, at which point a book party was thrown at New College, in September 1982, featuring Duncan and others along with audiotapes of Adam performing. More unfortunate for our purposes here, no tapes, notes, or substantive recollections of Adam's talks as the first apparent poet-in-residence of the Poetics Program have come to light, so I cannot report on her topics, but it seems safe to assume they reinforced the heretical tenor of that first year.

By the second year, the poets-in-residence series was back in full swing. I have already mentioned Christopher Gaynor's accession to Doty's place as resident New Musician, so will only add here the title of his "mini-course," as the program catalogue calls it, listed in both the fall and spring terms: "Making Sounds upon the Ground of the Imagination." Also enjoying a two-term residency was Joanne Kyger, who had been one of the first residents in the undergraduate emphasis four years before. Unfortunately, when I spoke to Kyger about New College, she could recall neither her first residency "On West Coast Poetics" nor this second one, which proceeded under the title "Heart Place Poetry Nature." There are tapes of some of her 1977 sessions, when she spoke of various Native American traditions, tales, and contemporary poets of the western edge of the continent, but I've found no tapes of her 1981 mini-course. I was able to turn up a reading list, however, which indicated a continuity of concern. It consisted of *The Way of the Shaman* and *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, by Michael Harner; *Shamanic Voices*, by Joan Halifax; *Wizard of the Upper*

Amazon, by F. Bruce Lamb; *The Old Ways*, by Gary Snyder; *Back Then Tomorrow*, by Peter Blue Cloud; *A Jaime de Angulo reader*; and *Going for the Rain*, by Simon J. Ortiz.

The third poet-in-residence alongside Kyger and Gaynor in the fall of 1981 was Leslie Scalapino, at whose apartment McNaughton had lived the previous spring after returning from Damascus, and with whom he'd been running the weekly reading series at the college since the fall of 1979. McNaughton said "she was not a good teacher in the beginning. She wasn't comfortable doing it." Matt Haug remembered her being "difficult to understand. The things she was saying and the way she spoke. It was highly abstract...and she was very quiet. She'd speak in this very quiet, serious way." Her mini-course was ostensibly concerned with John Ashbery, John Donne, and Gertrude Stein, but no tapes of any of her talks have materialized, nor have any reading lists or other notable recollections. The same goes for the third poet-in-residence in the spring of 1982, Michael Palmer, who made his return with a mini-course on "Some Aspects of Silence and Measure in Contemporary Poetics." A new arrival on the Poetics faculty scene that second year, however, made a more indelible impression.

Anselm Hollo had first graced the New College campus with his presence shortly before the Poetics Program began, having come at the end of that summer's session at Naropa to read alongside McNaughton at the latter's going-to-Syria party

in August 1980. McNaughton said he and Hollo had “gotten to know one another in Buffalo. He was there for a couple of summers, teaching, and we had some scenes involving knives.” As he put it, “Anselm and I had some problems,” but they were friends and mutual admirers, and McNaughton had designs on getting him involved in his fledgling program, so while the terms of his inaugural trio of core faculty were still somewhat murky, in the spring of 1980 he sent Hollo a letter inquiring “as to the possibility of [him] being in active teaching residence at New College” for the entire second year. In June, Hollo wrote back to Patler, expressing “my definite willingness to—well, do so: Fall ’81 term as program chairman, at \$6,000 total, plus Spring ’82 and Summer ’82 at \$2,000 each, the total for that year being \$10,000.00.” These were the same rates at which Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer had each been hired for the first year, but Hollo would be coming from afar, and as he wrote to Patler, “I’m sure you must realize \$10,000 is not very much rent money in the Bay Area,” so his participation for the 1981-82 school year “would be, to an extent, contingent upon what I can rustle up for Fall of ’80 and Spring ’81.... However, I am, provided I don’t starve to death in the meantime, most eager to participate in the New College program during the year: Duncan sent me a program of the current MASTER OF ARTS IN POETICS 1980-81 prospectus, & I feel honored to be accepted in that company—...a temple, as it were, *and* a home....” Less than a month later, his “application,” which had consisted of little more than his letter to Patler, had been accepted and the terms of his employment settled.

Hollo had spent the 1978-79 and 1979-80 academic years as Writer-in-Residence at Sweet Briar College in Virginia, where his “life-partner” at the time was secretary to the dean, but that contract had come to its close. So Hollo managed to not starve to death thanks largely to unemployment benefits, “the assistance of Naropa Poetics..., a couple of readings, & translation jobs of relatively nebulous remuneration,” as he wrote in another letter to Patler, sent from Sweet Briar in April 1981, inquiring when exactly he was expected to report for duty, and if there were “any way to get an advance on salary before undertaking the trek across” the country. Whether or not such an advance was forthcoming, he arrived in September to teach the first session of what was to be a two-semester sequence on 20th Century European Poets, “a survey and reading of works in translation by Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Dadaists, Surrealists, Garcia Lorca, Bertolt Brecht, Vladamir Mayakovsky, Gunnar Ekelof, Paavo Haavikko, and others, with supplementary secondary material by the authors themselves as well as by contemporary and posthumous commentators,” continued in the spring “with some attention to American and British poets of the corresponding time frames and trans-Atlantic connections and influences.” This second term was to be accompanied by a course on Traditional North European Poetry, “a reading of the Icelandic Sagas, *Egil* in particular, and the *Kalevala* (Finno-Ugric) (in translations, as available),” and followed in the summer by a course on Contemporary British Poetry, “a survey, with particular attention given to Basil Bunting, F. T. Prince, David Jones, Gael Turnbull,

Tom Raworth, Tom Pickard, Lee Harwood (and others, including their more 'public' contemporaries like Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, etc.)."⁴²¹

Beyond that, McNaughton said, "I wanted Anselm to stay, but he wouldn't. I don't know, a lot of it had to do with booze. He was really on the skids. Drinking a lot.... That was a disappointment."⁴²² Strauss remembered Hollo as "a central figure..., [though] I think he was seen to be a little more aligned with Grenier than people liked, but we all liked him. He was a good teacher, but at that time he was also a totally self-destructive drunk. He was out to kill himself, and almost killed me in the process." Sarah Menefee recalled regular, extended visits to the Dover Club after Hollo's class, as did Strauss:

We would hang out in there, and also Dick's Bar. Dick's Bar was the greatest bar I've ever known, at 15th and Sanchez. That was a great bar. So we hung out. There was a one-eyed bartender named Ivan at the Dover Club—we called him Ivan the Terrible—and one night Ivan closed up the bar and me and Anselm were there after he closed the bar, and he was just pouring shots of whatever, and at a certain point I became convinced that he was actually trying to kill Anselm. So I staggered out of there and got almost home, fell in the street, and Gret found me, and I said, "We have to go back there, Ivan is trying to kill Anselm," and she was like, "Yeah, well I don't know if your testimony is very valid here." But we did go back, and he was there with Ivan, both continuing to drink, and everything was fine.... Anselm, he wasn't an ugly drunk, didn't get violent except he would take your hand and just *squeeze* it.⁴²³

Hollo would develop several close friendships and at least one amorous relationship with his students while he was around the Poetics Program, but how long he was formally affiliated remains in some doubt. Though McNaughton's

memory conformed roughly to the original arrangements cited above and elaborated in the year's program catalogue, and though Strauss remembered Hollo "being there over time," Sarah Menefee recalled that "he was there for one semester. They wanted him for the year, but the first semester they would pay him more than the second for some reason and he kind of said, 'Fuck you, I'll do the first semester,' and then he ended up working graveyard in this law office where they were doing proofreading with Tinker Greene and some of the other poets."⁴²⁴ It wouldn't have been the first time, or the last, that a financial dispute would arise between New College and a Poetics Program faculty member or poet-in-residence, and it seems that by the time Hollo joined the faculty, the idea of a Program Chair had been abandoned, perhaps causing Hollo's promised pay to be cut by \$2,000—a full 20 percent. It wouldn't have been the first or the last time that the printed catalogue would misrepresent actual events, either, and on fliers made up to advertise that summer's courses and public offerings, no mention is made of Hollo. Menefee's memory appears to be confirmed by an interview with Hollo conducted on March 3, 1982 by Tinker Greene and Noreen Norton and published in that spring's issue of *Notice*. In a prefatory note, Greene writes, "Noreen and I had been participants in Anselm's Twentieth Century European Poetry seminar at New College last fall." It seems if they'd been interested enough in the class to want to interview the teacher, and edit and publish a transcript of their interview, they'd have enrolled in the second seminar in the sequence, if it were offered, but Greene's note puts their participation in his seminar

firmly in the past tense, so it seems unlikely that there was a sequel. Such is the sort of triangulation I've been constantly forced to do while writing this book, attempting to navigate a spotty and unreliable paper record and to negotiate conflicting memories. I've mostly foregone exposition of that process, choosing simply to present my best understanding of events, but must reiterate that all information contained herein rests more on sand and landfill than bedrock, as it were, much as the city of San Francisco itself. Whatever the duration of Hollo's formal affiliation with New College, his presence in and around the Poetics Program was acutely felt, and his departure saddened many, though it proved salutary for the man himself. In the end, McNaughton said, "Anselm left [San Francisco], and he went to Baltimore..., and that's where he met the woman who'd become his wife. She just came into his life like an angel, and really saved his ass. Turned him around and they were together till the end of his life. So it worked, in that sense."⁴²⁵ Hollo would take up a post at Naropa in 1985 and continue to teach there until his death in 2013, but the interview mentioned here, presented under the title "Anything In Between Obviously Can Happen," gives a glimpse of the particularly affable and collegial tenor of Hollo's teaching in the Poetics Program, as well as an example of an undergraduate, a graduate student, and their teacher collectively bodying forth ideas—in this case about translation—in the manner that seems by and large to have characterized the program: as co-inquisitors.

I'd like, in light of that example, to turn my attention briefly to the poets who came together to form the first cohorts of students in the Poetics Program, for they, as much as the faculty, made it what it was. In many ways, they made it possible for the members of the faculty to become what they were, as teachers. In their original proposal, McNaughton and Patler had emphasized the advantage of having "persons of professional standing and accomplishment enrolled in [the program], insisting that "their experience and sophistication must prove invaluable to all concerned." As they'd begun to develop the proposal, they'd asked around and "many poets, from the Bay Area and elsewhere..., [had] expressed genuine interest."⁴²⁶ Once the program became official, "the first students [to sign on] were John Thorpe and Bobbie Louise Hawkins, alerted by McNaughton and Patler, then Aaron Shurin and myself," wrote David Levi Strauss, "alerted by [di Prima] and Duncan."⁴²⁷

Studies of the Hearth

I. First Persons

John Thorpe had been among the very first visiting poets to teach in the undergraduate emphasis in North American Poetry at Poetics at New College, teaching a class idiosyncratically titled *The Horror of Being Human* in fall 1977, invited by McNaughton, his neighbor in Bolinas, where Thorpe had lived since before the major influx of poets began in the late 1960s. “Thorpe was known to most people in Bolinas as Shao, [meaning ‘young’ or ‘new’ in Chinese] a name that was given to him by one of his professors at Princeton,” as Kevin Opstedal tells it. “The son of a Princeton professor, who later became the curator of the Huntington Library, Thorpe was briefly enrolled at Princeton[, and] it was there that he met...Lewis MacAdams..., [who recalled] the floor of Thorpe’s dorm room at Princeton [being] covered in dirt, soil, with which he was attempting to cultivate an experimental indoor garden.” Tom Clark characterized Thorpe “as the poetic spirit of the town, ‘like a pixie spirit’. He had a big friendly paleolithic beard and would reel about the mesa in the middle of the night to be found in a ditch with a bottle of wine at 3:00 a.m. staring at the stars.” However, Opstedal continues, “while this characterization may hold some truth, it distracts from the fact that Thorpe was, and is, a powerful poet. ‘Shao’s learning is incredible,’ said MacAdams, ‘God knows what he thinks of his own poetry, but to me he is the true poet of Bolinas.’”⁴²⁸ Before

his brief stint at Princeton, Thorpe had dropped out of high school and been committed by his family to “a State-run Mental Institution,” where at the age of 17 he began corresponding with Charles Olson, “the only guide...I could recognize and trust,” who introduced him to Robert Duncan and Ed Dorn along with the writings of Sapir, Whitehead, and Jung.⁴²⁹ Thorpe later took part in the *Curriculum for the Soul* project with a fascicle on *Matter*, published widely in magazines, and had one book in print (*The Cargo Cult*, 1972, Big Sky Books) with another on the way (*Five Aces and Independence*, 1981, Tombouctou), when the program began. Beyond his own series of lectures in 1977, Thorpe had been an active participant in many of the other guest poets’ lectures, throughout the late 1970s and, most notably, John Clarke’s aforementioned spring 1980 lectures, the transcripts of which were seen through several years of development with Thorpe as lead editor and eventually emerged in print as *From Feathers to Iron* in the fall of 1987. Meanwhile, Thorpe remained an enigmatic presence at the college, by turns an official student, formal auditor, and unaffiliated visitor.

Another Bolinas resident at the time, who also had been invited to teach as a visiting poet in the undergraduate program (fall 1978, *The Voice on the Page*), Bobbie Louise Hawkins had been married to Robert Creeley when McNaughton met them both in Buffalo ten years earlier. As McNaughton tells it:

We hadn't been there very long. A Sunday, I remember. [Ed] Sanders had told me before I went up there, "Watch out for Creeley. He carries a knife." Creeley was sort of known, you know, for that sort of thing. So one day..., I'd been drinking beer, or whatever, and I knew where they'd rented a little house, so I went over there. I had a knife. One of those buck knives. I went over there and knocked on the door and nobody was home, so I wrote a note and I stuck it on the door with the knife. I went back and told [Genie], and she said... uh, you know... So I went back to get the knife, and when I got back, the knife and the note were gone. So I knocked on the door and Bobbie came to the door and said, "Oh, you must be Duncan. Come in!"⁴³⁰

When the McNaughtons moved to Bolinas several years later, it was in large part because Bob and Bobbie Creeley (Bobbie Louise Hawkins) were there. Hawkins recalled her "first major reading in the Bay area" in July 1971 at Intersection, with Joanne Kyger: "I read the poems that became *Fifteen Poems*. One of the poems I read was 'The Thought that Was Called Helen.' Afterward, Robert Duncan asked to have a look at the text and when he looked at it, he said, 'I wanted to see whether you were taking material from H.D., but this is the Gnostic Helen,' and I said, 'Absolutely.'"⁴³¹ Her slim pamphlet, *Own Your Body*, was issued as the December 1972 number of the monthly *Sparrow* by Black Sparrow Press, and in 1974, when Wesley Tanner published *Fifteen Poems* under his Arif imprint, Duncan wrote "a beautiful little preface for it,"⁴³² in which he notes "a magic..., a would-be witchcraft in spirit.... Her art in the poem works at the breast of her being in the universe taken in the language, out of a moving life-need...to liberate in self and in the world the workings of a womanly imperative."⁴³³

Born in 1930, Hawkins was 50 years of age when the Poetics Program began—older than all of the faculty save Duncan—and she had begun to drift away from poetry. As she told Barbara Henning, “One reason I stopped writing poems was because I came to associate them with being unhappy.... When I was writing prose there was more of a sense of humor, rather than circling around my own distress.”⁴³⁴ Her relationship with Creeley had growing rockier and rockier, with the two spending more and more time apart until Creeley left for good in 1975. By the end of the following year she published two collections of stories, *Back to Texas* (Bear Hug Books) and *Frenchy & Cuban Pete* (Tombouctou), and had begun to establish a national reputation as a storyteller, but it all started, as she recalled, “one afternoon in Bolinas when the sun was shining and I was sitting out in the garden with Joanne Kyger and John Thorpe. I said, ‘Ok I’ve got a story I want to read to you.’ It was the first story I’d written that I felt was a real story (‘When you’re stoned on grass’ in *Back to Texas*).”⁴³⁵ Not long after, she was invited to teach at Naropa in its second summer writing program. Hawkins recalled:

Anne Waldman had a way of inviting a particular writer, and then if they had a spouse who had something going on, she’d also invite the spouse and provide a plane ticket and find a little workshop for them or something. [Bob and I] were coming on that sort of basis and when we definitely split, I had a call from Anne, and she said, “Does this mean you won’t be coming this summer?” I said, “Well I can’t really. I mean if you give me a ticket. I can’t really afford to come because there isn’t any money involved.” And she said, “No, if you come separately from Bob, we’ll give you a ticket, we’ll give you a salary and we’ll put you up and I’ll put you on the calendar.” That was an extraordinary act of friendship on Anne’s part. And it reassured me

enormously. So I came and taught a workshop and did a reading and so forth.⁴³⁶

When she returned to Bolinas, her role as Robert Creeley's wife now finished, her public presence as a writer in her own right grew, as did her friendships with Diane di Prima and various neighbors, like Thorpe and Kyger, as well as the young Louis Patler and Duncan McNaughton. Hawkins would be a central figure in the first years of the Poetics Program, as a "student," but would also become an increasing presence as a teacher at Naropa over the ensuing decade, becoming the director of the prose writing concentration of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in 1987 and continuing to teach there until retiring in 2010 at the age of 80.

Nearly twenty years her junior, the Manhattan-born Aaron Shurin came to the Bay Area by way of Texas and Los Angeles to attend college at UC Berkeley in 1966. In spring 1969, at the time of that "epochal war-at-home known as the battle for People's Park,"⁴³⁷ he was studying with Denise Levertov, and the whole class would "go together to work at the park..., testimony to our support of Denise's political conviction as well as our belief that the common purposes of poetry made a place for voice in the space of action; 'the personal is political' extended its alliterative syllogism to include 'poetry.'"⁴³⁸ (The June 2 Reading for the People's Park would occasion, or at least publicly manifest, a split between Levertov and Duncan, two theretofore dear friends, over just such concerns, i.e. how the political, the personal,

and the poetical relate, but I'll reserve discussion of these matters for later in this text.) "I often joke to those in the know that I'm the bastard son of Robert Duncan and Frank O'Hara..." Shurin wrote: "But the truth is I'm the lovechild of Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan. Each was my longtime poetic mentor, teacher, beloved friend, spiritual guide, and muse. For each I was apprentice, acolyte, amanuensis, confidant, communer, and fellow traveler."⁴³⁹ However, when Aaron Shurin moved into San Francisco in summer 1974, he did not yet know Duncan. He said, "I certainly had known *of* him, and my brother, who at that time was writing poetry, was in a workshop with Robert, as far as I know the first gay writers workshop in the early 70s with Paul Mariah, and somebody else,"⁴⁴⁰ but Shurin first met Duncan "on a Market Street trolley in 1975, capping an imaginative sequence begun earlier in the week," as he tells it in *King of Shadows*:

I'd had a dream in which a rainbow loop of light appeared to me on a cliff-top, raising such howling winds that I was nearly driven over. A hand appeared from a nearing car to steady me, and bring me safely into the presence of the enormous, pulsating light. I awoke and named that light "Jehovah," and wrote a poem that seemed to me, then, all my own, with the sense of finding my true way into poetry for the first time. The next day, in a bookstore, I chanced upon *The Opening of the Field*, and opened directly to the poem "A Natural Doctrine," in which Rabbi Aaron of Baghdad "came upon the Name of God and achieved a pure rapture." "But it was for a clearing of the sky...my thought cried," writes Robert, and "the actual language is written in rainbows." Just a few days later I spied him on the bus, introduced myself, recounted in the most astonished way the poem, flush with the magic of circumstance, synchronicity, or fate. I remember distinctly that Robert was unimpressed by the linkage, as if this foretelling were a matter of course, utterly quotidian.⁴⁴¹

As Shurin put it, “his attitude was as if, ‘how else did you think things operated?’ You know? And he invited me over for coffee or lunch.”⁴⁴² They became fast friends, and soon after lovers.

By Shurin’s estimation it “must have been just a year later, [when] an ex-boyfriend of mine came home and said he’d taken up with Diane di Prima.”⁴⁴³ At that point, She was living in Marshall on Tomales Bay, a good hour and a half drive north of the city, but “I was there all the time, visited frequently out to her house,” along with his ex-boyfriend, who was also “one of my very closest friends,” Jackson Allen. Shurin recalled di Prima playing recordings of Jack Spicer’s 1965 Vancouver lectures, and one “great experience we had, she and Jackson and I: There was a theatre—...the Surf Theatre—way out at the ocean, Irving and 47th or 48th. It was a little art house movie theatre, where she took Jackson and I out to see Cocteau’s *Orphée*—I was in my late 20s then—and then we went out to the beach, built a campfire, talked all about it and went back in and saw it a second time!”⁴⁴⁴ Shurin’s relationship with Levertov had begun to wane when he came to San Francisco, so now, he attested, di Prima and Duncan “were both my unofficial mentors, because I was unofficially a student in a way. They were both brilliant, and they both had treasure and kind of biographical authenticity. They were amazing.... I was so lucky. So so so so lucky.” A few years later, after several years of working at various bookstores in the East Bay and in San Francisco, “I was 33 and I thought this isn’t

enough, it isn't going to work for me, making my \$5 an hour.... I don't remember whether I thought about [going back to school first] or it all happened as a convergence, but [the Poetics Program] was announced somewhere, or I knew because they were talking about it, and it was so ridiculous because the two people who were already my teachers were forming a school..., [and] I had decided I wanted to teach. So it was a no brainer."⁴⁴⁵

David Levi Strauss "first heard of a projected 'Poetics Program' in Diane di Prima's kitchen in, I think, 1979," he wrote. "When Robert Duncan returned from Europe, I attended his lectures on Browning's *Sordello* at the San Francisco Zen Center in March, April, and May of 1980. At that time, rumors were circulating about Duncan teaching in a poetics program with other poets,"⁴⁴⁶ but he recalled "the rumor [first coming] into focus" a couple of months before, when he found himself "sitting at the table Christmas morning, Duncan and Diane talking about the program and what it was going to be."⁴⁴⁷ Strauss had been spending a great deal of time in di Prima's kitchen, at her table, the previous year since his friend, Sheppard Powell, and di Prima had gotten together in 1977. Strauss and Powell had been part of a tight-knit group at Goddard College a few years before, and Powell was in large part the reason Strauss and his soon-to-be wife, the painter Sterrett Smith, had come to San Francisco. Before coming to Goddard to study philosophy and photography,

Strauss first spent two years at Kansas State, from which institution he was kindly asked to leave after organizing protests on campus against Nixon's bombing of Cambodia, as well as a student strike over the firing of a radical history professor, so he then joined World Campus Afloat/Semester at Sea, travelling around the world and studying, among other texts, of course, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Friere. After graduating from Goddard, itself a decidedly non-traditional college drawing on the same Deweyan principles Black Mountain had been founded upon, Strauss studied with Nathan Lyons at the artist-run Visual Studies Workshop, in Rochester, NY, before moving to San Francisco in 1978, reuniting with his pal Sheppard Powell, thereby immediately diving into di Prima's inner circle, and so meeting Duncan.

Carl Grundberg, too, was a friend of Powell from Goddard, where he'd transferred from Dickinson College, "a somewhat traditional liberal arts college near Harrisburg in PA..., where [he] studied ancient Greek for a couple of years."

Goddard "had a much more creative environment," he said:

I met people like Richard Grossinger, who was teaching there at the time. I didn't study with him a lot, but he was around. I remember him giving a reading in the Plainfield Grange that blew the top of my head off. That's also where I met Sheppard Powell. Levi was there but I didn't meet Levi until I moved out to San Francisco. From Goddard I stayed living in Plainfield, for a couple of years after I graduated..., then I went to Naropa Institute, summer of '76, so that was a big eye opener as well. There I was studying with [Allen] Ginsberg and Anne

Waldman, but that's where I met Diane di Prima.... At the end of that summer I had no idea what I was going to do—go back to Vermont? Stay in Boulder? Some friends were going to California, and Diane happened to mention that she would be teaching this workshop in the Point Reyes Dance Palace, the Poetry Dream Collage Workshop, so I thought that was something to go on.... A friend of mine, Robert Horton, who was also taking a lot of poetry classes at the time, we both hitchhiked out to San Francisco and kind of made a life here. [We] went our separate ways, [eventually,] but every Wednesday we would take the 64 Inverness bus up to Point Reyes to take Diane's Poetry Dream Collage Workshop and then crash on somebody's floor and take the bus back in the morning....

I'd heard Robert [Duncan] and Helen Adam read at Naropa. I'd never heard of Robert Duncan before, but that blew the top of my head off. I had no idea what he was saying but it felt like the air was rippling and he was lifting his hand slowly as he read, keeping time, and it felt a little bit like a conductor in an orchestra but also like a magician casting spells. And when I came out to San Francisco, Robert was around and would occasionally give readings, and teach classes every once in a while.⁴⁴⁸

Like Strauss, Grundberg recalled Duncan's *Sordello* lectures "at the SF Zen Center guest house. A weekly class, free class, maybe 15-20 people that would crowd into the living room in the guest house as Robert would hold forth.... That was an immediate predecessor to the poetics program, maybe Robert sort of testing the waters," in a way. Around the same time, Grundberg said,

a friend of ours named Peter Hartman, a very gifted pianist and composer, was teaching a music class just in his house—kind of a music appreciation class—and a number of us like Levi, Aaron Shurin, we were all taking this class at Peter's house, and I remember Aaron and Levi and I sort of chatting, and they were saying, "Yeah, they're getting together this Master's in Poetics Program at New College, and Robert's going to be teaching there, and Diane, and David Meltzer," so we were all, "Yeah, I'd like to get involved in

that." We didn't know or care beans about New College *per se*; it was just the people that were teaching we were interested in.⁴⁴⁹

There are others' tales to tell, and they'll be told, but this last comment deserves note, as it was a common refrain among many of those with whom I spoke from the first few years of the Poetics Program. Though as many as half of the roughly 25 to 30 initial students in the program were either already enrolled at New College as undergraduates or had just recently graduated, of those who weren't already affiliated, few had much, if any, sense of New College as an institution, or knew anything about the undergraduate concentration in which di Prima, Hawkins, and Thorpe had already taught (along with Joanne Kyger, Jim Carroll, Tom Clark, John Clarke, Bill Berkson, and others) at McNaughton's and Patler's behest. Patler recalled that aside from the several current and recent New College undergraduates, "the initial group was largely drawn from the Robert Duncan community and the larger, and at that time growing, sort of Olson community.... I think there were half a dozen students that came because of Robert Duncan, and 3 because of Diane, and 4 because of McNaughton, and, you know, 2 by word of mouth..., and 0 probably because of me."⁴⁵⁰

The handful of recent graduates from other institutions who came to join the program mostly were directed there by colleagues of one or another (or several) of the faculty. Noreen Norton, for instance, had been directed to the program by the

poet Robert Kelly, friend and correspondent of both Duncan and di Prima, and Bill Scharf had been at Buffalo before moving to British Columbia to study with Robin Blaser, Duncan's old comrade. While there he'd begun a correspondence with Buffalo alum and childhood friend of McNaughton, Albert Glover, who wrote a letter of recommendation to Louis Patler, noting Scharf's editorial efforts with *Longhouse* magazine: "His work is careful and full of desire.... There seems to be no inroad to any discipline without either the good fortune or the sheer determination to meet and learn from what pre-exists us. Scharf, like McNaughton, has made a determined effort to study with poets I consider among the very best."⁴⁵¹ It was likewise for many in the subsequent cohorts of students. Dawn-Michelle Baude, for instance, had done her undergraduate work at the University of California, San Diego under Michael Davidson, then something of a Duncan protégé as a young poet and professor just beginning to establish his reputation as a New American poetics scholar, who "suggested that there was this new program that I would be good at. So I contacted Louis Patler, and Louis sent me *Letters for Origin*, by Olson. Sent it to me and said read this and come to New College," but the finances were complicated, Baude said, so instead "I went to Bisbee Arizona, and was one of the co-organizers of a poetry festival there—I was responsible for bringing Alice Notley and Ted Berrigan. Helen Adam was there that year....—but then Louis wrote and said..., 'We got you money.' I couldn't turn it down, so I left.... I returned the book, *Letters for Origin*, when I got here."⁴⁵²

As the years wore on and awareness of the program grew, an increasing number of students came of their own accord, or at least through less direct recommendations, but throughout the first manifestation of the program, it had a number of such boosters at other institutions who appreciated the singular opportunity it presented and strongly nudged good candidates its way. Another was Robert Creeley, whose endorsement, made in an interview published in the May/June issue of the *American Poetry Review*, Patler would proudly make a staple of program publicity: "The groups that seems to me the most decisive in the arts are basically centered in the city programs, either in some university base, or else more often, in some self-designed grass roots group.... There is one college that much impresses me. It's New College in San Francisco down in the Old Mission."⁴⁵³

Of course, the program had its detractors, too. They no doubt actively discouraged any number of potential students, but disparagement can serve as accidental encouragement, too. Such was the case for Norma Cole, who had come to San Francisco from Toronto by way of France in 1977 with her six-year-old son in tow after the collapse of her marriage, but would not find her way to the Poetics Program until 1982:

I had no money to speak of, I couldn't get a babysitter and go out and travel around and meet poets.... I was painting, too, at the time, and I was writing, but I knew that I needed some kind of company or community and I needed people who were book people, who read. I was not finding them. I went to the usual places, North Beach, and read, went to readings and things like that, and I was not finding

people I would be akin to. So I heard about the Berkeley Writers Conference and went there, and it was just horrible. It was like a workshop. [Robert] Hass was there and [Robert] Pinsky and Louise Gluck, and they ran it like a workshop. I didn't know anything about MFAs, or programs, or anything, but I knew I didn't want to be in workshops.... It was horrible, but I was in the Maude Fife room [at UC Berkeley]...and I overheard Bob Hass say, "I don't know *what* Robert Duncan is doing over there at New College, talking about *Olson* and all that stuff," and the next day I went to New College.... I didn't know anything about SPD, SPT, or New College. You don't know until you find out. I knew about Duncan, had seen a little bit of his work, but I didn't know Olson. I mean in [the University of] Toronto..., I studied English, but they didn't do American poets after Wallace Stevens, you know.... So, I thought, "Oh, if *he* doesn't like it, *I'll like it.*" So I went there. It was the middle of summer, so nothing was going on, [but] there was a list near the door, and I saw that Robert Duncan was a teacher there, and Michael Palmer—I knew Michael's work because of dance. I was interested in dance and went to [Margaret Jenkin's] company and he was involved.... He was a reader of his work during one of the performances, so I knew that was interesting.—I just decided, "Ok, I'm going in." And I went in, and there was a person at a desk. It was Duncan McNaughton. I didn't know who he was. I said, "Um, can I just come in and audit some of the things that are going on, because I don't need another degree, I just need to hear what people are saying." And he said, "Yeah, sure. There's nothing going on until September, but there's the library." And he showed me the fucking library, and *everybody* was there. That basically changed my life, forever.⁴⁵⁴

Cole was not the first to find the Poetics Program a welcome and desperately needed alternative to more traditionally academic pursuits. From the outset, in the first year, both Susan Thackrey and Susan Friedland were key members of the community—Thackrey formally enrolled as a student, Friedland at first officially and then unofficially an auditor—and both were pursuing higher degrees at universities in the area.

Friedland had come to California from New York with the poet Jim Carroll, settling in Bolinas, before receiving and then abandoning a healthy fellowship in the then-fledgling Modern Thought and Literature doctoral program at Stanford due to certain disfunctions of its first years. She next tried out the English PhD program at UC Berkeley, and essentially dropped out of that, too, moving to New Mexico, where she did continue work on papers for the several courses she'd left "incomplete." While in New Mexico, she heard about the soon-to-be Poetics Program at New College via former Bolinas acquaintance Robert Creeley, and returned to the Bay Area to see if she could enroll. As she said at a memorial for Duncan at St. Marks in New York,

The day I met Robert, he was holding court, talking to his soon-to-be students, and when I told him my field was the novel, he was furious. "I am attending here only to the poetics of the poem," he told me and, in effect, threw me out....

So I returned to Berkeley and worked out a deal whereby I could get an M.A. if only I wrote a thesis. And then I started sitting in on Robert's classes. And that's what I did for a year and a half.... Somehow, by the end of that year and a half of listening to Robert, I began to see the beginning of a thesis. But it wasn't quite like any thesis I'd come upon before. It involved a ghost of a language, and the language of a novel being disrupted by a haunting. By this time Robert had agreed to be on my committee at Berkeley, and I went to him with this idea. He liked it and encouraged me.⁴⁵⁵

However, when Friedland went to take her thesis proposal, about Joseph Conrad, to the resident Conrad expert at UC Berkeley, it didn't go over so well, she said:

The Conrad expert sat behind an enormous desk. *Like the president of Wells Fargo* I kept saying to myself. Why did I need to know whether

or not Conrad knew Russian he asked me, cautious, as if I was asking to withdraw knowledge from his bank. So I explained my thesis to him, including the details of the haunting I had detected. By the time I had finished explaining the crux of my thesis to him, a steely grey dusk had entered his office. "Are you sure you are enrolled here?" the Conrad expert asked me. "What is your name?"

I had managed to get the phone number of another great Conrad expert from him before he began to feel so queasy about my mental credentials. When I called him, this expert also asked me about my thesis, so I tried it out again. Silence....

By the next day, when I had Robert's class, I was wrapped in an armor I knew well. Head filled with inarticulate noisy fury. After class I explained it all to him. A desk like the president of Wells Fargo Bank's. "And Robert" I said to him, whining by now, "when I explained my thesis to him, he looked at me like I was speaking Martian." ... "Susan, we're *all* speaking Martian," he said, and was gone.

I went home immediately, and that afternoon I sat down and began to write about Joseph Conrad.⁴⁵⁶

The entire faculty—the core as well as the others—were active recruiters throughout the early years of the program, of course, encouraging select younger poets they met in various ways to enroll. Judith Roche, who entered the program in 1984, recalled that she had been reading di Prima's work for a few years, "and studying her, but I met her at Centrum, which is a Poetry festival sort of thing in Port Townsend, Washington.... Diane was there and I talked to her quite a bit about New College, and then she called me after she got home and urged me to come.... I might not have come except that she personally called me."⁴⁵⁷ Roche would shuttle back and forth from the Puget Sound to the San Francisco Bay for the next several years, one of a handful of vital figures attempting to navigate the joyous intensities Poetics

studies and intense joys of motherhood, simultaneously. Another was Julia Connor, whose participation offered an alternative route back to Black Mountain via her apprenticeship and friendship with poet and ceramicist M.C. Richards, who taught there during Olson's years as Rector. "A young mother in the late 1960s," Connor wrote, "I had just completed my studies of ceramics at Chouinard Institute (now California Institute of the Arts) in Los Angeles when a copy of M.C. [Richards]'s book *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* was put into my hands."⁴⁵⁸ She would marry, move to Sacramento, where she would obtain a certificate in Waldorf education from Rudolf Steiner College, then, upon Nixon's inauguration, move to Quebec, and finally study with Richards in New York in 1974 before returning to Sacramento, "the apprehension of an appointment with poetry lay[ing] dormant until mid-life and the dissolution of a marriage prompted me to undertake a study of poetics under poets Robert Duncan, Diane di Prima and others—an experience that radicalized my being."⁴⁵⁹

Mary Margaret Sloan had returned to the Bay Area from Australia, leaving her husband behind and bringing her young daughter along, about 1976, and soon after participated a writing workshop in Santa Cruz called Women's Voices:

That's where I met Kathleen Fraser, and Kathleen invited me to take her classes at SFSU, which was very generous of her because I wasn't even a student there. I was living in Palo Alto at the time. So I did. I took several of her classes, and then I did a lot of independent studies with her, but I wasn't really that satisfied. I can't really quite characterize it, I just felt that I was looking for something else, something deeper and more serious. I continued

to write for a couple of years and then in 1983 or 1984, a friend called me, actually the woman who had started that Women's Voices workshop, Marcy Alancraig. I was living in San Francisco, in Bernal Heights at that moment, and she said "Did you know that Robert Duncan is teaching at New College, and it's right down the hill from you?" And I said no, I didn't know anything about it, but I immediately got off the phone, got in the car, drove down the hill, parked, got out, found Duncan McNaughton, and signed up, all in about two hours' time.

I had met Robert very briefly. I had gone to what I believe must have been George Oppen's last reading, and when he faltered and forgot what he was supposed to be doing, what lines he was reading, Robert, who was sitting behind me filled in, and it was just terribly moving. I knew his poetry already, and I realized that he must be Robert Duncan. He was such an impressive presence. As soon as I heard I could possibly study with him, I jumped.⁴⁶⁰

One thing the last several stories bring, again, to the fore, is the Poetics Program's embeddedness in one of the most vibrant and diverse regions of the country. Iowa City, San Francisco was not. The Bay Area abounded in colleges and universities, cultural institutions of all kinds, cafés, bars, music venues, galleries, performance spaces, etc., and I have more to say about the broader milieu at other points in this text, but it's worth mentioning here again because many of those who enrolled in the Program were drawn to the City as much or more than they were drawn to the Poetics curriculum or faculty, per se. Still, the very fact that they did attend New College, and not San Francisco State University, the University of California, Berkeley, or any other institution, in and of itself speaks volumes. Matt Haug was one of any number of young students who had grown up in smaller towns elsewhere—the Midwest in this 19-year-old's case—and were simply interested in

writing and intrigued by the city's cultural history. Haug said, "I wanted to be a writer, and of course had read all the Kerouacs, all the Ginsbergs, and so it seemed like San Francisco was the place to go." As far as New College was concerned, he'd seen an advertisement somewhere, and recalled "a picture of Robert Duncan in one of the Kerouac biographies, so I knew who that was, but I just kind of lucked out.... I had some hint, an idea that this was the place to go. I couldn't say why exactly. I thought I'd just go check it out for a year or a semester and see what happens... I took it almost for granted in a way."⁴⁶¹

Todd Baron did not take it for granted at all, but similarly ended up at New College in large part because of the city it called home, which seemed infinitely more active and fertile than his hometown of Los Angeles, "where it felt like there was not very much going on," he said: "[I was] young and reading a lot of contemporary work and a lot of 1910-1920 European Modernism and Surrealism, and the Dada school. Beyond Baroque felt more like pop confessional Hollywood poetry, so that didn't work, but it was a starting off point." Despite the seemingly barren poetic landscape of L.A., Baron was quite active, "giving readings around L.A.," and with his friend Tosh Berman, son of Wallace, starting a magazine called *Issue*, which "helped us connect to people all over the world, really, and another group of more Modernist writers in L.A., including Paul Vangelisti and Dennis Philips." Baron also enrolled at the progressive Immaculate Heart College, but "during my second year as an English major the school folded, which was horrible for me," he said: "I was

trying to figure out what the hell do I do now. All I wanted to do was read and write poetry, and there was nothing in L.A.," so one of his professors, the poet Marth Ronk, "suggested I not go to college, take some time off, and she introduced me to a friend of hers," the poet and translator Peter Levitt. Baron said:

I went out to Peter's house once a week and brought work that I was writing, and we'd look at it, but it wasn't so much about what I was writing. He'd just hand me a stack of books, and I'd take them home and just ingest them. These were books I hadn't ever seen before, a lot of New York School poets, and Amiri Baraka—just people he had known personally, from his personal library. He was just grabbing stuff and saying, "Read this, and this, and this.... We did that for a long time, and the magazine was still going, and I was just reading. At some point I was invited to go read at the Intersection [in San Francisco], which was then downtown. I went and I became friends with Roberto Bedoya—one of my best and oldest friends. The minute I went up to do that I knew that I needed to be up there. There was my reading, and I went to a bunch of other readings, and there were all these people, a bunch of Language school poets and Robert Duncan and houses filled with people. That was right at the beginning of all those Language school wars, so to speak, and all that wonderful controversy. I just found it so exciting that people were angry about poetry, getting mad over writing, and yet still attending things together. Somehow, I found out about New College from someone up there, at some reading, and I knew I needed to go. So I applied, got in, and made it up to San Francisco.... I enrolled in the program, but really, not just the program, but the city and everything that was happening.⁴⁶²

As Baron said, summing up my own impressions, "Everybody made a similar journey to get there. Whether you were Robert or me or somebody else, the stories were all the same, you know: finding our way in language, and finding a way to

define a life in language.”⁴⁶³ It was indeed a “life” Poetics students were after, not a “career.”

It is one of the “arguments” of this book that as *sui generis* as the curriculum was, as a whole, as *sui generis* as each of the teachers was, individually, and as personally invested as they were in one another, it was this quorum of students who were equally invested in their teacher’s lives and in defining lives in language of their own via their curricular studies and “extracurricular” relations and activities that characterized the unique community of inquiry associated with the Poetics Program at New College of California. Simply put, without the students they had, the teachers would not have been the teachers they were. None of it could have happened. In the face of the many practical, personal, political, economic, and institutional challenges the participants in the program faced, as Strauss said, “the fact that it held together at all is miraculous, and is a result of...these people really lov[ing] each other. All of the many figures were so devoted to one another that it could happen.”⁴⁶⁴ Such love, not only for one another, but for the actual work at hand, sustained the program and its participants throughout these years, engendering a remarkably coherent, if multifarious and ever expanding, community.

Certainly, at New College at large, and in the Poetics Program, too, Todd Baron said, “there were students that probably weren’t up to doing the work, and yet they got in because the entrance requirements were very lax and they could pay, so you

could be in a room where there were incredibly serious students doing translation from Greek, and other people that were just writing kind of very traditional light-weight kind of poems and expecting to be in that place in these classes.”⁴⁶⁵ “If you wanted to be in the program you basically could be,” Michael Palmer acknowledged: “There were people who came in cold, and there were people who came in thinking it would just be a lark to be there and they could do a lot of cocaine and fuck off basically. There was a rude awakening for a few of those.”⁴⁶⁶ “We treated people well and there weren’t a lot of hierarchical machinations,” Strauss insisted, “but there were people who showed up and had their minds blown, and we set them outside the door and someone would come and take them away. In a couple of instances it was about like that,”⁴⁶⁷ but as Palmer put it, “that sorted itself out. By and large the people who came were very sincere about studying.”⁴⁶⁸ Grundberg said, “The feeling I had with the Poetics Program was somewhat my same feeling with Goddard, which was that the people who did the best with it were people who already had some experience under their belt and were maybe not on a beginning undergraduate level when they started. It wasn’t a good beginner’s situation.”⁴⁶⁹

One had to be a “self-actualized” person, not only to succeed, but simply to survive, as Baron said: “It reminded me very much of my high school experience...at an experimental or democratic high school here in L.A. called Summerhill Day School, based on Summerhill in England, which A.S. Niell started in the 1940s, where students had complete control of their day, and teachers could offer classes,

but no one was ever required to go." Baron, of course, was "one of the kids at school who attended classes all the time,"⁴⁷⁰ so when he arrived at New College, he was prepared to meet the intense demands of the Poetics Program, even though officially to complete his undergraduate studies. When he did, he immediately re-enrolled graduate program, and the transition being "seamless," he said:

[From the beginning,] I was studying with Michael Palmer and Aaron Shurin and Robert Duncan, and Lyn Hejinian came into the program, and David Meltzer, and there are other names, but I got my BA, and I'm literally walking out the door saying goodbye to people when Louis Patler...stopped me and said, "You need to get a Masters degree. You should stay...." So I stayed and got that.... From Day One until the day I left with the Masters not very much changed, really. Maybe 8-12 people in a room sitting around a table. That was what every class was for years and years.⁴⁷¹

Baron was not the only undergraduate in these graduate seminars. Of the approximately two dozen students formally enrolled in the graduate program for its first term, and more generally throughout its initial incarnation, only about half of these entered with their BA already in hand. Some, like Baron, only intended to get their Bachelor's degree before moving on, while others were enrolled in a curious "BA leading directly to the MA" arrangement created in part, no doubt, to help boost official enrollment in the graduate program to a more viable level by adding a number of current New College undergraduates. Perhaps the more significant reason for the arrangement was to accommodate the likes of Julia Connor, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, and John Thorpe, who, like the three members of the core faculty,

may have flirted with academic degrees in their youth, but never carried through with the necessary formal institutional studies. Without a BA, these poets and others of similar experience would have been precluded from enrolling in graduate studies at most any other institution, just as many of their teachers would have been precluded from teaching.

Whether they came for the city itself, for the peculiar curriculum of the program, or for a particular member of the Poetics faculty, practically every student involved in the New College Poetics Program shared with that faculty a fundamentally anti-institutional stance born of a negative (or at best ambivalent or underwhelming) experience of traditional institutions of higher learning or of a particularly positive experience of alternative, experimental education. Ultimately, very few Poetics students were particularly concerned with getting a degree, as we shall presently see, so although the official degree track required only one year of actual coursework, if pursued “fulltime,” many “fulltime” students, “part-time” students, and official and unofficial auditors would remain engaged, either continuously or intermittently, for several years in the program, proper, and/or its many ancillary activities, and many of them became (or continued to be) active as editors, publishers, and organizers of reading series, lecture series, and the like, extending its presence and influence throughout the city, region, and beyond, and providing new students in the program a ready milieu. New College, per se, wasn’t of any particular significance to anyone, as an institution, except insofar as it was itself a

sort of “anti-institution,” at least ostensibly run as a collective of faculty and students. As we have seen, and as we will see again, the ideals of New College weren’t always realized, nor, even when they were, were they always so “ideal,” but despite the constant precarity and conflict behind the scenes threatening the Poetics Program’s existence, it seems also to have been something of a precondition of that existence.

Among the many unusual anti-institutional aspects of New College was its recognition of “the validity of learning that takes place outside of the traditional academic environment,” i.e. “prior learning” experience. Though credit for such was only awarded toward undergraduate degrees, it could constitute up to one fourth of an undergraduate’s total credits. The awarding of academic credit for prior learning experience, practicum (i.e. internships or apprenticeships with organizations and trades- and craftspeople), and the like, was hardly unheard of at other institutions of higher learning, before, during, or after New College’s 35-year existence, but it wasn’t standard practice, and the arrangements made for such at New College were often particularly unorthodox. One fascinating example is John Thorpe’s petition for the maximum of “30 units of undergraduate credit for prior learning experience,” “in addition to the accumulated credit-units of...completed undergraduate course work at Princeton University and New College of California,” which was submitted in November of 1984, after four-plus years of intermittent enrollment:

In the accompanying dossier, while I understand that learning areas might be best described as if they had been formal college courses, I give a succinct précis of ten subjects which I feel definitely involved as much or more concentrated time and applied study as a semester-long fully assigned course in each of the ten instances.... I feel confident that I've engaged these ten subjects at depth and with intensity; and also that, happily, I've passed the demands that each one set.

The competency areas are:

READING / LIBRARY SCIENCE / ECONOMICS / EARTH SCIENCE /
DREAM / WOMAN / THE MUSHROOM / CHILD CARE / OPEN
WARFARE / WRITING

While this 10-page document—the entry on Open Warfare is, sadly, lost—is quite as amusing as some of the “competency areas” might suggest, it also is sincere, and it contains a number of passages in each of its sections that are very much in keeping with certain tenets of the Poetics Program as well as the earliest energies of New College itself, when its founder, Jack Leary, had challenged his students “to actually help shape and define [the] college”⁴⁷² and cajoled their parents that what they should be most concerned with for their children was “growth, a warm and perceptive development of his mind and personality,” not “a big name degree”⁴⁷³ from someplace like Princeton, with its hundred-year old institutional traditions.

New College could offer plenty of opportunity for the former, and indeed demanded it—there was no safety net for the unprepared and unmotivated student—but it could hardly offer the latter, being, as it was, quite new as an institution, and newer still to San Francisco’s Mission District. I’ll offer more details about the campus and its environs later on, but suffice to say they

were a far cry from the ivied stone edifices and green acres of Princeton. Too, the administrative practices and academic policies of New College mirrored its ramshackle physical condition, far more so than they did any etched Ivy League charter. Such unorthodox requests as John Thorpe's for special academic and administrative arrangements were, if not commonplace, also not at all rare in the Poetics Program and at New College more generally. Indeed, such arrangements would ultimately be one reason for the fateful revocation of the college's accreditation in the mid-2000s, and were a point of contention internally and externally for the length of the school's life, the complaint being that "prior learning experience," life experience, and the like, lacked any structure sufficiently formal to be adequately documented and so lent New College to accusations of not being a real college at all, but a sort of degree-mill—just the concern that occasioned a major internal struggle in the 1970s, albeit then coming from a different direction. Over the course of the college's three-and-a-half decades there may have been instances when such charges had some foundation, but there should be no doubt about the serious rigor of the Poetics Program in the 1980s. Carl Grundberg recalled, "When we had our first orientation meeting, I just went home that afternoon and promptly went to bed and took a nap for as long as I could, because it just seemed like the whole thing was going to be this crushing weight.... [It] hit me like a ton of bricks."⁴⁷⁴

II. Eccentric Intensities

As the reader will recall, in first proposing and pursuing accreditation for the Poetics Program, its founders had been concerned about their fellow core faculty members' lack of appropriate academic credentials. "We knew we had obstacles to face," Patler said, "except if we could get [the accreditors] physically there to sit in on a class, any class, and see these people in operation, and the rigor of it, and the class syllabus, and the reading lists."⁴⁷⁵ What I hope this book will show is that this rigor was not at all at odds with, or in spite of, the anti-institutional, extra-academic stances and experiences of the faculty, but in fact derived from, or on account of, these very things. Meltzer, di Prima, and Duncan were the extreme cases, as we have seen, and as we also have seen, Dr. McNaughton, despite his appropriate credentials, was about as far from "academic" as academics come. Even Michael Palmer was ambivalent about his august training as both an undergraduate and graduate student at Harvard. Mary Margaret Sloan said:

He was a wonderful, brilliant teacher. As we know, he had a wonderful education at Harvard, and so on, and he was very immodest about that, but at the same time he was critical of it. In a sort of funny way he taught us most of what he knew, and had learned at Harvard, but at the same time was providing a slightly humorous—I don't want to say cynical, but slightly critical light on all that, so we got the best of both sides.... He was always a deeply, deeply serious poet, but...he had a wonderful sense of humor.... I love to see that smile turn on, and his eyes just twinkle with humor.... Michael was a true wit. I can still remember some of the witty things

he said, and Robert was also a wit, so funny. He made us laugh. And David Meltzer was practically a standup comic. These three guys had a wonderful sense of proportion. They were deeply serious about poetry, but they had a wonderful sense of humor about life, shall we say, and the context of life in which poetry occurs. And the lack of seriousness with which the world around us regards poetry. It was the best of both, really, between seriousness and humor.⁴⁷⁶

This “sense of proportion” was something the faculty all shared, and what their respect and affection for one another was in no small part built on. None of the faculty had any illusions about poetry’s “place” in contemporary hegemonic discourse, inside or outside of the academy. At the same time, they were all “deeply, deeply serious poets,” and they banded together in common cause to resist the ongoing deracination of the poem. As McNaughton put it quite plainly, and disdainfully, in the program proposal: “Except in rationalized understandings of its motives and use, poetry has been in our epoch an estranged body of knowledge and value.”⁴⁷⁷ Two years into his teaching at New College, Duncan said:

Universities are an environment that poets who are conventional can take over very rapidly. And they tend to entrench themselves in universities. The interesting thing about poets entrenched in universities, in English departments and so forth, is that they insist on the poem being an expression of individual feeling and sensibility and a cultivation of it. And they’re very opposed to the intellectual, or an intellectual adventure.... Ruled out absolutely is the prophetic, the apocalyptic.... Ruled out is mystery.⁴⁷⁸

To read and write poetry, however—to live a life of poetry, this is, as intellectual adventure, vision, prophecy, and mystery requires complete devotion, a devotion few professors can muster, concerned as they are for their careers. This is one reason

it seems so significant to me that the Poetics faculty had led such unconventional, anti-institutional, anarchic lives. As di Prima told Meltzer:

When I was are thirteen or fourteen..., one day it hit me that [poetry] wasn't just out there, it wasn't just heroes, other people, it was me. I could do this. I could do this. I cried a lot when I realized that. I was very sad because it came with the understanding that I was going to have to give up a lot of things regular people have. I wasn't going to be able to snuggle in to regular human life. I don't know how I knew all that, but I did. And that's when I made my commitment to poetry.⁴⁷⁹

Aaron Shurin insisted that for the faculty, "it was all personal. Very much. And they expected the students to be as personally invested as they were.... It was real. This was poetry. It wasn't a lower order. It was poetry and if you were in it, you were in it. Completely. It was ferocious."⁴⁸⁰

"You got along fine with Robert if you just waded in, and just said what was on your mind," Carl Grundberg said: "He was willing to take into the fabric of the discourse whatever anybody had to contribute, but he could seem very intimidating because he seemed to have read every book that had ever appeared in print and could draw on them all at will a mile a minute." As a result, Grundberg continued, "there were some people that had real conflicts with Robert and got blown out of the program."⁴⁸¹ "Robert," Susan Friedland said, "had an astonishing tolerance for ignorance. And Robert had great good will at the comedy involved in knowledge awakening ignorance," but he "had a great disdain for stupidity,"⁴⁸² and, as Norma Cole remarked, "he would get angry when people were trying to talk about things

they didn't know. He would never get angry if you didn't know something, and you were like, 'Oh, I don't know that. Tell me about it.' He was just angry if you pretended. He hated that. He hated pretense."⁴⁸³ Shurin said, "You'd think because I knew Robert and Diane, it was giving me a leg up, but I think it put greater pressure on me and I think they demanded more of me." In one of his first classes, he wrote a paper for Duncan "kind of trashing Eliot. And he *flamed* me in class, just absolutely incinerated me, for being so glib about Eliot instead of *encountering* Eliot. It wasn't that I couldn't have a critical take on Eliot, but I had dismissed Eliot, and that was absolutely unacceptable." He recalled Duncan's progressively compounded conflict with Bobbie Louise Hawkins being "very similar, about her effort in class."⁴⁸⁴ About this conflict, Lisa Jarnot writes:

On December 22, Duncan woke in the middle of the night to take half a Valium, preoccupied by a disagreement with Bobbie Louise Hawkins about the scansion of Yeats's "The Second Coming." In his notebook, he recorded his annoyance when Hawkins theorized that the term "gyre" in the poem hadn't, as Duncan suggested, derived from Yeats's study of Swedenborg, a writer Duncan suspected Hawkins had not read. The feud continued into January 1981, when Hawkins and Duncan classed about the significance of the word "falcon" in the poem.⁴⁸⁵

Sarah Menefee, in recalling how "rude" Duncan had been in these exchanges. She felt that "he wanted to choose his own acolytes," in a way, but "if you didn't kiss his ass, you know, if you just treated him like a wonderful person, he was very open. Still, he was very hard on some people." Grundberg said,

I'm sure there were some pre-existing dynamics there from long before I knew either of them, but I think part of the problem, that I could see, was that to really dive into the poetics program you kind of had to be willing to take that monastic approach and leave your own work aside. Bobbie Louise Hawkins was already a published writer, making a name for herself, so there was a sense that she wanted to really enter into being better known for her writing, so there was a conflict there with just hunkering down and being humble enough to learn the basics. In addition to whatever the personal history and personality conflict was between her and Robert. And Robert was no saint.

As Michael Palmer said:

The emotional dynamic was intricate, and we were all kind of demanding of our students in a funny way, but Robert was a little bit more erratically authoritarian at times, and that had a bad effect on some people. For some people it was fine, but he would also acquire a certain animus for people that was a little poisonous..., including with his personal circle, exiling Michael McClure in a moment of rage.... I never was subject to that, but at times people were subject to a kind of rage that came from the pressure in his blood and the toxins in his blood, and he would think that, like Denise [Levertov], they had insulted the sacred poetics. Betrayals. It's not always very comprehensible.⁴⁸⁶

Diane di Prima, too, had a reputation as something of a mercurial mentor. As Todd Baron recalled, "there was always some trepidation each day when you walked in the door, a kind of performance anxiety..., [because] her coursework and Robert Duncan's coursework were the most strenuous, and in a way scary.... They were very loving and warm, but much more strict.... You really needed to be in the class in a very specific way for them."⁴⁸⁷ She was one of the "very few people [on the faculty] who would come in with kind of an authoritarian stance. Diane could be

wonderfully dismissive of a lot of stuff," Baron said, but at the same time "she was so generous."⁴⁸⁸ "It depended on her mood," said Dawn-Michelle Baude, more bluntly: "She could be really bitchy and horrible, but she could also be very generous."⁴⁸⁹ Matt Haug concurred: "Diane could be kind of crazy. Though I liked her, she was a little nuts, in a way, at times. A little intense. Diane could just 'go off' on people in her class."⁴⁹⁰ "Diane at that point was more of a force of nature than a human being..... She was like a geyser," said Kerry Tepperman Campbell: "It was a little unsettling to be there, because you never knew when she was going to go off. If you were very watchful you could figure out what things were going to make her go off and you could either choose to do them or not do them but there was a lot of Diane-watching going on..., a certain amount of 'learning Diane' going on in the room." Haug said the same:

I got it a little bit before we became friends, and...I remember the stories of Diane going after Lynne Wildey (Bob Kaufman's partner) in one of her classes and just dressing her down for like an hour in front of the class. Lynne was drinking pretty heavily and was all over the place, but she was also pretty tough. The story I heard was Lynne just sat there and took it and didn't flinch. Others would have run for the door.

A more typical story was people would say "Diane finds out where all your buttons are, and then she pushes them." It was meant to be educational, in the true sense of word, but it was intense. A lot of people could not take it, or thought she was nutty. She was part of lineage of Trungpa, the "crazy wisdom" guru at Naropa. She would push you to the next level. But no one else in the Poetics Department, no other teacher did this, that I know of.⁴⁹¹

At the same time, like all her fellow faculty, she had a hearty sense of humor. Haug remembered

Once in Basic Elements, Duncan McNaughton was delivering one of his favorite things he liked to say, regarding electricity, “no one actually knows what it is....” He was pushing for a more universal magnetic understanding of energy, or something.... Diane raised her finger and said, “Energy is eternal delight,” and kind of brought down the house with her comment. It was something we could all agree with. She was really attuned to wisdom of her path, while McNaughton would kind of brood over these fragments of things that got stuck in his head.⁴⁹²

McNaughton, Haug said, “could be really moody, very dark and heavy, this very dark sarcastic humor, and people would love him eventually, but he could be strange. We all loved him. Eventually.”⁴⁹³ Menefee concurred, “Once I got over being afraid of Duncan McNaughton and took a class of his—I think the first class I took was Shakespeare’s Sonnets, oh boy, and I got to read the amazing dissertation he’d written about the Sonnets—he became a really good friend, and mentor,”⁴⁹⁴ but he could be intimidating at first, with a physical aspect that matched his temperament: intense blue eyes under a heavy brow and shock-white mane of hair, shirt-collar often flared—“Byronesque!” as Shurin called him.⁴⁹⁵ Baron said McNaughton was an “interesting guy, great teacher, and so scholarly. At times it would seem like he was so stern, because again he had an edge, and he didn’t laugh a lot, but when he laughed it was really open, and readily and when I got more comfortable after a year or two in the program I went to him with a lot of questions about things, and he was

really wonderful.”⁴⁹⁶ Strauss, too, observed his double-edged personality: “Duncan McNaughton I loved, and I love Duncan still, but there were many times I just wanted to knock him down. I never did, but I came close.”⁴⁹⁷ Like di Prima, McNaughton could be dismissive of certain things, certain questions, certain people. “Peculiar thing about Duncan McNaughton, which I think was part of it—maybe a similarity between the Black Mountain diaspora and the San Francisco Renaissance—all about: ‘if you know us, you’re in, if you don’t, then you probably shouldn’t know.”⁴⁹⁸ McNaughton “came out of the best, out of John Wieners and Garrett Lansing,” Strauss said. “I think to this day that he is one of the truly great lyric poets of our time. Completely underestimated and under-appreciated.... I go back and at every period there’d be one poem that would just knock me out and I thought was the best thing around at the time.” So, Strauss noted, McNaughton’s occasional gruffness stemmed from “this sense of lineage” as a personal responsibility, to find out for yourself what lines converged in your own person, in your own poetics. “There was a lot of thinking about lineage in that program, and Duncan talked about lineage a lot, feeling connected to something that came before and has a through-line, a continuity.”⁴⁹⁹

Continuity of the Gnosis was the subtitle of di Prima’s Hidden Religions course, of course, and we also have already seen the importance both di Prima and Meltzer placed on passing down traditional poetical and spiritual lore and information as it is doubly incarnate in texts and in the flesh and breath. From whence things came,

i.e. how they came to be, was as much a part of the study of poetics, which was understood to mean “the study of how things are made,” as were their peculiar techniques, mechanics, forms, or physics, i.e. their basic elements, these investigations of a thing’s evolutionary history and irreducible particularity were not exclusive, one of the other, but in fact inextricably entwined. “Two things the Poetics Program tried to do was to give us an intellectual base that we could build on, a base of historical import that we could build on, and then to give us sources that we could draw on for the rest of our lives,” Strauss said.

A way to sources...is something that actually can be taught—I still don’t think writing or art can really be taught. They taught what they could, and there was influence, but it was not direct.... In any area that we approached there was someone in the faculty that knew the best stuff that had been done in that area.... Once you find a way into a scholarly area, then you look at what they’re reading, what’s influenced them, and you start to build your own network. To me, that became the teaching, that’s what you can do, that’s what you can teach..., knowing what the particular sources are, how to appreciate them, and then how to build a network that you can follow out. That will take the rest of your life to do.⁵⁰⁰

Strauss insisted that each member of the faculty had their own unique set of sources to offer:

I’m thinking of Duncan, Diane, McNaughton, Meltzer. Anselm also had a lot of stuff that nobody would have gotten to otherwise, in translation, and Michael Palmer, too. He was a great teacher, whose classes meant a lot to me. We read Rilke, the *Duino Elegies*, and it seems like we did it for a year, again following out sources, where that sat and where that came from. It was pretty direct. I think it partly came from Duncan’s study with Kantorowicz. I’m still going back to things that he wrote that actually opened up a whole group of

people at Cal, like Leonard Olschki, this tremendous scholar.... There was this whole group of people, and Kantorowicz was one...., this generation of scholars that are so wide ranging. Actually the entire Pound-Olson-Duncan-di Prima tradition in poetry is based on that. That whole tradition of poetry.⁵⁰¹

Strauss studied Shakespeare with McNaughton, he said, and McNaughton “really knew this stuff.... We were looking at the way that sources work, with Shakespeare,” tracing his work to Holinshed, Plutarch, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Marlowe, so fastidiously it took five years to go through the entire *oeuvre*. By all accounts it was an intensely rigorous study, and “both Diane [di Prima] and David [Meltzer] were rigorous scholars [too]. There was a good deal of rigor in the reading and in the investigation,” but “the atmosphere in the classroom was more relaxed and less tense” than in Duncan’s classes, Strauss said. Grundberg also recalled that although they both were demanding, Meltzer and di Prima were helpfully “systematic,” and their demands were better “defined,” i.e. “you should expect to do *this* amount of reading per week for this class, like 10 hours of reading a week, for the Hidden Religions class, whereas with Robert you felt like you should be reading everything printed in history.... He could seem very intimidating because he seemed to have read every book that had ever appeared in print and could draw on them all at will a mile a minute.” Strauss confessed that “Duncan’s seminars were in some ways terrifying,”⁵⁰² and he has elsewhere called Duncan’s lectures simultaneously “catastrophic” and “psychedelic, as in ‘mind manifesting.’”⁵⁰³ Extending this

characterization in *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness*, Peter O'Leary suggests "following the use of one of Duncan's favorite designations of the activity of the poet" to call these lectures "*psychotic*, as in 'of a psychosis,' meaning literally, 'the soul in process,' from the Greek *psyche*, for soul, and the suffix *-osis*, for process." O'Leary continues to note that "the suffix *-osis* also designates disease, or the process of disease,"⁵⁰⁴ and indeed Strauss wrote that "the students did get sick with it."⁵⁰⁵ By his own account, Shurin was "famous for having the worst stomach problems, nearly ulcers,"⁵⁰⁶ and Strauss recalled Shurin going "through a period where he'd wake up in the middle of the night gasping for air, unable to breathe," while Strauss himself "suddenly lost all vitality, as if a reservoir had been drained, and was left physically and mentally exhausted for months. Others had allergic reactions. Emotional breakdowns and blow-ups among students were common during this period. There was at least one full-blown psychotic break and a number of lesser episodes. We were pushed to the limits of our capabilities."⁵⁰⁷

I'll not elaborate on the "full-blown psychotic break" Strauss mentions here, in part out of respect for the privacy of the persons painfully affected by it, but also because the student in question turns out to have had a history of similar episodes before joining the Poetics Program, so it would be disingenuous to tie the experiences too tightly together, but "lesser episodes" of psychic and psychosomatic distress can, I think, fairly be attributed to the intensity of the demands. In a letter to O'Leary, Palmer recalled there being "much discussion that perhaps students were

coming under too much pressure to perform in some unspecified way, that perhaps the 'mystique' of the Poetics Program had gotten a bit heavy," and as O'Leary writes, "Palmer realized eventually [part of] his role, in an almost therapeutic manner, was to attend to the well-being of the students."⁵⁰⁸ As Palmer said to me, "Robert in particular put a lot of psychological pressure on people. I don't think I did. I was sensitive to that. I didn't apply that same pressure.... I tried not to be authoritarian. It's a point of honor for me in teaching. It's very important to me not to abuse that authority.... I know for some people there was pressure, and I know that Duncan was intense...."⁵⁰⁹ In his letter to O'Leary, Palmer wrote:

To some, Robert's improvisatory, associative style of teaching presented a challenge particularly hard to meet, and his expectations could seem at once capricious and insufficiently articulated. His relation to his subject matter was highly emotional and personal, and he was capable of flaring quite dramatically in class when the discussion seemed to be taking a bad turn. ("Bad" here must be seen in terms of Robert's *belief* in the poem, his deep commitment to what one might call the spirit of romance, the *Traditio* to which the poet must always, after his fashion, answer—however "open" this might appear, it engenders intolerance of certain kinds of thought that might read to [Duncan] as betrayals of Spirit. The potential here for contradiction is enormous.)⁵¹⁰

Belief, here, deserves the emphasis Palmer gives it. Matt Haug, too, emphasized belief, in an anecdote he shared about McNaughton: "He would talk a lot about the power of the imagination. He'd say you know I believe that I can walk through that wall right now, so I have to be very careful. Because I *believe*." Haug correlated this extreme belief to McNaughton's "Corbin Sufi obsession," but also noted that

Avicenna and the Visionary Recital “was one book people talked a lot about at New College,”⁵¹¹ not only McNaughton, but also di Prima and Duncan, too. More generally, Dawn-Michelle Baude said, “the school did encourage this visionary consciousness, I mean actively encourage. Diane di Prima and Meltzer—we had to translate from the Hebrew and make the letters and do the Kabbalah—they were really pushing, the actual magic.”⁵¹² “She had us trying to access alternative forms of consciousness by meditating on the tattvas IN CLASS at one point,”⁵¹³ Baude said. “We were all a little afraid of her, because we knew she practiced white magic.”⁵¹⁴ As Baude notes, Meltzer incorporated actual Kabbalistic operations, like gematria, into his classes along with the historical and theoretical elements, but to what degree he saw such operations as actually magical, as opposed to intellectual or poetic, remains an open question for me. Likewise, though Haug recalled that “when [McNaughton] got into Shakespeare, studying the Sonnets, [he said] he heard Shakespeare’s voice commanding him to do things,”⁵¹⁵ it isn’t clear that McNaughton saw his own belief as magical, rather than mystical. It’s a distinction I am not at present equipped to expound, but in an interview Evan Calder Williams, Peter Lamborn Wilson offers the following useful remarks:

Magic is not exactly mysticism; these are not the same field. Mysticism, in my experience anyway, can be a completely self-enclosed thing: it maybe involves just you, or just you and your guru. It’s not necessarily social because it doesn’t involve action in the world. You might say that it involves the opposite of that: a retraction of consciousness into itself. Whereas even the simplest magic act is about changing reality through consciousness, actually affecting what

we think of as reality so that there would be change in the “real” world.⁵¹⁶

Wilson’s remarks come in response to Williams raising “the question of practices that we have, or can have when we’re not cannibalizing ourselves, that are a way of constituting ourselves, to form fronts of resistance,” to which Wilson responds:

PLW: Right, but if you look at it just as constituting yourself then it doesn’t come right.

ECW: Exactly. That constitution must be plural.

PLW: And it has to be balanced with an outward direction. That’s what I call protection and projection, in magical terms. First of all, you have protection: you disenchant yourself from the web of image magic that’s controlling you. You realize that, yes, I am a slave to the image, and I want to break the chains, as Bruno said. Step two is projection, where you then re-enchance yourself, the landscape, the world. And that means you do your own image magic and you aim it outwards. It’s like heraldry. In heraldry, you have a shield that protects you, through the images. But you also have a weapon, or at least the weapon is implied, if it’s not shown in the actual coat of arms. That’s the outward projection of the power that you’ve created through this complex of imagery, that relates to you, your thoughts, your place in the world. And I think that any magical act that was designed to deal with, let’s say, political and economic realities, on some level would have to do both of those things.

ECW: One of the things that interests me when I think of this approach towards the magical, the occult, the pagan, the arcane, the alchemical, is that the majority of these are practices and concepts...belong to a separate discipline than what most people would consider politics with a capital P, or even a lower case one. Most importantly, they seem to have, or forge, their own timescale....

PLW: ...I never thought about this but it’s true, mystical time and magical time would mean two different things.

ECW: That’s a question I’m quite interested in, the active time of magic: it’s a sort of form you can’t separate from its action.

PLW: I think that fits. Mysticism deals with, somehow a kind of passive time, and magic with an active time.

ECW: Definitely. It has echoes of things, like the workers' enquiry practiced by radical sociologists in Italy in the 1950s and 60s, that do not find a pre-existing subject but compose it in the process of enquiry. Or like Karl Korsch's notion of what he terms as activist materialism. The point is that you can't separate your analysis or a situation from your involvement in it. It's a sort of practical involvement in a theory, such that magical time makes the time in which it engages.⁵¹⁷

The question of "politics with a capital P, or even a lower case one," as it relates to the Poetics Program, is a question I'd like to visit a little later on, but I have come to think of the community as a kind of magic circle, a congregation of poets sharing a fundamental "*belief* in the poem, his deep commitment to what one might call the spirit of romance, the Traditio to which the poet must always, after his fashion, answer," as Palmer put it. As Duncan wrote, "Responsibility is to keep / the ability to respond,"⁵¹⁸ and McNaughton convened a Poetics Faculty that was "responsible to the subject as poets and teachers..., working artists who, while their procedural bases vary greatly, as do their respective dispositions to the tradition, nonetheless share a common commitment to open scholarship and to mature investigation of the subject,"⁵¹⁹ as he put it in the original program proposal. This faculty, he emphasized, was comprised of "persons who cannot be said to be in any easy or specious agreement on the terms of their vocation.... The subject does not ask agreement. We expect division and contest to exist within this faculty, and we believe our differences can yield formal benefits for all of us."⁵²⁰ I hesitate to make too much of this, but the difference between mystical experience and magical

practice seems to been marked between the members of the faculty—di Prima being the only one with an actual magical practice—and it has been a part of my attempts to articulate for myself a particular Poetics Program “stance,” if you will—though obviously, no single, unitary “stance” was taken by any two, three, four, five, or six of the core faculty, much less the rest of the visiting poets, or the whole of the student body, and by and large, the differences were acknowledged with good humor. Matt Haug recalled, for instance, how Meltzer “always recommended the Wizard’s Bookshelf [published by a bookstore in San Diego]. They had a really cool *Zohar*. They had a really cool Chaldean *Genesis*. They had different magical books.... We’d be at some meeting, and he’d say, “Oh, you guy should check this out,” and Michael Palmer would groan, and be like, “Oh, no. What are you telling these kids?” In a joking way,” but really rolling his eyes, too. Palmer didn’t take the mystical and magical aspects of the art quite as seriously as others. Of course, as Haug also recalled, and as I’ve noted, it wasn’t always clear how seriously these others took it either:

Once there was an afternoon when a bunch of [Poetics] students were standing around in front of New College, waiting for class to begin, and from out of nowhere 30 preschoolers dressed as angels in robes and with wings on their backs came rushing across Valencia street. As soon as we saw them, they were gone again. Along came David Meltzer and Robert Duncan, David saying, “You see? You see?” — joking, but arguing for the presence of angelic beings in our midst.⁵²¹

Haug also recalled Duncan saying “he had made a vow to never study Kabbalah until he could do it in Jerusalem” —he had of course read plenty of Kabbalistic literature, so here he must have meant *study* with seriousness and rigor — “but that an angel had come to him and told him to take David’s class, so there he was. These were things that littered the imagination...the Vow...Angelic intelligences.”⁵²²

Descriptions of Duncan, his crossed eyes, his flamboyant dress, his discursive manner of speaking, his theatrical manner of reading his poems, often present him as a mage, a shaman, even a god — “not like the Yaweh kind of god,” as Judith Roche put it, “but one of the Greek kind of gods who have human failings, but are still gods!”⁵²³ — and tales of his seemingly otherworldly powers abound, from Allen Ginsberg’s and Philip Whalen’s stories of “black magic attacks” in the mid-1950s from “the magical emanation of Robert Duncan”⁵²⁴ to the following anecdote from Dawn-Michelle Baude:

There was a moment when Duncan was teaching in the summer and there were very few people in the class. It was a summer morning class.... It was in the morgue, which was then the Hari Krishna temple, which was then New College, and...the lights wouldn’t go on in the room. (We always had trouble with the lights in that room. Always.) So somebody was running up to check on the lights, and the lights won’t go on, and Duncan — when he was on, he was really inspirational. He took up more space than the normal human being — he was standing up, talking about when he writes..., and he said, “I feel myself under the command of supernatural powers.” And the lights went on in the room, and only Duncan and I saw it. Everybody else was [furiously scribbling.] “I feel myself....” Duncan looked at me and that was one of our big connects. We both got it. Nobody else noticed the lights..., trying to get everything down. I’ll never forget.

But Duncan did not actually practice magic. As erudite in mythical, mystical, magical, and religious texts and traditions as he was, he always insisted that he was “neither a believer nor a disbeliever,” as he put it in a 1985 interview. “Some things appeal to the imagination, and some things do not.”⁵²⁵ As di Prima has noted, Duncan was “certain...that Poetry in itself is all the practice, all the religion and magic one needs (and for himself it may well have been).”⁵²⁶ For di Prima, however, there was something else, something poetry partook of, but something other, something more than the poem.

As David Stephen Colonne writes, “her life had always been devoted to integrating the imaginative with the practical: poetics and politics, magic and medicine.... Thus di Prima recalled that she began to

do both healing work and trance visualization work for clients—people who felt they had a shadow in their life that was wrong, and so on. And in doing the visualization work, a few times I ran into forces (that’s what I call them—I don’t know what they were) that were way bigger than what I had been asked by my client to deal with. I would just put up a shield wall and call on larger forces to take care of them and go about my business. But I was aware that some of this work was kind of like Frodo in Tolkien’s *Hobbit*: “If you shine a stronger flashlight, it’s going to notice you!” So I started to wish I had a sangha, or other people I could sit with, just to ground myself after doing that kind of work.⁵²⁷

In late 1982 or early 1983, while the New College Poetics Program was still at its height, she founded the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts (SIMHA) with her partner Sheppard Powell, New College poetics student Carl

Grundberg, and Janet Carter, all members of the Golden Circle di Prima had formed in 1978 “with a group of artists who wanted to explore the range of the imagination through deep visioning techniques.”⁵²⁸ That group met regularly for several years “to investigate through group visualization the five elements and twenty-five subelements and the Major Arcana of the Tarot.”⁵²⁹ SIMHA was “an educational organization presenting a grounded approach to the hermetic tradition both as personal practice and as a way of working with others. Through a series of related courses students can acquire a basic background in magic and healing, and find their own specific areas of concentration.”⁵³⁰ Courses included Deep Visioning, Psychic Self-Defense, Healing Work, Tarot, and the Language of Alchemy, taught by di Prima, as well as Hebrew Calligraphy and Kabbalah, taught by Grundberg; I Ching, Magic Ritual, and the Magical Use of Voice, taught by Powell; and various astrological courses taught by Carter. SIMHA ran parallel to the Poetics Program for a few years—and continued on until 1992. Many Poetics students also took classes with di Prima through SIMHA, and for some the two contexts have become wrapped up with one another, inextricable in memory; for others SIMHA was very much its own thing, but it remained integral to their overall experience and a welcome supplement to Poetics courses. Kerry Tepperman Campbell recalled:

I took this class called Structures of Magic that went on for two or three semesters, and she also had this Deep Visioning class that she taught, where she’d put you in a light trance and then you’d do this deep visioning and you’d write and then you’d come out and read what you’d written. It was a great experience. And the thing that was

so amazing about doing it with Diane was that she would also do it. She'd put herself into the trance, write and read what she wrote. And when Diane read what she'd written—it was fresh, it wasn't revised, just fresh—it was like the oracle was speaking through her. It was extraordinary, but that's why she was Diane di Prima.... There were times when she would just have that moment when something else came in and she would be an oracle for a minute there.... She would be giving this fantastic lecture and then all of a sudden she kind of looks away off to the side, gets a little quiet, sort of feeling something that's in the atmosphere, and then she comes back and says something or does something.... [On one occasion] she said, "Well, you know, if you ever have an image that's hovering, off to the side, don't turn and look at it directly" —this is if you're writing—"don't look at it directly. Focus on the space between your eyebrows on the inside of your head and the image will come around to that place that you're focusing on.... I would have that happen, when I would try going to the image, before she told me that, and I *would* go to the image, but it would be this kind of out-of-body experience when I was writing, which wasn't so bad except I had such a hard time getting back *into* my body, and it was disconcerting and unsettling, and it was a bit of an obstacle to writing, because I knew I would have to experience that, and I didn't like that part of it. It was unnerving. When she told me that, I thought it was great, and I could bring the image just where she said, and I didn't have that feeling of leaving my body and not knowing how to get back into it. Writing became a much happier experience. That was one of the most helpful things that anyone ever said to me about writing. I was so grateful to her for saying that. It was so personal. Nobody was talking about how weird it was to write....

From time to time she would talk about things in astrological terms.... There are three ways that the muse can come in. There's the Neptunian way, and that's the way we all want to have the muse come, or have our visioning be. The Neptunian way is just being awash, *awash* in this beautiful stream and waves of images and languages. That's what we all want. That's what we enjoy the most. This other one is Uranus. Those are the ones that hit you like a thunderbolt and they kind of crack you open and they're not that pleasant and you don't feel like you're in control. It happens *to* you and all in a flash and it's all there and you're just writing it down, and she said that's the way *Loba* came to her, that she just wrote for days. And the third one is like Pluto, the god of the underworld, and that

one, that's the most uncomfortable, and you feel a physical discomfort. It could be for months before it breaks the surface, but you feel this physical discomfort of something pushing on you. It's very unpleasant and it sort of irrupts and you write the thing, but you can't bring it to consciousness any sooner. You have to wait for it to irrupt into consciousness and it's pretty unpleasant the whole time. And I was like, "Thank you, Diane." Finally someone said something honest about writing that's truly useful.... As much as she wasn't anyone I wanted to get *close to* close to, in ways like that she was generous—like nobody else in that whole program.... Diane was really open about her process.⁵³¹

Haug said di Prima "would accuse [the other faculty] of doing a 'head trip' on [the] poem, i.e. being too cerebral, and missing the main information of the poem."

At one point, di Prima suggested adopting the phrase "a path with heart," which Naropa used, into the Poetics Program marketing materials, but "it went over like a lead balloon. It was a cynical crowd"⁵³² in certain ways. In an interview she gave at the outset of the Poetics Program, di Prima said:

Poetry is not a place where you can bluff. So you speak direct to the hearts of people. People are hungry for that directness. It's like the days of dying in the desert yearning for a glass of water, for any speech that's speech of the heart. And there's way too much speech of the brain, and there's way too much information about what's going on and not anything of the gut and not anything of the heart happening. So whatever else we do, the first thing is to reactivate the feeling, we reactivate the possibility of living a life of emotion and of the flesh, as well as of the brain.... Because without the livingness of the words, there's no living of mind consciousness.⁵³³

All of these are sentiments with which the other faculty would have been sympathetic, but there was a sense that SIMHA provided di Prima a separate sphere in which to exercise those faculties the others felt perhaps a little too *outré* even for

them, and also no doubt to deal with the dark cloud of illness that had begun to spread not only over New College, but the city, and the nation.

One can hardly forget that these were the early days of the AIDS crisis, the virus first appearing namelessly at the end of the Poetics Program's first year, in June 1981, and looming over the lesser maladies so many Poetics students suffered. Their teachers suffered, too, with their own troubles, as Strauss recalled: "Most of these reactive illnesses were either respiratory or circulatory — students tended to have trouble with breath and teachers with blood."⁵³⁴ I don't want to make too much out of the connection between the psychic, psychosomatic, and physical illnesses and the curriculum and pedagogy of the Poetics Program, but many of those involved then did and continue now to see a great deal of significance. "For some of them it represented a complex expanding sort of crisis," Palmer told me: "I was made aware of that by the book about illness [O'Leary's *Gnostic Contagion*], which is maybe a bit over the top, but it did bring out an aspect of the Gnostic that is somewhat relevant in relation to the program — though it paints a darker picture."⁵³⁵ He'd encouraged O'Leary to "keep in mind the constantly high emotional pitch of that student body, which left many of them quite vulnerable,"⁵³⁶ and indeed many of those I spoke with acknowledged as much, some with a hint of embarrassment — e.g. Mary Margaret Sloan: "There was something about Robert, when I was in his classes I felt I was practically — well, I don't want to sound too California-ish, but I practically felt like I was seeing auras or something. I was so rapturous and ecstatic in his classes because

he was just saying everything I wanted to hear."⁵³⁷—some unabashedly—e.g. Dawn-Michelle Baude: "I had a really high level of extrasensory, you know, telepathy or precognition, whatever you want to call it. I've had this since I was a wee girl, and it comes and goes, and...after New College, I don't really let it come, because it's too seductive. You start looking for patterns where there aren't patterns. You have to keep it at bay."⁵³⁸ All this goes to show is that many of the students were indeed predisposed to Duncan's opening admonition in *The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography*: "When a man's life become totally so informed that every bird and leaf speaks to him and every happening has meaning, he is considered to be *psychotic*. The shaman and the inspired poet, who take the universe to be alive, are brothers germane of the mystic and paranoiac. We at once seek a meaningful life and dread *psychosis*, 'the principle of life.'"⁵³⁹

This was the poetic condition to which the program's students were increasingly inured. As a result, certain events have taken on mythic proportion, like the time David Levi Strauss, Dawn-Michelle Baude, and Tinker Greene "were playing pool and drinking too much at a rough bar near the school," as Baude put it—the Dovre Club, said Strauss—"And this girl came in, covered in blood," said Baude—"naked and covered in blood," said Strauss: "We finally got out of her that her boyfriend or husband had attacked her."—Baude said, "Her mother had been stabbed to death by her father, and the girl had escaped."—Anyway, "we went across the street and this guy was still there with a knife," Strauss said, or maybe as he told Jarnot, "We

grabbed pool cues and went to the apartment across the street to find the ax murderer sitting in a chair by the bed, ax in lap.” Anyway, Strauss said, “the police came. I can’t remember who all was there. But that image....” The precise details hardly matter. Baude said “the next day Robert spoke to Levi and I about the baptism of the blood.” Strauss too recalled the “blood baptism” to Jarnot: “Everything that happened to us during that time became incorporated into the ‘curriculum.’”

In the foregoing I’ve woven my own interviews with Baude and Strauss, both conducted in July 2017, with emails they sent to Jarnot in December 1997 and February 1998, respectively,⁵⁴⁰ partly for fun—one needs to have a little fun when writing a book like this—but also because I’ve been intrigued by the overlapping temporalities of the task. I’m dealing here—not only in this anecdote, but throughout the work—with events that happened, as I write this, 35 to 40 years ago, literally a lifetime ago, from my own perspective. I wasn’t there, but I’ve tellings from others, and, what’s more, sometimes, as in this case, multiple tellings from given tellers, here separated by 20 years and differentiated too by their contexts. A tale told via email, perhaps in response to a particular question (I don’t know if that’s the case here; I haven’t read the entire email chain, but it doesn’t matter) is a different tale than the one told face to face, unprompted, in the flow of conversation. And here, too, these conversations weren’t only with different people, but took place in very different contexts, one squeezed into a two-hour window before my interlocutor

headed to the airport in a café a mere two blocks away from the scene of events, the other 3,000 miles across the country in my interlocutor's home, where I was most hospitably accommodated and so able to talk intermittently while looking through boxes and boxes of papers. This is not in any way to pit one against another—though I'll take a weekend in the countryside any day—I'm only remarking, again, on the disparate temporalities and materialities at play. As I noted earlier, in addressing the question of Anselm Hollo's tenure, the challenge of "triangulating" between divergent memories and conflicting documentary records to ascertain any given "fact" has been great, and I imagine the challenges I've faced are commonplace. Anyone who has attempted to write a book like this might recognize them, though many, no doubt, are more adept than I. Needless to say, I'm not an historian—neither by training nor by nature. I've always struggled with dates and names, but what's more, the task here isn't merely to tell a story or tally facts. I do want to do those things, yes, but I must take some meaning from them, too, must make some meaning I might impart then to others. An history ought to be of use, yes, as much to the one writing it as to the ones who might read it, and at this point it seems more important that I get something useful out of it myself than worry unduly about what others might glean. Hence the permission I've granted myself to go off into the weeds we find ourselves in now. Don't worry, we'll find our way back out of them again soon enough. The trouble has been that in attempting to construct meaning, rather than simply tell a story or tally facts as best I can, I've found that everything is

a trapdoor to everything else, potentially, anyway, to anything else. As Strauss said, in telling me the blood baptism tale above, “there are all these undercurrents.” One story flows into another, into an idea, into a text, a work of art, whathaveyou, and yet it might flow into any number of others, too, depending on who’s telling it, to whom, in what context. And here I am trying to piece it all together into something that might hold up, not collapse under its own weight, as seems continually to be happening. How many times have I found the scraps laying around me in what seems complete disarray? How many times have I shifted them around, resoldered the connections, only to see the current overwhelm the circuit and blow the whole thing apart again? I’ve had crisis after near-paralyzing crisis in writing this book, and the experience has made me wholly sympathetic to the early Poetics students’ anxieties. Everything seems to proliferate with meaning, and it is impossible to articulate enough of it. I am perhaps predisposed, as they were predisposed, to Duncan’s semiopsychosis.

As Carl Grundberg said, “[It was] a lot more than any of us had bargained for. Even for Robert [Duncan] it was a lot more than he had bargained for. He found himself working really hard, too, to keep up with these classes.”⁵⁴¹ Duncan had had “his own doubts and fears going into this teaching. He described waking up the night before in a cold sweat from a dream that his teaching would fall on deaf ears and fail completely,” Strauss wrote: “Duncan took these years of teaching very seriously, as a particular kind of work. He came to it as a lore-father, someone who

had been poetically obsessed for forty-five years..., and now wanted to pass on as much of it as he could, orally, mouth-to-ear."⁵⁴² He tried to pass on *a lot*, Straus said

You were on the edge of your seat all the time, not knowing what was going to happen. Because so much was coming at you. The proportion of what you could absorb in time—you knew you were...going to have to...think about it for the next ten or fifteen or thirty years. So there was an anxiety about learning and not being able to keep up.... Carl Grundberg started this practice of people writing titles of books and authors on cards and he started collecting them and it turned into this vast storehouse of sources because Duncan was just a fountain. In an hour he would go through 200 sources and we were writing them all down, and it became important to be able to move them around. Carl would collect them and copy them and give them out to everybody.⁵⁴³

As Grundberg recalled,

I was thinking it would be a good project just to make a bibliography of all of the books that Robert mentioned. I quickly realized that it was an overwhelming task. There was no way I could, even if I stopped doing anything else. It would be a big job, definitely not something I could do. You've seen the *H.D. Book* and there's a pretty hefty bibliography of most of the books that Robert mentions in the *H.D. Book*, but even there there's some that don't quite appear because he's all over the map and sometimes his references would be quite fleeting. He'd just mention some pre-Socratic philosopher in passing and then move on to 19th century socialist theory and weave them all together..., but you weren't quite sure—Was this one really crucial? Was that one just tangential?⁵⁴⁴

I came across copies of these partial, collectively notated bibliographies of Duncan's talks in several archives and personal papers, including those of persons not enrolled in Duncan's courses that first year, and soon found myself recognizing them with a sidelong glance at a given stack of documents. The ease of this recognition was in

part, no doubt, because, as Grundberg said, the paper used for “the New College Xerox machine, probably because it was the cheapest paper they could get, was sort of tan colored,” making these thick stacks of notes visually distinctive. “Everything you Xeroxed came out against a tan background, and I would hack away at my manual typewriter and then Xerox it, so it was often not incredibly legible.”

At the same time that Duncan’s references were being recorded on paper, Duncan’s lectures were also being recorded to audiocassette, though here too the medium left something to be desired, as Grundberg recalled: “We had these lousy cassette tapes that somebody had bought—the cheapest possible, like Irish brand cassette tapes—so they were always getting snagged and snarled up in the middle of Robert talking. And of course he wouldn’t stop talking and wait until you got the tape going again. He’d just keep going.” Though these tapes are often as inaudible as Grundberg’s notes are illegible, owing to the cheapness of the original tapes, the awful acoustics of the New College classrooms and their proximity to the street, among other factors, many hours of Duncan’s seminars and lectures were recorded over the course of his first few years at New College—as were many hours of di Prima’s seminars and lectures and a good many other talks, readings, and sundry events. Some of these tapes, or copies of these tapes, have ended up in various archives and many others remain in boxes and filing cabinets in the homes of former faculty and students. During the Poetics Program’s early years, recordings of Duncan’s lectures and seminars were often made by students for their own purposes

and to send to other students who were unable to attend, like Judith Roche, who had been forced to return home to Seattle for the Spring semester of 1984:

I was still enrolled and still paying tuition and still doing work and people were sending me materials and I was writing papers, still doing it.... I got a lot of tapes, that have since been lost. And the quality was really bad on Valencia Street there. Tons of traffic noise and people with cheap little tape recorders that you put on the desk and it picked up a lot of what was going on, but it was also pretty bad. At one point I asked a professional to copy them for me, but he said they were kind of too bad to do.

Roche recalled classmate Julia Connor "being faithfully there every time, all the time, and faithfully taping," and others did likewise, though on an ad hoc basis. The first year, however, Grundberg said recording Duncan's classes "was part of my work-study job."

III. Collective Looks, Collective Language

Work-study opportunities for many of the students in the Poetics Program were often quite extraordinary. Jobs included various administrative tasks, of course—in the registrar’s office, “cataloguing, ordering, and invoicing, as appropriate; work with [the] college librarian,” and assisting Louis Patler on researching and securing “funding and grant resources for...students [and] the Program” (a role filled to some extent by various students over the years, though most notably Steve Klingaman, who eventually wound up “actually working at New College for a couple of years, doing grant writing.... I got some big federal grants for those guys..., working for them full time.”⁵⁴⁵)—but they also included working directly with some of the faculty poets, and others unaffiliated with the program. Robert Kocik assumed the role of “editorial assistant for poet Larry Eigner, 53, an established writer palsied from birth; [the] job involve[d] organizing files, typing & Xeroxing manuscripts, locating specific library materials..., reading texts aloud, occasional trips w/ Mr. Eigner to events in Bay Area (poetry readings, etc.),” according to the initial job description penned by Robert Grenier. One student’s job under Diane di Prima was to “transcribe tapes of [her] lecture series ‘Structures of Magic and Techniques of Visioning’ (1978) & prepare & edit mss. for book publication,” and Jill Duerr later transcribed talks by di Prima on Shelly (earning \$5.00 an hour). Noreen Norton and Stephen Ferreboeuf both worked as research assistants to David Meltzer helping to

assemble material for an anthology at first tentatively titled *Thanatos*, but eventually published in 1984 as *Death: An Anthology of Ancient Texts, Songs, Prayers, and Stories*, a companion volume to Meltzer's 1973 anthology *Birth*, which was brought back into print in 1981. Aaron Shurin was hired "to be Robert Duncan's archivist. They paid me to go there twice a week or so and put his papers in order and have lunch with him and Jess. For 2 years I did that." When he was no longer a student and so no longer eligible for work-study through the school, Shurin parlayed his experience as Duncan's archivist into a job with editor Donald Allen. "I was his assistant for about three years, put all the correspondence for the *New American Poetry* together to send off to [UC] San Diego. Had everything through my hands. Everything."

Another advertised work-study gig was the "editing of a program publication," and over the years, Poetics students put out a number of one-shot or short-lived magazines, produced by mimeograph, photocopy, or other inexpensive means, in small runs and distributed by hand in the immediate vicinity. These magazines served a vital purpose for the students in the program, who had no formal context within which to read one another's work. Carl Grundberg said, "It was very monastic in a way, in that all of our own poetry was way in the background, kind of humble, or humbling. It was like, 'Just leave that in the background for now; You need to get some basic training so you have some idea what you're doing.'" He

insisted that “there was a real humility among the teachers as well. They were definitely not grandstanding their own poetry. All the teachers were very serious that they had this material they wanted to present, and that was the important thing, rather than their own poetry or their own poetry careers.”⁵⁴⁶ Indeed, Sarah Menefee told me that if students wanted a member of the Poetics faculty to read poems they’d written, they had to surreptitiously inquire and covertly hand the manuscript off at the bar across the street as if it were a kind of illicit exchange.⁵⁴⁷ Grundberg conceded that “maybe in some ways it was problematic” for some students, because “you kind of had to be willing to take that monastic approach and leave your own work aside,”⁵⁴⁸ and not all students were. He perceived part of the conflict between Duncan and Bobbie Louise Hawkins, for instance, was her being “already a published writer, making a name for herself. There was a sense that she wanted to really enter in to being better known for her writing, so there was a conflict there with just hunkering down and being humble enough to learn the basics.”⁵⁴⁹ Few, if any, other students had quite the stature Hawkins had begun to achieve as a writer, much less her life experience, but there may have been some with a comparable sense of their work’s as-yet-unrecognized importance. More often it was a question of young poets wanting encouragement and needing advice but not knowing quite how to go about getting either outside of some pre-established institutional structure. It was a problem that seemed to come more to the fore with each new crop

of students, prompting this seemingly obligatory addendum to the course descriptions in the third program catalogue:

Writing

While the Program offers no classes in writing, many students do want to work on their own writing with the assistance of faculty members. For undergraduates, there exists the possibility of enrolling via Tutorials or Independent Study for credit in writing.... This is not a graduate option.

The most realistic solution, for *all* students, is that which more or less naturally occurs; that individual students simply ask faculty to look over their work, and that faculty in turn offer whatever responses they judge useful. It is understood that faculty are willing to do this, inasmuch as we are writers and are interested to help....⁵⁵⁰

“One of the things that was great about that program was that it fostered a peripheral community of people sharing and discussing work in an informal way,” Mary Margaret Sloan recalled: “There were these sort of formal meetings where poetics was discussed, and the writing of all the people we were reading, but then these conversations continued on outside the classroom.... People just went out for lunch, coffee, all the time, and shared [their own] work, discussed it, really, all the time.” As she pointed out, “Poetics was what that program was.... There were plenty of other places people could go if they wanted workshops, like San Francisco State.”⁵⁵¹

Grundberg recalled, “After we’d been going for a while, people said, you know, ‘We actually *are* still writing some poetry, so why don’t we put something together?’”⁵⁵² So at the end of the first fall semester, Michael Lazar issued a call for

work, with a February 1st deadline, and at the end of the first year of the program, he published 277 copies of the one-off *Asphaleios*, “a collection of works by students attending the Poetics Program at New College of California, San Francisco, 1980-1981.” It was a fairly comprehensive 40-page collection, with contributions, in order of appearance, from John Thorpe, Susan Thackrey, Kerry Tepperman, David Levi Strauss, Aaron Shurin, Bill Scharf, Ken Petrelli, Sarah Menefee, William T. Matthias, Donna Lynn, Michael Lazar, Robert Kocik, Carl Grundberg, Tinker Greene, Janice Goucher, Debbie Fass, and Jeana Edelman photocopied from the original submissions, of which all received were included, variously formatted in various typefaces, on 11 x 17” paper, folded in half and saddle stitched into blue, waxy covers with a pasted-on blue, purple, and pink photocopy of an infrared satellite image of the San Francisco Bay Area—“Back when it was still new and avant-garde to have satellite photos of things!”⁵⁵³ as Grundberg noted. The title was taken from Karl Kerényi’s *Zeus and Hera*, as was the explanatory epigraph, which reflected a certain awareness of and sensitivity to the precarity and potential catastrophe of the Poetics Program: “An early experience of human beings living in the Mediterranean area was that earthquakes were not confined to the land. The sea often enough quaked too. From the ‘shaker’ they expected security against earthquakes and gave Poseidon the epithet ‘asphaleios’, ‘securer.’”⁵⁵⁴

The following year, Bill Scharf and Kerry Tepperman edited two issues of *Notice: A Journal of the New College Poetics Program*, photocopied, 8 ½ x 11, side stapled. “We

had this work study money and some people were like go-fers for somebody, or typing somebody's something-or-other, and Bill and I had no interest in that," Tepperman recalled: "We were pretty inundated as it [was].... I [didn't] want to be somebody's research assistant." So they asked themselves, "What would be worthwhile for [us] to do, and might contribute something to the community?" As she put it:

We were in this fascinating little subculture in terms of what was happening with poetry in the Bay Area, and...nobody else [had] a way into it, and we [didn't] have a megaphone out—only to likeminded people..., so it was also like, "Ok, we'll send this out in to the world, and it'll be just a little paper airplane that we send out into the world...." We didn't reach out to anybody.... We just announced it. New College didn't even have a central notice board for the Poetics Program or anything, it was just like word of mouth: "We're doing a journal, pass it on." Because we didn't want to take up much space in these important people's classes, when we let people know we were doing it, it was just three words....

Both issues featured work by Scharf, Tepperman, Sarah Menefee, Robert Kocik, Dawn Kolokithas (Dawn-Michelle Baude), Steve Klingaman, and Ken Petrelli, while the Fall 1981 issue was supplemented with work by Julie Norstrand, Carl Grundberg, Adam Shaw, Pamela Raphael, Stephen Ferrebeouf, William T. Matthias, and Jana Salmon-Heyneman, and the Spring 1982 issue, which sported a photograph of Robert Duncan's chalkboard on the cover page, was supplemented with work by John Thorpe, Julia Connor, Michael Lazar, and Rebecca Tassi, plus a transcript of visit faculty member Anselm Hollo talking with Tinker Greene and Noreen Norton.

Primarily it was for us. I don't think we sold it at all. And we didn't have a reading. Maybe we took a few copies to someplace like Small Press Traffic.... We didn't have a lot of time to make something happen, but the way the Bay Area community was then, you tossed out that airplane and then it would get handed from person to person to person and it would just move. I remember [meeting] Beau Beausoleil at a party around that time—and I didn't know him, though I knew of him; he was older than I was—and we were having this long chat and finally we exchanged names, and he said, "Oh my god, I read your piece in *Notice!* He wasn't part of that community, but that's what I mean. Things move, things travel...."

It was actually a piece in *Asphaleios* ("Methods of Punctuation") that "prompted Beau B. to track me down," Tepperman later clarified, remarking, "He said, among other things, he'd tried calling New College but whoever answered the phone was extravagantly unhelpful. I thought that was hilarious and so telling about NC. It had a little bit of that Bolinas vibe, like somebody moved the sign so it couldn't be found."⁵⁵⁵

The third year of the program saw the publication of *Convivio: A Journal of Poetics from New College of California*, edited by John Thorpe and co-published by New College and Tombouctou, Michael Wolfe's Bolinas-based press, which counted several Poetics affiliates among its authors. Weighing in at 150 pages, professionally typeset, perfect-bound, with cover art by Terry Bell, the magazine was geared decidedly more toward the "outside" world and served as evidence of, and advertisement for, what was going on in the program, proper. Opening with a nutshell history of the program penned by Louis Patler, *Convivio* was indeed a journal of "Poetics," not poetry. Though curiously with no contribution from Diane

di Prima and none from Duncan McNaughton, it does have a characteristically elliptical seven-page piece by David Meltzer, "Sounding and Text," "A Letter to Duncan McNaughton," by John Clarke, "Hedge-Crickets Sing," by Robert Grenier, and an interview with Joanne Kyger. The focus is clearly on student work and the program's resident luminary, Robert Duncan. In addition to Duncan's essays "The Self in Postmodern Poetry" and "The Adventure of Whitman's Line," along with the poem "Let Me Join You Again This Morning, Walt Whitman," which concludes the latter, there are two collectively sourced précis of Duncan's lectures, the first drawing on contributions by Thorpe, Grundberg, and Patler; the second on contributions from Susan Thackrey, Ken Petrelli, Noreen Norton, Aaron Shurin, Stephen Ferrebeouf, Carl Grundberg, Tinker Greene, et al. David Levi Strauss felt—and having listened to many hours of tapes myself, I agree—that direct transcription of Duncan's lectures was impracticable, and moreover, as Thorpe wrote, "Robert Duncan feels that transcribed talks are pretty flat tires, and prefers a more poetic blend of memory and imagination," so what are offered here are "flushed and giddy didactic reactions,"⁵⁵⁶ or to use Strauss's more sober terms, "reconstitut[ions of] a teacher's lectures for use, as was done with students of Saussure, Wittgenstein, Olson, and many others."⁵⁵⁷ The pieces in *Convivio*, of course, are only a hint of what some enterprising editor or scholar might do with Duncan's teaching, but they highlight again the collectivist nature of the program, especially, but not only, under Duncan's influence in the first years. Rounding out the magazine are individual

essays by Grundberg, Norton, Shurin, Thorpe, Michael Lazar, Bill Scharf, and Kerry Tepperman.

Patler's introductory note to the first issue of *Convivio* promises, "in the next year or two..., three or more volumes" of the magazine, but the financial burden proved too great for the program and its publishing partner to carry themselves. Despite attempts to raise additional funds from various local foundations and individuals, the second and final issue—John Clarke's aforementioned 1980 lectures *From Feathers to Iron*—would not appear until just after the initial incarnation of the Poetics Program had dissolved in 1987. That volume would come to fruition thanks to several "students of New College who gave their time and energy to prepare the manuscript," as part of work-study jobs and out of sheer interest and enthusiasm, including Thorpe, Dan Blue, Martha Crook, Jill Duerr, Michael Kronebusch, Pat Shell, Dale Sides, and Julia Van Cleve. Meanwhile, other students took it upon themselves to fill the void with mostly smaller, rougher, but similarly short-lived New College-centric publications of their own.

In the last year of the Poetics Program's initial incarnation, Helen Hampton Nace put out four issues of *Plunk*, "a poetry magazine for the students of the Poetics Program at New College of California." The final issue, featuring work by Alfonso Alvarez, Todd Baron, John Evans, Carolyn Kemp, Helen Hampton Nace, and Andrea Plamondon, also included a faculty contribution from Louis Patler. Other

little mags making their way into the world in the interim included *Flit*, edited by Dawn Kolokithas (Dawn-Michelle Baude) and featuring work by Strauss, Petrelli, Klingaman, Kenney, Menefee, Rebecca Sassi, Connor, Tepperman, W.L. John, Grundberg, and Kocik, and *Webs*, which Patler sites in his introduction to *Convivio*, but of which I've otherwise recovered no evidence. There are no doubt others that I have not stumbled upon and have slipped the minds of those with whom I spoke. Such is the nature of the little magazine. Todd Baron also published several issues of *Issue*, the first of which came out while Baron was still in Los Angeles, co-edited with Tosh Berman, who also helped with the second issue, published from San Francisco in 1984, before Baron took sole responsibility for the third (1985) and fourth (1987) issues. Baron was a student in the Poetics Program, and *Issue* featured work from a good number of other Poetics Program affiliates, but the magazine had no official connection with New College and cast a wide net. Likewise with the Turkey Buzzard Review, which Dottie Le Mieux had begun editing out of Bolinas in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s, when she was briefly a student in the Poetics Program. Bill Scharf had edited three issues of *Longhouse* before entering the program, and in the third issue (March 1980) projected another "6 issues a year," but it is unclear how many more may have come to fruition. He did launch Burn Books in 1982 with Albert Glover's *Next*, which was to be followed by Kerry Tepperman's *Over*, but the latter never materialized. Charlie Ross published a handful of items, including Duncan McNaughton's *Sonny Boy* (1983) under the Smithereens imprint.

Grundberg's Aleph Press had co-published two books with di Prima's Eidolon Edition—*Going Out for Coffee on a Windy Night* (1979), by Grundberg, Janet Carter, and Rocket; and *Manoeuvres* (1980), by David Levi Strauss—before the aforementioned *Songs with Music* (1982), by Helen Adam, but published no other books for some time thereafter. Dawn-Michelle Baude expanded her magazine *Flit*, inaugurating Flit Publications with her own *Good Morning, Bob* in 1985, and published several more of her own works in the ensuing years. There were, of course, many other magazines and small presses whose editors were friends, allies, associates of the Poetics Program in one way or another, or simply were publishing in the same general milieu, and thereby became outlets for student and faculty work. It would be foolhardy to try to map them all, so I'll mention just a few that others specifically mentioned to me in on particular order: Steve Abbott's *Soup*, Leland Hickman's *Temblor*, Clayton Eschleman's *Sulfur*, Kathleen Fraser's *HOW(ever)*, Sue Carlson's *Channel*, Ed Foster's *Talisman*, Owen Hill's *Blind Date*, Joe Safdie's *Zephyr* and later *Peninsula*, Joseph Simas's *Moving Letters*, Nathaniel Mackey's *Hambone*, Michael Cuddihy's *Ironwood*, *Sagetrieb*, *Conjunctions*, and such presses as Alastair Johnston's *Poltroon*.

Perhaps the most notable publication to come out of the Poetics Program was Strauss's *ACTS*, the first issue of which was published at the end of the second year in June of 1982, roughly simultaneous with the second issue of *Notice*, and like that second issue of *Notice*, the first issue of *ACTS* featured photographs of Duncan's

blackboards from New College classes on the cover. The work inside was “drawn entirely from poets & writers moving in and through the New College nexus— faculty and students of the Poetics Program,” as a publication announcement and subscription form slipped into the magazine notes: “ACTS will continue with New College as its ‘center around which’, while expanding to include a wider spectrum of work by poets moving in and through the Bay Area....”⁵⁵⁸ In addition to poems by Grundberg, Kocik, Shurin, Strauss, Thackrey, Thorpe, and prose by Menefee, and Hawkins, the first issue featured a hefty dose of work from the faculty: Duncan, di Prima, McNaughton, Meltzer, Palmer, Patler, Grenier, Hollo, Leslie Scalapino, and Christopher Gaynor. The second issue appeared one year later in June of 1983 with photos of several over-stuffed crates of “Larry Eigner’s bloomer oeuvre” on the cover and a small slice of that oeuvre inside, along with work a number of poets not affiliated with the program in any direct way. The issue also sports a curious dedication: “to the little bureaucrat at the State Board of Equalization, who sd: ‘ACTS are not a magazine. *Newsweek* is a magazine.”⁵⁵⁹ Perhaps this quip came in reaction to the decidedly low-fi, though quite clean and handsome, production of the first issue—“80’s Depression style—8 ½ x 11 mimeo, side-stapled”⁵⁶⁰—and perhaps it motivated Strauss to tone up the production a bit. The third issue through sixth issues, appearing annually through 1987, were professionally printed and perfect-bound, though they retained the 8 ½ x 11 inch format. Contributors continued to be drawn largely, though not exclusively, from the New College nexus. Benjamin

Hollander joined Strauss as an assistant editor with the fifth issue, and continued in that capacity for the sixth—which was published as “a book of *correspondences* (‘a language “between and among” things’),” in conjunction with the Jack Spicer Conference & White Rabbit Symposium held in San Francisco in June of 1986 (about which more later)—seventh—which “proposed the *analytic lyric* (‘as a critique of the discourse of power, to renew the function of poetry’)” —and eighth/ninth double issue—which “was an extended inquiry into the meanings in acts of *translation* (‘a figure, then, *carried across* by circumstances’)” and was centered on the work of Paul Celan. Strauss was again sole editor when the tenth—which was published in 1989, a little over a year after Duncan’s death. This final issue bears an announcement for another double issue to follow, co-edited with Aaron Shurin, and “devoted to Robert Duncan’s teachings in the Poetics Program.”⁵⁶¹ It never appeared, but some material was gathered and I was lucky enough to read a few pieces in Strauss’s barn and have included some excerpts in this text.

While he had met Duncan through Diane di Prima before the Poetics Program started and studied with him at New College, Strauss’s “original absorption into the Duncan/Jess household” was not foremost as a poet, but “as their gardener. Duncan hired me to bring the garden back. It had been ‘let go.’”⁵⁶² When I visited Strauss at his home in the Hudson Valley, NY, to interview him and look through various boxes of materials from his time in San Francisco in the 1980s, I found the detailed landscaping plans for Duncan’s garden among his many New College notebooks

and papers, and it has been interesting to note how entwined the two activities were. As Strauss has written, “Some of the best discussions I had with Duncan during that time occurred when we were both down on our knees, sifting through the soil to rid it of the corms with which the incredibly rampant Oxalis plant had colonized the garden,”⁵⁶³ and — coincidence or not? — what would have been Strauss’s thesis had he ever submitted it for the degree was an extended examination of, or as he puts it “invitation” to, Zukofsky, most especially the poet’s last book, *80 Flowers*. At the end of the published version of this essay, Strauss thanks the “Helen Crocker Russell Library in San Francisco’s Strybing Arboretum for research materials and a quiet place to work.”⁵⁶⁴ Strauss also obtained plants from the Strybing Arboretum for Duncan’s garden, “and off the garden was the basement, where Duncan set me up with his mimeograph machine [‘a near-virgin Gestetner 466’⁵⁶⁵] and enough paper to print the first [two] issues of...*ACTS*.”⁵⁶⁶ The confluence emphasizes again how entwined the work was for so many Poetics students and faculty. Strauss recalled that “Duncan was supportive, but not involved [in the production of *ACTS*]. He wanted us to do it, but he didn’t want to be involved.” The same could be said about the other faculty and other magazines mentioned above. They would contribute writings to one or another magazine when asked, of course, but I also imagined, when first writing this section, that they must have offering key insights into the ways, means, and reasons for publishing one’s own and one’s peers’ work. As it turns out, students were pretty much left to their own devices in this way. As

Tepperman recalled in respect to *Notice*, “David was our adviser for it, because we had to have an adviser for our work-study money, but I think we met with him and talked with him [once at the beginning], and he said fine, but that was it. He never checked in with us, I don’t think we ever talked about it again. Maybe something at the end.”⁵⁶⁷ Each of the core faculty had, as a central part of their experience as poets, the editing and publishing of little magazines, newsletters, anthologies, pamphlets, and books. In this respect, too, they were models for those under their tutelage, even if indirectly. As Meltzer said about the influence of the Kabbalah on such Jewish philosophers as Wittgenstein and Derrida, “you’re sure something seeps in.” More importantly, perhaps, their experience does influence my own thinking about the little magazine and small press as it informs the New College Poetics community, and any community of poets, for that matter.

Robert Duncan had a long and varied record as a publisher, editor, and instigator, having edited his first magazine at the age of 19 while still at UC Berkeley in 1938. *Epitaph*, co-edited with the painter Virginia Admiral,⁵⁶⁸ was a small mimeograph magazine featuring work by Duncan and a half-dozen classmates and friends, claiming a poetical space for themselves outside the academy, parallel to their Trotskyite political activities.⁵⁶⁹ Only one issue appeared, a second planned but never realized, and the following year, shortly after leaving UC Berkeley for the first time and being turned away from Black Mountain, he began work on his second magazine while living between Annapolis, VA, and New York City. *Ritual*, again co-

edited with Admiral and published in the spring of 1940, featured the same set of friends, plus one other young poet, as well as Anaïs Nin, whom Duncan had met at a party in New York.⁵⁷⁰ Later that year he published *Experimental Review*, which featured more work by Nin, now joined Henry Miller, Dylan Thomas, Lawrence Durrell, as well as a young Thomas Merton and various others.⁵⁷¹ Though none of these writers at the time enjoyed nearly the fame they later would, and while they were something of a band of outsiders themselves, they were hardly unknown, so in a way this was the beginning of Duncan's brief flirtation with the literati, a flirtation that largely ended when he was "read out, out, out" after publishing "The Homosexual in Society" in 1944. Duncan proceeded to publish the vast majority of his work with small and very small presses, like his own Enkidu Surrogate, Bern Porter, Divers, Jargon, Oyez, Sand Dollar, City Lights, and Black Sparrow.

Twenty years later, his 1964 *Roots and Branches* would be published by the large, august New York house of Scribner's. The much smaller, newer, independent, though also New York house of Grove had published *The Opening of the Field* in 1960, and in 1968, *Bending the Bow* was published by New Directions, which would also publish, fifteen years later, Duncan's final two books of poems, *Ground Work: Before the War* (1984) and *Ground Work II: In the Dark* (1987), and his essay collection, *Fictive Certainties* (1985). When *Roots and Branches* and *The Opening of the Field* were allowed to fall out of print by the larger houses, they were brought back into print, in 1969 and 1973, respectively, and kept in print thereafter by New Directions, consolidating

its position as stewards of Duncan's work until UC Press issued its massive collections from 2011 to 2014, a quarter century after the poet's death. However, Duncan was ambivalent about publishing his poems with those New York houses—for many reasons, but most germane here was their consequent detachment from the immediate context of their writing. It would take much more space than I have here to thoroughly address the matter, so I'll simply say that in calling himself a "derivative" poet, as he so often, so famously did, Duncan was calling himself a poet of context and community. The accuracy of the designation is clear from such early works as *Heavenly City, Earthly City* (written 1945-1946), *Medieval Scenes*, (1947), and *The Venice Poem* (1948) through *Letters* (1953-1956) to the later *Dante Études* (1972-1974). Just as the work derives from its context, its community—i.e. is written in one way or another in response to other poems and persons—so it ought to return to that context, that community, to circulate within it. Duncan's cantankerous compatriot Jack Spicer advocated an extreme version of this stance, refusing to allow his own books or his magazine *J* to circulate outside of his own immediate environs, generally; he did make exceptions, of course, but he excoriated Duncan for giving *The Opening of the Field* to Grove. This was not their first, last, or most heated disagreement, though, perhaps because Duncan didn't actually disagree. He enjoyed the exposure, certainly, but he was not pleased with any of the publishers, neither with the way they handled the production of the books, nor with the way he felt pressured to turn out a product, and so "at what appeared then to be the height of

his career, Robert Duncan publicly declared...that he would not 'issue another collection of my work...until 1983 at which time fifteen years will have passed," as editor James Maynard writes in the introduction to *(Re:)Working the Ground: Essays on the Late Writings of Robert Duncan*:

Why might Duncan have desired to escape the burdens of publishing? First, he had just completed a prolific run of publications. In 1968 alone he had published five books of new and previous work, including *The Truth and Life of Myth*, *Names of People*, *Bending the Bow*, *The First Decade: Selected Poems 1940-1950*, and *Derivations: Selected Poems 1950-1956*. Furthermore, *The Opening of the Field*, *Roots and Branches*, and *Bending the Bow* were all composed around fairly consistent images and ideas of organic growth, a trope against which Duncan had begun to chafe. So one of the presumed benefits of waiting was to "undo the heavy business of thematic composition" and once again open up the field of his poetry to "possibilities of writing." This self-imposed hiatus was thus intended to create an undetermined space in which the poet might begin "preparing the ground for the work I shall write in my old age."

However, although explicitly deferring "another [major] collection" of new work, Duncan nonetheless remained active with small presses and private publications, so the self-imposed ban was, in fact, not entirely sincere. During this period, he collected and in some cases revised earlier writing in volumes such as *Play Time Pseudo Stein* (1969) and *Caesar's Gate: Poems 1949-1950* (1972) [and] released new work in limited editions, such as *Tribunals: Passages 31-35* (1970)..., and *Dante* (1974)..., [as well as] *A Prospectus for the Prepublication Issue of "Ground Work"* (1971), which Duncan published and distributed privately.... Duncan's initial plan as outlined here in the *Prospectus* was to release *Ground Work* in small, self-published installments that he types himself and sent to "certain friends of the poet...." Subsequently, he self-published and circulated copies of *Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn's "Moly"* (1972) and *A Seventeenth Century Suite* (1973)..., and manuscripts at the University of Buffalo indicate that he had intended to self-publish typescripts of "Circulations of the Song" and "Eidolon of the Aion."⁵⁷²

For Maynard, what is perhaps most significant about this practice is that Duncan was thereby able to circumvent the problematic typesetting and design choices of publishers, large and small, which often had angered Duncan, who insisted “that his own typescripts represent[ed] the authoritative version of his writing. As he explained..., ‘the typescript...comes from and is in my own working hand and Eye as concept ongoing.’”⁵⁷³ This is, absolutely, central, but I am more interested here in the control asserted not only over the appearance of the work on the page, but also in the production and distribution of copies of that work to “certain friends of the poet,” harking back to Spicer’s aggressively parochial stance—and I do not mean small-minded, but literally relating to a parish, kept in-house, in context. It harks back, too, to the days of carbon copies circulating through the mail, days Duncan, di Prima, and Meltzer were all raised in, as poets. “We had no Xerox machine! Xerox [machines] came in the mid-‘60s,” di Prima recalled: “That’s very interesting to remember—before that we were typing 10 carbons when we wanted to get a lot of copies of something. That’s kind of mind-boggling to me!” She also recalled the hectograph, “where you could pull off about 10 copies using gelatin; I think it was the forerunner of the Ditto machine.” There were other technologies, too, some new, others now cheaper and more abundant than they’d previously been, having been made obsolete by the new technology, that came into widespread use from middle of the 20th century, including Berman’s beloved verifax, outmoded hand-operated letterpress, offset, and of course the mimeograph. The midcentury Mimeo

Revolution wasn't, of course, about the machine itself—all of the above technologies played their parts in it—but about the ease and affordability of producing books, pamphlets, magazines, newsletters independently, and therefor being in control, or having the responsibility for distributing those books, etc. Much has been written about the aesthetics, politics, and history of the Mimeo Revolution—*A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980* is a great primer—which in so many ways sets the stage for the New College Poetics Program.

Few, if any, were more important to the Mimeo Revolution than Diane di Prima. In 1963, she canvassed her friends, “mostly well-known painters and sculptors,”⁵⁷⁴ to raise enough money for an offset machine. “I bought a Davidson 241 and put it in a store-front.... I went to ‘printing school’ for a week and learned how to run the machine (I was the only woman in class[, which was included with purchase of the press]), and I got on with it.”⁵⁷⁵

I called myself Poets Press, and did the first book of poetry. It was by A.B. Spellman..., *The Beautiful Days*.... I was hooked.

Over that year a bunch of saddle-stitched poetry books came out....

We did a small run of Jean Genet's *Le Condamné à Mort*..., the *Seven Love Poems from the Middle Latin* that I had translated..., *Hunke's Journal*, a first book of short stories by Herbert Hunke, who was Alan Ginsberg's mentor and friend....

I went on from there to do Clive Matson's first poem book, *Mainline to the Heart*, with a John Wieners introduction; and David Henderson's [first book] *Felix of the Silent Forest*. Later there was *Sapphobones* by Kirby Doyle, Audre Lorde's first book, *The First Cities*, and many others.

Between 1963 to 1969, di Prima published more than two dozen books under the Poets Press imprint, including several of her own, Jay Wright's first book, and others by Ashbery, Creeley, Duncan, McClure, and more. In 1972, she inaugurated the Eidolon Editions imprint, under which she published the occasional book for the next several decades. Her importance as a longtime publisher of books is significant, clearly, but perhaps pales in comparison to her importance as co-editor with Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) of *The Floating Bear*. "It started out as a bimonthly mimeograph of about six sheet, that we mailed for free to folks in the arts we knew and cared about. By pooling our address books, we came up with a list of 117 names: dancers, painters, sculptors, writers, composers, jazz folk, choreographers and so on,"⁵⁷⁶ di Prima recalled. Between 1961 and 1962, they put out a whopping 25 issues, before Baraka dropped out and di Prima carried on alone, with various guest editors along the way, putting out another 12 issues over the next six years. "For me *The Floating Bear* was a profound and intimate school of what 'was happening' in poetry in the early 1960's. That 'news that stays news,'"⁵⁷⁷ di Prima said in the first of her 1985 Charles Olson Memorial Lectures at SUNY Buffalo. In her memoir, di Prima remarks how "familiar" it felt:

the linking of all of us through the magazine: Olson, Duncan, Dorn, myself, John Wieners. A kind of sixth sense of who was actually speaking to whom in a poem, a review, or article. Where it might be heading....

[Those who received an issue] with a new piece of, say, *The Maximus Poems*..., would not only read it, but answer in their work—

incorporate some innovation of line or syntax, and build on that. Like we were all in one big jam session, blowing....

We managed to put people in touch with each other, and with the *Bear*, and kept the energy moving. Kept all these writers we cared about involved and informed. As the jam session continued.⁵⁷⁸

Physically producing the newsletter, “especially for those first issues..., was another kind of social event.”⁵⁷⁹ “We held gatherings at my East Fourth Street pad every other Sunday. There was a regular marathon ball thing going on.... Whole bunches of people would come over to help: painters, musicians, a whole lot of outside help. The typing on those particular issues was done by James Waring, who’s a choreographer and painter. Cecil Taylor ran the mimeograph machine, and Fred Herko and I collated, and we all addressed envelopes.”⁵⁸⁰ This community, in flesh and breath, took the texts, missives sent in from members of another, overlapping, but distinct community, put them together and sent them out again to another, overlapping, but even wider community of readers, correspondents, who “kept the energy going.” It seems to me that the intimacy and constancy, the relative immediacy, of this exchange makes the community not only imagined, as Benedict Anderson would have it, but actualized in a way publications with larger print runs and wider distribution cannot accomplish. Recalling a visit with Olson in 1967, di Prima said:

He talked to me about *The Floating Bear*, how important it had been to him. Especially in its first years, when it actually *was* a twice a month event. The fact that he could get his important new work into the hands of the people who mattered to him—and get it there that fast—

had made, he told me, an enormous difference. That fact of immediate communication—getting the news (the poem) out as soon as it occurred—Roi and I, he said, had actually and actively made a community of poets.⁵⁸¹

Juliana Spahr, citing such disparate examples as the Black Arts movement and Language writing, writes:

most literary movements or schools that existed in the last half of the twentieth century announced their presence through little magazines and journals.... These journals, usually financed by the communities they represent, cultivate independent aesthetic or politicized literatures.

Then, sometime around the turn of the century, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs put together a series of recommended guidelines, "Hallmarks of a Successful MFA Program in Creative Writing." Among [these] hallmarks...is a literary journal or small press. And in the years since the literary magazine has been "common"-ed, a huge number of literary magazines have been established, most of them glossy and institutionally supported but without a community of readers beyond their editors. These magazines...tended to have a rotating editorial staff (usually students), existed mainly as a vehicle for professionalization, and often had as their reason for being not a political or aesthetic agenda but promotion of a degree program.... The glut of literary magazines has made it almost impossible for an intellectually meaningful readership to exist. So the little magazine lost...community need....⁵⁸²

I suppose there's some value to the professional experience gained by rotating student editors of MFA magazines, and I've no doubt those who work together under such auspices sometimes forge close relationships with one another and occasionally make useful, even important connections with the writers they solicit or accept for publication, but these periodicals are an entirely different animal from the magazines Spahr celebrates, which are also different in important ways from the

magazines that came out of the first incarnation of the Poetics Program. Obviously, there is a certain degree of publicity involved in publishing—it's about making something public. *Convivio* no doubt had the promotion of the Poetics Program, in which one could actually enroll (and pay tuition), as one of its motivations, but it is impossible to overstate the difference between this and the MFA magazine whose "reason for being [is]...promotion of a degree program." One thing Spahr doesn't highlight about these magazines is that, by rule, they tend to exclude work written by students in the program, and only occasionally print faculty work. What they promote, then, is not the actual work being done in any given program, but the visibility, stability, and professionalism of that program and the prospects for students who obtain degrees therefrom to establish careers, not as "creative writers," or even teachers of Creative Writing, which are the two primary reasons most students enroll in such programs, then as editors, maybe, or at least proofreaders, publicists, salespeople, fundraisers, grant writers, administrators of various stripes in arts organizations, other non-profits, academic, corporate, government offices, etc. As Spahr says, they are "vehicle[s] for professionalization." Considering the glut of MFA degree-holders, improbability of "making a living" by one's actual "creative writing," and paucity of career opportunities to teach Creative Writing, it's probably a good thing to give students this extra experience. It's quite practical.

At the same time, "this is just one more way that growth of the MFA and the idea that one should get an MFA to become a writer becomes a little less than the mild

aesthetic project than McGurl admits," as Spahr writes: "It is not just the magazine. The same can be said about the poetry reading and the literary gathering. These spaces that in the past have functioned as a sort of community-maintained commons, one that is permeable and decentralized. And when they move into higher education physically or when they are maintained outside of higher education only by those who have an MFA, certain demographics are dispossessed."⁵⁸³ It goes beyond demographics, of course, though this is an important consideration, and Spahr attends to it well. I might even say it goes beyond aesthetics, and beyond politics, even, being fundamentally a matter of ethics. What is the ethical basis of relations between the editors, writers, and readers of any given magazine? For the MFA magazine, generally, it is professional. For the various New College Poetics magazines, it was personal and communitarian. Publication projects like *Asphaleios*, *Notice*, *ACTS*, etc., it seems to me, were foremost about "actually and actively [making] a community," as di Prima put it about *The Floating Bear*. Norma Cole recalled:

I was there when the first issue of *ACTS* got put together at Levi and Gret's loft. We were all walking around the huge table, getting a page, and a page, and a page, and putting it together.... We were comfortable with each other and would travel around in a group in a way and brake off and could speak to one another. It was really a generous, welcoming group.... We had some wine, we just walked around. That was fun and great to do and see everyone.... When I had some poems ready, I just gave them to Levi and he said, oh, good, and he put them in. We didn't have to talk about it.

A decade later, when she was teaching at the University of San Francisco under the auspices of the MFA in Writing program headed up by Aaron Shurin, and modeled in large part on his experience at New College, Cole recalled, “they had a sort of job fair— ‘Have your work published! Come to the fair and see how it’s done!’ —and I was invited to do something,” so she decided to talk about ACTS. “I was wanting to...say, ‘You have to talk to people, you have to look at them in the eye, and be willing to be a person, not just send in your poems and have them published!’” Cole said: “But these people...they were like, ‘Who cares?’”

I’ve written above about McNaughton’s editorial work on *Mother, Fathar*, and the first issue of *Yanagi*, which Patler then carried on parallel to *Cayati*. I’ve also mentioned Meltzer’s work on the journal *Tree* and Tree Books, which, as Meilicke noted, likewise “emerge[d] from a community...while simultaneously bringing about such a community..., [a community that was] non-institutional in character.”⁵⁸⁴ Meltzer’s first editorial work was with Michael McClure and Lawrence Ferlinghetti on the 1961 *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, which “melded the anarchist thought of the 1950s...with the pacifism evidenced...at the camp for conscientious objectors in Waldport, Oregon...[and] work from the San Francisco Renaissance poets.... [It] also reprinted...Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Declaration of Rights’ and the famous statement by Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Indians.”⁵⁸⁵

(Three more issues appeared at long intervals, the last in 1978.) In 1969 and 1970, he also edited a series of ten chapbooks under the Maya imprint—including work by Clayton Eschleman, Asa Benveniste, John Brandi, Harvey Bialy, Philip Whalen, Cid Corman, Bill Bathurst, Theodore Enslin, Lew Welch, and himself—and undertook a series of interviews—with Welch, Ferlinghetti, McClure, William Everson, and Kenneth Rexroth—which were published as *The San Francisco Poets*, by Ballantine in 1971.⁵⁸⁶ Meltzer was a consummate editor of anthologies, too, with the aforementioned *Birth* appearing in 1973, also from Ballantine, *The Secret Garden* in 1976 from Seabury, and *Two-Way Mirror* in 1977 from Oyez. (This last is perhaps not technically an anthology but is comprised largely of quotations.) Meltzer would later add the anthologies *Death* (1984), *Reading Jazz* (1993), and *Writing Jazz* (1999) to his bibliography, as well as seven issues of *Shuffle Boil: A Magazine of Poets and Music*, co-edited with former Poetics student Steve Dickison, the first four issues appearing from winter 2002 through fall 2003, with a double issue (#5/6) following in 2006, and the seventh, being a special issue of my own magazine *AMERARCANA: A Bird & Beckett Review*, published a decade later, shortly before Meltzer's death at the end of 2016. Dickison was among several students who recalled with some awe and much admiration the massive readers Meltzer put together for his Kabbalah and related courses in the Poetics Program.

One of the fantastic things about New College was it just tapped into people at certain moments in their own trajectory, and they just laid it out there, what it was that they were about at the moment. That that

was what they needed to be studying, and so that was what they were going to be presenting and working with, with others.... With David, in that sense, the class was a way of making a book. The class was almost part of the anthology, in a sense. We would be privy to a lot of the stuff he was finding in libraries. I mean, David would spend hours down in the basement of Doe Library over in Berkeley, and you could get access to practically anything through interlibrary loan. 587

All of this, it bears remarking again, occurred outside the context of the Poetics Program's official coursework, which was almost unbelievably and at times impossibly demanding. As I've written above, the sheer amount of material Duncan, di Prima, Meltzer, and others endeavored to cover in their three hours each week was daunting, to say the least, which is to say nothing about the obscurity and difficulty of much of it. In a letter to Benjamin Friedlander, David Levi Strauss recalled how over the course of the first year in the program,

It became increasingly clear that there wasn't enough *time* to do everything we needed to do during class time, so various groups spun off, meeting outside in people's homes. When the [second] semester ended, we were still utterly absorbed in the *Duino Elegies* in Michael Palmer's class, so we moved the class from New College to Michael's living room and continued to read. There were always little groups spinning out of David Meltzer's classes, to read the *Zohar* or practice Hebrew Calligraphy.... Other groups were planned, to read poems in Spanish, Japanese, Hebrew....

Dan Blue, who entered the program in the fall of 1983, the program's fourth year, recalled,

Robert [Duncan] was forever starting clubs: a Homer group, Pindar group, a group reading *Finnegans Wake*. While he often would attend their meetings, Robert did not preside. These were conceived as

opportunities for students; if Robert joined, it was strictly *inter pares*. Yet I can't but help see it as particularly RD that he would take an act—reading—which many consider almost erotically private and suggest we do it as a collective.⁵⁸⁸

These many extracurricular groups were of various sizes and lasted for various durations, but considered *in toto* they formed an integral part of the Program and all embodied the same collective ethos Blue identifies. The Homer group, however, was a special case, enduring almost as long as the Poetics Program itself, in its original manifestation, from February of 1981 until the fall of 1986, when the group finally completed their collective reading and translating the twenty-four books of *The Illiad*. The group was first comprised of Duncan, di Prima, Shurin, Strauss, and Thackrey, along with non-Poetics associates Steve Anker, David Melnick, and Noel Stack. Over the years a number of others, including Dawn-Michelle Baude, Dan Blue, David Doyle, Tom Fong, Edith Harnett, Michael McClure, and Jim Powell, joined in.

“We were all *astonished* by the beauty and complexity of the poem,” Strauss wrote. “This kept us together for six years. Whatever else was going on, the reading practice was constant. There were times when I knew the most important thing I was doing in my life was singing that poem every Tuesday night.” As he remembered it,

Every week we assigned lines, five or six at the beginning, twenty at the end. Sometime during the week we would copy out the lines, scan the dactylic hexameter, rehearse chanting and translate. In the beginning most of us had no grammar so we looked up every word in the lexicon and cribbed from existing translations. We picked up the grammar slowly, as we needed it. And we always had one ringer, with a thorough knowledge of the Greek—Noel Sack at the

beginning, Jim Powell at the end—to resolve problems. We used Cunliffe’s *Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, supplemented with Liddell & Scott, and Clyde Pharr’s *Homeric Greek* for questions of grammar and prosody. Later on Owen & Goodspeed’s *Homeric Vocabularies* became useful. Our text was the Loeb Library edition (A.T Murray). For a “good read” we read translations by Lattimore, Fitzgerald, even Pope. Someone was always bringing in other books to read: Jane Ellen Harrison, of course, Denys Page..., Norman Austin..., Redfield..., Nagy..., Kerényi..., Emily Vermeule..., Nilsson, Simone Weil..., Onians. When one of us was particular intrigued with something in the poem, we’d research and do a special study of it: time-reckoning in the *Iliad*, or smells, colors, sheep, oaths, methods of sacrifice, arms and armor, anatomy, shipbuilding.... In 1984 Aaron [Shurin] wrote a book on the *Iliad* for the “Barron’s Book Notes” series under the pseudonym George Loutro.⁵⁸⁹

The rigor of the individual and collective inquiry was remarkable for what might be considered an extracurricular club, but each meeting remained a vibrant social occasion and, at the same time, an enthralling theatrical event. In a marvelous piece entitled “VOX,” written for the projected but never published issue of *ACTS* centered on Robert Duncan’s teaching, one as yet unidentified participant elaborates on the performative aspect of these meetings with such élan and insight that she deserves to be quoted at length:

Each week after translating and commenting upon lines, we would read them aloud, allowing Homer to speak for himself. Some of us sang; some chanted, declaimed, intoned; and one person read with affected casualness, as though making public a memorandum. The variation was far more striking than if, for example, ten people were to read from Ezra Pound. None of us had ever heard—no one for 2500 years has heard—the tongue and manner of this speech. Working from books and imagination we had each to make up Homer for ourselves, and the modes were as various as our persons and poetics.

Among the anomalies we had to account for were the accents—diacritical marks devised by the librarians at Alexandria a century or so before the birth of Christ...[and] imposed on a text not itself written down until two to three hundred years after composition.... Many feel like a charlatan when attempting the accents (not only do they sound ugly, but affected, insincere); and professors prudently ignore them. But to sidestep the issue is to eviscerate Homer. We know his poems were chanted often to the accompaniment of a lyre, and this suggests their musicality was not just metaphorical....

They lent a savor missing in less daring readings, and often someone would comment on how much more pleasurable Homer sounded when the tone-pitches were sung. Tom Fong—the one member with background in a tonal language—never abandoned them and in prosodic analyses often insisted on their expressive and onomatopoeic value. Others—Aaron Shurin and David Melnick—had so built pitch into their sounding of the line that their readings could only lose when these were abandoned. Aaron tended to read by the syllable: his voice hopped about in light dance rather like birdsong as he hit each morpheme in precise tonic place. David, on the other hand, tended to ride his lungs like a bellows, running speech, tones, declamation together in a sustained chant syntactically difficult to follow but undeniably grand....

Robert and Edith..., to use a metaphor neither would like..., were our ex-officio high priest and priestess, both having read Homer since before any of us were born, and both speaking from the perspective of full and accomplished lives. Robert invariably used the accents. Quivering in rhythmic sympathy and bent over a score on which he had plotted the scansion and tone levels of the syllables, he chanted with an concentration which made it the more startling when he would stop—Robert being Robert, he was always interrupting himself—to point out a difficulty or come at a passage in a new way.

Edith never used accents but read with an intensity that made many of us think of Cassandra if not Medea.... No tragedienne brought such drama and immensity to a text as Edith savoring the passage of a spear through cranium. We were careful to award her the bloodiest passages.... She found in Homer a relish for the body of language that left the rest of us bewitched as though squatting around a camp fire hearing the poem in its pre-classic prime.

We didn't always read solo. Sometimes a member was unable to attend or—when he or she did show—was unprepared to recite. It

was unthinkable we should skip a line, whether in translating or reading, so Jim Powell would provide an English version and all of us would recite the passage in unison. Since our impersonations of Homer were as various as already described, we found it difficult to stay together; and many were the occasions when half the voices would derail on a syllable, staying out of synch for the rest of the line. Few seemed to mind this—most found the custom loveable and quaint—and many giggles and shared rolls of the eye would accompany the debacle when amid the lurching sing-song someone's misplaced quantity would unstitch the line and send the voices tumbling.

Nonetheless, to keep such incidents to a minimum we read in unison slowly—so slowly as to fall into a drone. One member complained that this mournful mechanicality reminded him of group prayers in a Baptist meetinghouse and we decided to try something different. Thus was born the round-robin, each person reciting a line *seriatim*, so that instead of all blending together the voices were strung out and displayed one at a time—a montage of individual treatments at the opposite remove from a chorus.

Here we discovered something new. In the beginning people's competence with Greek—Homeric Greek at that—had been the subject of much doubt. Members armed themselves with prepared scores—the syllables divided and accents marked in colored inks; and they read with tentative intonation, stopping to repeat a line fresh or mumbling low in the hope others might not hear. In the round-robins no preparation was possible, nor was the individual submerged in a group drone. And we did it. Occasionally there was a falter, but on the whole people waded into a line and emerged intact at the other side. Greek had been assimilated into the vocal body and the *Iliad* made part of our living repertoire.

In the Homer group we encountered on a grand scale a problem anyone learning a foreign language encounters in miniature: to speak differently one has to hear differently—learn to distinguish new phonemes with the ear as well as tongue—and when no one is a native speaker with a native speaker's competence and authority, progress can be tentative.

Not that this stopped us from mutual correction. We were tolerant on the whole, but many of us had opinions and were wont to exercise them; virtually no member of the group was exempt from an occasional tart inquiry into a scansion. This was indeed one of the

initiation rites into the group—a certain running of a critical gauntlet as long-standing members took the new-comer's measure and he/she in turn learned what sorts of correction were well- and ill-received.

As the six years passed, our group of nine to twelve members evolved a particular framework of recurrent ceremonies, themes and vocabularies. We were a community: formal discussion provided our congress and marketplace, and the recitation of Homer was our music, our anthem.

These comments about the Homer group seem central to me, and in a number of ways reflective of the ethos of the Poetics Program as a whole, for what was at stake was not simply the learning of a foreign, and in this case ancient, language, but also the development of a common, and very much present, tongue. The former was a part of it, surely. The program's requirements did include competency in a language other than English, though the college did not offer any language instruction—a complication that would occasion a major dispute a few years down the line—so in the first few years of the program, such informal reading and translation groups, particularly in Greek, Hebrew, and French, provided an opportunity for students to attempt to meet that expectation. More importantly, however, “learn[ing] to distinguish new phonemes with the ear as well as tongue” and learning to analyze both unfamiliar and familiar phonemes with such tools as the IPA would inevitably heighten poets' attention to the movement and operation of such minims in their own work, perhaps revealing formerly unrealized resonances in its aural passageways. At the same time, and perhaps more significantly, this collective development of language and community, coterminously, recalls the linguistic

relativity of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose work appears on several reading lists for Poetics courses.

IV. Extensions and Intentions

The various supplementary groups together served not only to extend the Poetics curriculum beyond the formal bounds of the college, but also to extend the campus out into the city, into the homes of faculty and students alike, as had been the case in the first days of the college when classes were held in various bungalows and apartments around Sausalito. What's more, Diane di Prima had decided very quickly, after only a few days, that she could not teach in the old mortuary building on Valencia. "I took my class out of that building and taught in my studio. It was making me sick being in the building! So that was it, everybody had to come to me for their classes."⁵⁹⁰ "She was so anti-school that even New College was too much for her," as Baron put it: "New College was too establishment for her and didn't want to codify poetics in any way, shape, or form, so while she was teaching, she refused to teach on campus, in any room on campus."⁵⁹¹ Shurin said, "It was just about convenience and intimacy and non-institutionalization."⁵⁹² So the students in her Hidden Religions course would gather at New College, then go out its doors together, turn up 19^h Street, pass through Dolores Park, cross Castro Street, and turn the corner to her apartment on Collingwood Street, about 20 minutes away. "We would walk over there and sit on the floor and meet,"⁵⁹³ said Dawn-Michelle Baude. Later, "she had a studio she rented up in Bernal Heights, so we had to march up there and meet with her once a week," according to Baron: "It was perfect,

wonderful, because we spent a year reading the Romantics, and we'd just be sitting on the floor in the study."⁵⁹⁴ "Diane was quite formal about her lectures..." Judith Roche added, but "we'd break, and she'd make tea. [Then] we'd continue."⁵⁹⁵

After class another kind of tea, and refreshments a mite stronger, might be offered on occasion. Unnamed sources tell me that di Prima had an orange block of Owsley acid in her freezer, which will come as no surprise to anyone with the least familiarity with di Prima's history. (She'd lived for a time at Timothy Leary's intentional community at Millbrook in the middle 1960s.) It should come as no shock, either, that these young poets studying visionary poetics did a fair amount of dope themselves. The first memory Baude shared with me was of Joanne Kyger giving a lecture "on shamanism," presumably as part of her residency in the 1981-1982 school year, Baude's first in the program:

She was talking about going down, not the rabbit hole, but raccoon hole, or whatever, into the earth, a shamanic voyage, and so on and so forth. I was doing a lot of drugs when I was at New College—that coincided with that part of my life—not really heavy, heavy drugs, but I was smoking a lot of dope, and that was enough, that was all I needed. I had this little visionary thing where I went down the rabbit hole, and I ran into her at an Anselm Hollo reading and said, "Oh, Joanne, I just did it!" And she said, "Did what?" "Went down, you know, went to the underworld. I did just what you said." And she said, "Oh, really?" And that started off our friendship and we remained friends up until the very end of her life.⁵⁹⁶

I don't mean to suggest at all that any of the faculty encouraged their students to do anything they weren't already doing—even if di Prima's partner is rumored to

have made his living around this time not only as a healer, but, shall we say, a New Age apothecary—only to acknowledge the role consciousness-changing substances played alongside consciousness-changing somatic, psychological, and intellectual exercises, including most fundamentally reading practices, in the pedagogy and curriculum of the Poetics Program. I want to stress that the sharing of food, drink, and drugs—hardly foreign to any undergraduate experience—combined with the domestic settings of di Prima’s courses and of the various supplementary groups, together with the personal exegeses encouraged, even demanded, in the program, served to make ever clearer to the students that “it was all personal,” as Shurin put it. This was not a mere course of study, but a life’s work, and an actual life, i.e. a way of being in the world. “For me going to a class or going to a reading or going to someone’s house and hanging out, they were all the same thing, in a sense, other than having to produce things for class.... The faculty were involved a lot [in the social world], too,” Todd Baron said:

Norma Cole used to have these amazing parties, and everybody was there from school that she was close with, but also everybody in the community. Norma is a painter too, so there’d be visual artists and such, and it felt to me like I was always in the same environment and always engaged in talking about art or poetry or politics just constantly.... Norma was a student but Norma felt like a teacher, too, and Norma was really good friends with Michael [Palmer]..., so Michael was around a lot of social stuff that I was involved in. Afterschool at least once or twice a week we’d all go out to lunch, I bet it was Michael’s class. We’d all go, Michael and I and whoever wanted to come, David Meltzer, we’d all go out to lunch and sit and talk. A good part of every day again whether it was in a building or outside getting lunch or going out for coffee those people were

around.... There were some people like Diane who didn't show up to too much and had her own social thing, but David, Aaron [Shurin], Lyn Hejinian, Michael, there would be events at their houses. To me it sounds like old-school college where you're not "hanging out," but having dinner with your professors, only this was a lot less official than that.... I don't think, for me at least, there was a distinction between what I'd call study and living and writing....

In this sense, the Poetics "campus" was hardly confined to the former mortuary building at 777 Valencia that New College called home. It stretched not only to di Prima's Castro and Bernal Heights spaces, Duncan's home just a few blocks down 20th Street, Michael Palmer's home a twenty-minute walk away in Noe Valley, and the students' own apartments scattered around the neighborhood and throughout the city, but also to the many bars and restaurants, bookstores, galleries, performance spaces, and spaces of various other kinds where myriad formal and informal arrangements and engagements were consummated between students, faculty, and non-affiliated poets in the region. This is, for me, one of the starkest contrasts between the Poetics Program at New College and such kindred entities as Black Mountain College and the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa, which were located well outside any major city. Indeed, one of the most intriguingly complicated realities of Black Mountain was its seat deep in the North Carolina backcountry, where its progressive and avant-garde ideas were hardly looked upon with approval. Naropa's setting is a little less remote, being under an hour's drive from Denver, but Denver was hardly a bastion of the arts when the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics came into being. In such hinterlands,

students were almost sequestered, and in certain ways this might be an advantage. On the one hand, such isolation seems far more conducive to the sort of monastic intensity of study demanded of students in the Poetics Program. I can't help but think, however, that in such situations, what was made available to the students by the faculty and fellow students was more or less *all* that was available to them. Of course there are always visitors, guests, but it is all the more interesting to note that the Jack Kerouac School began as short-term summer sessions only, and many of the activities and performances for which Black Mountain is best known also occurred during short-term summer sessions, not the regular school year. These schools have, for me, an air of the artists' or writers' "retreat," whereas Poetics Program was more of a gonzo embed in arguably the most poetically fertile region of the United States at the time, and while the program had its own ax to grind, it was emphatically open to the many different methods, modes, manners explored and exercised by the myriad poets in its environs. As Duncan insisted, "It isn't our affair what kind of poems they are [writing]; it's our affair how they *answer* for their poetry."⁵⁹⁷ So what they taught was not some singular poetics, but "Poetics, in the plural."⁵⁹⁸

I want to avoid schematizing the local scene in retrospect. Poets, being human beings, tend to associate with one another for all kinds of reasons, in one-to-one relationships first and in groups second, but as any human being knows, one-to-one relationships shift over time, and groups overlap, interpenetrate, and change shape, as those one-to-one relationships of the individuals who might be said to comprise

them at any given time change. As Norma Cole insisted, “It was fluid..., it was all fluid.”⁵⁹⁹ Everyone I spoke to about this book saw and experienced things a little differently—though because I spoke exclusively to persons who were associated, albeit in varying degrees of formality, with the New College Poetics Program, there are certain common perspectives on similar experiences. Certain influences and oppositions were articulated again and again, and I’ll address one of the latter in a little bit, but here I want to stress the sheer vibrancy of the scene and how stimulating it was for all the poets engaged in the program, students and faculty alike. As Todd Baron recalled, “There were always choices to be made about whose reading you would go to almost 7 nights a week, from Berkeley to the city and back. I could hop on BART, go alone, and run into half the people I knew.... The years I was up there I was always with poets and people engaged with language no matter where I was.”⁶⁰⁰ Sloan concurred, “We’d go to readings, then we’d go to some Irish bar, and talk and talk and talk, and maybe at one o’clock in the morning somebody would say, ‘Let’s go to the Ivy and dance!’ We were having so much fun. You’d go to four readings a week. It was constant. A real huge wonderful thriving active joyful—and backbiting of course—community. There was always that side of it, but it was all about poetry, and it was just incredible.”⁶⁰¹

In a 1985 interview conducted by David Melnick, a member of the Homer Group, Duncan insisted:

living in San Francisco, with hundreds of poets, that the hundreds of poets are what enables me to write. I'm ruthless about that, it's as if, as far as I'm concerned, they make the environment, they make the place. Not that they're listening to me, or even that I'm listening to them, but as we lift a paper and see almost every day, in *Poetry Flash*, see that you've got four or five different readings that you could be at, that's a very different world from the one where once a month you had a reading or something.⁶⁰²

He recalled that in the late 1940s, when the Berkeley Renaissance was getting underway, there were fewer readings, but "at the very best, we had an audience of about two hundred, when everybody got together. It was a wider distribution of audience. At the time..., Academic poets like Thomas Parkinson and Leonard Wolf" would share the spotlight with Duncan and his own "bohemian" milieu, he said:

and it wasn't even a sense of mixing—they were distinct in one way..., but there were only about ten or twelve of us [active figures on the scene, and so] the audience prepared to think about ten or twelve poets without starting to discard any. They were interested in all twelve.

One of the results of having hundreds of poets is that that is no longer true. No audience is going to think, including myself—tolerance won't get you there—is going to listen to all hundred and know, have the shape. But it is amazing what a San Francisco audience will, indeed, listen to. They'll listen to an evening of thirty poets. And they will have opinions about all of them.⁶⁰³

The population of active poets had blossomed indeed from that dozen Duncan counts in the late 1940s to the hundreds he counts in the middle 1970s, when despite the volume and diversity, "the writing scene was not fragmented...into several separatist camps of concern," as Stephen Vincent wrote. "At that time, on most any night of the week..., it was possible for several kinds of writers to run into each other

over drinks[, and] the reading as a place of engagement with issues was played out all over the City and the Bay Area into the mid-1970s.”⁶⁰⁴ By the late 1970s, however, when McNaughton and Patler began to scale up their activities at New College, coincident with the school’s move into the city, the energy had changed, Vincent felt, and “fragmentation and separatism were in the air.”⁶⁰⁵ McNaughton too felt that the atmosphere was increasingly contentious as the decade came to a close, and he said part of his original aim in creating the Poetics Program was to “ventilate the scene,”⁶⁰⁶ to create a space where persons with conflicting views of the poem and role of the poet could confront one another and yet breathe, not get all red in the face. “The way I felt about the whole program, was it was going to be an open door,”⁶⁰⁷ McNaughton said. He had been committed all along to a great degree of openness to the city, its diverse and vibrant poetic communities, and their occasionally belligerently confrontational personalities, as we’ve seen from the aforementioned Corso-Clark encounter,⁶⁰⁸ and the ecumenical weekly reading series, which continued as the Poetics Program got underway. It hosted Anita Valerio and Simone Lazzari; Marina la Palma; Nanos Valaoritis and August Kleinzahler; Bill Berkson and Louis Patler; Stan Rice and Jack Gilbert; Julia Vose and Steve Emerson; Robert Peters and Ellen Zweig; Robin Hunt and Margeaux Perry in the fall of 1980, and in the spring of 1981, Paul Auster and Lyn Hejinian; Aaron Shurin, Sarah Menefee, and David Levi Strauss; John Thorpe and Michael Wolfe; Victoria Rathbun and Gloria Frym; Pat Nolan and Cecelia Belle; Victor Coleman and Kathy Acker;

Dennis Cooper and Tim Dlugos; Beau Beausoleil and Beverly Dahlen; Tom Cuson and Gary Gach; Steve Schutzman and Gene Berson; Ron Loewinsohn and Michael Palmer; Gil Helmick and Kush; Kenward Elmslie with music by Ken Dietik; Artie Gold and Geoffrey Young; Byron Perrin and Rennie Pritikin; Philip Whalen and Joanne Kyger; Clayton Eschelman; David Fisher and Norman Fisher; Leslie Campbell and Steve Benson; Tim Jacobs and Sue Carlson; Nathaniel Mackey and Jan Castro; and Ted Berrigan and Keith Abbot. In the fall of 1981 there would be readings by Jerome Rothenberg and Michael McClure; Kathleen Fraser and Gail Sher; Donald Powell, Steve Abbott, and Joe Safdie; Ken Irby and Anselm Hollo; Steve Lavoie; Susan Roether and Alastair Johnston; Michael Solo and Mario Vadu; David Highsmith and Margeaux Perry.

Meanwhile, faculty and some students were active readers at other venues around town, the poets-in-residence talks were widely publicized, and core faculty gave their own public talks both at New College and elsewhere. In mid-November of 1980, for example, Duncan gave a weekend seminar (two days, twelve hours) at the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, entitled "Eternal Persons of the Poem" (echoing his impending spring course in the Poetics Program, "The Nature of Persons Proposed in Poetry), in addition to a one-shot talk about Shakespeare at New College, which was followed the next month by a talk at on the Kabbalah by Meltzer. The following October, Robert Grenier gave a public talk at New College entitled "Measure's Halloween," and David Levi Strauss and Aaron Shurin inaugurated

their “Works and Words” series at 544 Natoma, modelled after the Poetics Program’s poets-in-residence series, featuring paired lectures and readings by Duncan, Ronald Johnson, Leslie Scalapino, and Robert Gluck, that fall, followed by Ron Silliman, Bill Berkson, Michael Palmer, Thom Gunn, Kathy Acker, Richard Grossinger, Christopher Gaynor (“with friends”), McNaughton, Shurin, and Strauss themselves in the spring of 1982. Curiously, that same season, aside from a pair of readings by a trio of travelling Dutch poets (Jules Deelder, Hans Plomp, and Simon Vinkenoog) and a reading by Lucia Berlin, the relatively few public readings and talks offered under the auspices of the Poetics Program—at least those for which advertisements or listings found their way into print—were all by directly affiliated folks: single, solo talks and readings by the core faculty of Meltzer, Duncan, and di Prima; a trio of talks and a reading by Michael Palmer (then poet-in-residence); a talk by Carl Grundberg on the Troubadours, the subject of his thesis-in-progress; and a group reading of “New College poets.” It is possible that whoever was responsible for submitting the reading listings to *Poetry Flash* and any other outlets simply fell down on the job, but it also seems possible that tensions between the New College Poetics contingent and certain other factions on the local poetry scene had caused the suspension of the more ecumenical spirit of series that semester. There are no official records, so I can’t say for certain, but the following summer such tensions were evident at a series of public lectures/panel discussions held at the college on Poetry and the Occult Tradition, offered in relation to the term’s courses.

That second year, while Anselm Hollo had been there and gone, the faculty had continued apace. Meltzer and di Prima revisited, revised, and revisioned their courses in Kabbalah and Hidden Religions, respectively, while Epstein rehashed his course in Poetics and Theatre. Patler helmed the poets-in-residence program and taught the aforementioned course on The Evident Poetic Community in the fall, followed by an expansion on his previous summer's course on John Wieners, "Dark Eternals of the Nightworld": Reading the New Poem, in the spring. McNaughton led his collective investigations of Eurydice and Hermes, while Grenier offered his fall Prosody course and followed in the spring with his course concerned with the Poetics of the Personal Voice in USAmerican poetry since midcentury. Duncan, too, reprised his first year courses in Basic Elements and the Nature of Persons Proposed in Poetry in the fall and spring, respectively. In the summer, while Meltzer and di Prima rounded out their sequences, and McNaughton again offered entrée into Muslim Sources, namely The Sufis, Duncan taught Political Vision in Poetry, which he described in a letter to Barbara Joseph as "six double-packed weeks, close dealing with passages of Dante, Milton, Blake and Whitman in which politics is a metaphor for poetics."⁶⁰⁹ The catalog elaborated only slightly, describing it as

a lecture course in Dante, Milton, Blake, and Whitman, using *De Monarchia*, along with *The Vita Nuova*, *The Convivio*, *De Vulgare Eloquentia*; Milton's *Areopagitica*; Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; and Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* along with the *Preface to Leaves of Grass*. A study of the poetics of politics. Students will write four papers in the course work, answering key questions raised in lectures, and progressively relating the worlds of the four poets studied.

In the summer's public presentations, the Poetics Program relate its own world of concerns to the wider world of poetry. On six consecutive Wednesdays, from June 2 through July 7, Duncan spoke on Swedenborg and on Ideas of Electricity, Forces & Energies, di Prima spoke on Early 20th Century Magical Groups and on the Structures of Magic, and Meltzer gave talks on American Kabbalists of the 18th through 20th Centuries and on Kabbalah in 20th Century Art, with each talk open to comment by the other panelists—Duncan interjected quite frequently, as was his wont—and, of course, questions from the audience. Most of these questions are inaudible on the tapes among di Prima's papers, but many of the panelists' responses amount to a collective and impassioned defense of the core curriculum of the Poetics Program in the face of a clear and direct challenge, so I'll largely turn the floor over to them for the next few pages.⁶¹⁰

In the course of di Prima's talk on early 20th century magical groups, she speaks of Éliphas Lévi as the modern revivalist of two-hundred years of buried traditions and practices, kept alive in large part by the Masons, via the Rosicrucian classic *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. She gives a very quick rundown of that two-hundred-year history, up through the founding of the Rosicrucian Society of England (c. 1865), the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky (c. 1875), and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (c. 1887), which were the modern heirs of the likes of John Dee and others who did not separate what we might now call their

properly scientific investigations from their occult activities, and for whom such occult activity was not full of “fear and trembling,” but was quite “matter of fact,” as di Prima puts it. These late 19th century occultists shared a concern for developing a systemized way of passing on material that hitherto had been scattered, an unsystematic soup, as Meltzer puts it. In these few decades, there was “a concentration of information and energy, and then it bursts and pieces go off in different directions,” di Prima says, as individuals begin to claim sole authority, with many “splinter groups” and the attendant “issues of secret teachers and authoritative lineages” emerging at the turn of the century. She stresses however that “all this stuff spreads form small centers,” and it is easy here to pick up on her own and her company’s sense of their task as something similar, the Poetics Program as just such a small center, “a seed form, a seed pod.”

After some banter, an inaudible audience question or comment prompts Meltzer to quote Christopher Macintosh’s argument, in *Éliphas Lévi and the French Occult*

Revival:

Lévi helped to change the popular concept of magic. Whereas magic had hitherto been regarded by most people as a means of manipulating the forces of nature, and by many as a dangerous superstition, Lévi presented it as a way of drawing the will through certain channels and turning the magician into a more fully realized human being. This has always been the real purpose of theurgy as opposed to the cruder forms of magic, and Lévi was not the first to express it in writing, but he was the first to popularize it on a large scale.

He then quotes Yeats, from an 1892 letter to John O'Sullivan:

Now as to magic, it is surely absurd to hold me 'weak' or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make, next to my poetry, the most important pursuit of my life, whether it be or be not bad for my health can only be decided by one who knows what magic is and not at all by any amateur. If I had not made magic my constant study, I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would the Countess Kathleen have ever come to exist. My mystical life is the center of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.

Meltzer continues, in his own inimitable way:

We're dealing with people that the more we understand about them the more we suddenly begin to see fragments and shards of ourselves floating around. These are not these sort of wacko monocle movie mad scientists, wackling and cackling around in some sort of neon bubble-arium, you know? This is something else. These people are involved with art, with politics, with the present. They're in the present. They use the past, they abuse the past, they reinvent it all.... They're throwing the whole thing into this soup: "My soup! Here, eat, eat," and everybody said, "Plehw, I don't like it. Let's throw in some salt, and blah, blah." That's how it is! It's a continuous invention, you understand? This is what we do!

The rant elicits loud applause and cheers from the audience as Meltzer

laughs, then says, "And one other thing: We address these subjects as poets.

Therefor we are practitioners, but we're not necessarily religious." Someone

in the audience inaudibly asks about Yeats again, and Duncan speaks:

At the end, Yeats was much involved with Whitehead but that was not because he was correcting the magical view but because for him it enlarged it and brought the universe more vividly into question throughout and still was seeking a life in which the life you were living, and its meanings, would be transformed. It would be incorrect to say "transcended" for Yeats because he never meant to *transcend*

his condition; he meant to go deep into it and *include* anything you would call “transcendent,” not divorce himself from it. I think the advantage of all these magic orders [was that they] were seriously involved with a nondivision between the spiritual and the material world. That’s why they were “magical” orders and why people who wanted to be “spiritual” were often opposed to them because they did involve the sexuality but they also involved material itself. That’s why they were into alchemy. They were into the actual material world, as a complete revelation, along with the spiritual. And that brought them into the problem, since it was a *language* throughout. Then the Hebrew language was a key to an actual chemistry, and they took both seriously.

Meltzer interjects:

They took many things seriously. I think one of the important things that they did was in this rather eclectic and at the same time [serious] business of correspondences which they developed, they also developed a much more present and coherent series of archetypes and symbolic relationships that became very useful in the development of art for the past two centuries. This stuff is bubbling in. It really takes us into a lot of what we appropriate now as rather commonplace, but in a sense these people lived their strange blend of politics, magic, occultism, kabbalah, alchemy, and so forth.

An audience member appears then to ask the panelists to relate their own practices as poets to these histories they’ve been discussing here, and teaching in the Poetics

Program, and di Prima is the first to respond:

Where do I locate my work as a poet in relation to work with visioning and so on is the core question of my life right now, how those two come together and how the material that’s been coming for me enters the stream of my writing, which is gradually now beginning, though for four years I was working without that conjunction truly happening, and so for four years I found that most of my work has been recording visions and visioning and dreams and very little “writing” since I finished *Loba* and only now, and in fact, the writing that came forward was very very much of this world....

And now very slowly I've found the material is beginning to filter into the writing and a lot of poetry is being written and yet it hasn't found its form, I haven't found its form, and I have a clear sense that you can't write *about* a vision, so you have to wait until that material percolates through to the place where the poem is emergent and that's what I'm writing and we'll see where it goes. I have no sense that it's wrong to belong to an order, and I have no sense that there's anything that a poet shouldn't do.... It is the core calling of my life.

Duncan follows:

I would say in relation to my work, a good deal of it carries with an almost filial duty a tradition. And yet it's elective, that is, it's not placed on me. I'm the one who names what it is I carry, so it goes to Dante, it goes to Homer, and that content comes through, and it bears a remarkable resemblance in some areas and is taken as being a—at this level, it's a truth that I recognize, and consequently it's experiential. If I turn to even a famous poet where I don't recognize it, I don't have anything to recognize. And I only recognize in Dante what seems true to me, so I don't turn around and say this is an authority. I don't believe it's an authority. And yet the fact that something carries through to one to one to one to one, then they're experiencing sources. That is already a community where we have a vast number—they seem big, don't they, because many, many people claim them. Many people claim Shakespeare, many people claim Dante, many people (maybe a smaller community) claim Milton, and yet, I'm not talking about carrying *that*. The truth may be something felt to be true, so that's a wide human community, and much of it, we recognize, ok, they're dead. I have no trouble with this community of the dead, ok? If they come in a dream or they come in a book, as Shakespeare comes, in a book. There are few words in dreams, but those that are true are the ones that will strike me, and if it's nonsense I'm not going to say I know.

Meltzer replies only briefly: "Yesterday in a class I was talking about this same period and my ritual, I suppose, is the act of writing the poem, or preparation for the poem, and then the moment or the moments when the poem is dealt with or comes through. I can't really enlarge on what a Robert said." Then di Prima interjects: "The

will in magic isn't necessarily the will of the ego. It depends on what you're doing," to which Meltzer replies: "Will & imagination, the two key words, both interactive and extremely dynamic emblems of the process of what we do, submission and activity, you're writing and being written, you're seeing and being seen through. You can think of a million flags to fly about that, but I prefer to do it myself, the act, often in that speechlessness, that silence, and whatever happens there, that's the culmination of my ritual procedure."

Two weeks later, during Meltzer's talk on American Kabbalists of the 18th through 20th Centuries, the skeptics grow more vocal, though their questions and comments remain largely inaudible on the tapes. This is Duncan speaking:

There's a great difference between a mythical view, a view of myth, and the stage later when a theosophical reading comes of myth, and in between we know a philosophical reading because Plato give us philosophical readings of myths, but in the Hellenistic period with Plutarch, and with Hellenistic readers, we begin to get theosophical readings from the wisdom of the gods, these texts that no longer are thought of as primary in themselves or even religious, so they're interpretive in a way, and so even myths begin to be read and other meanings are sought after them.... There are many theosophists through the period, but they're different from mythographers. There's a great tension, for Charles Olson, for instance, for whom the myth was absolutely important and theosophy, well, he could be polite about it at times, but it was heretical to be theosophical. But it begins when you look for the meanings in a text. The fundamentalist is *in* the myth.

From the audience, quite audibly, comes the question "What does this have to do with poetry?" to which Meltzer, replies: "Oh, come on now. What does it have to do with writing and reading? Isn't that what we're talking about? Who asked this

question? Let me see this chap!" The audience laughs, and Meltzer continues: "You know what it has to do with poetry, that's a silly question.... You want it real clear, right? It has to do with a central approach to, first of all, the mystery of language, the responsibility in being a conduit for the transformation of this language, the discipline involved with the approach to text into writing. To me, it's obvious."

"We're not talking about writing poems about Kabbalah, you know," di Prima adds:

"We're talking about an attitude, and a way of dealing with language, a way of being in a language, out of which comes not only your writing but your life." After a bit of inaudible commentary from the audience, Meltzer says, "What do you want to say? Go ahead, because I don't think there's going to be much response." The audience member continues, inaudibly, and when he has said his piece, Duncan steps in:

David already said earlier when he was giving his talk, he said at one point that in the Kabbalistic tradition one of the great recognitions is that reading, writing, and speech are already creational. And so, to view them as other than creational means that you have to be increasingly dumb to the situation, and blind to it. That's the hazard of writing without feeling there's any depth present in the very letter and sound that is moving. That clearly is not the dominant view. If you go to almost any place today to take courses in poetry, the primary question is: Do they belong to English or American literature, or to World literature, and are they great or small? And then the next question is: What interesting devices and inventions are going on in the poem and poetry? This is another part of the age of reason that was willing to settle on the poem. It's not only the Kabbalah that's cancelled out in this, it's all the early shamanistic traditions of the poem, all that Milton and Shakespeare and so forth thought it was. But the main thing is that this one tradition, this one Hebrew tradition

comes down to the letter and comes down to the sound and knows that that also must be the ground of revelation, where mostly when we approach it and don't trust that we're in a revelation, at the very ground, and that is the ground where the poem is. The step beyond that it's translated, and now, of course, once it's translated, we just have ideas or interesting devices. People either translate grabbing the rhymes and letting the ideas go or they translate grabbing the ideas and letting the rhymes go and both ideas and rhymes are seriously trashed out. They're viewed as superficial features that can be discussed in and of themselves. If ideas had anything to do with the poem, you're quite right, ideas get along very well without the poem entirely. But the poem, being a world, has ideas. It has at a depth that will be unconscious in a philosopher that's readable (not like Whitehead). Where it really begins to glow, then sounds are present in the letters, but in the poem they'll count. As a matter of fact, they'll have number, another feature of the Kabbalah. And worked in depth, as in *Finnegan's Wake*, for instance, where anagram, not only pun, but anagram is another feature of the recognition that words mirror each other and are contained in each other, and so forth. One thing that has revived the sense of what Kabbalah can mean is Freudianism. That Freud pointed out that there could be, at every level of operation in language, there could be sexual meaning, shows that there could be all meanings and that what you took as incidental puns are revealing, that if they can reveal one thing it can be multiple. That's what the theosophical does. It's an intensifying hermeneutics in which you read into and out of the text. You read out of it because it's human, and you're human, and you read into it because you're searching, you're searching for its meaning.

The audience member again replies inaudibly, and di Prima says, "I don't think we understand what you consider the nature of poetry. Could you explain? I think we're talking at cross-purposes because we have quite different views of what the nature of poetry is. Maybe you can make clearer what you mean by the nature of poetry." After another inaudible attempt, Duncan takes the floor again:

The entire series is interested in occult traditions. So, as I said before we started discussion, it is related to a program in poetics, but it is not a class in poetics. In a way we are opening up a suggestive area that, as a matter of fact, is suggestive of a lot more than poetry. Kabbalah goes in a lot of different directions. All of the aspects of these heritages.... Diane mentioned Fulcanelli.... He not only talks about a Kabbalah, but he also says, after several pages in which he's running puns on the Argonauts, argot, the language of thieves and the language of birds, and he runs all the possible French puns on the thing, and at the end of it he says, "I'm not interested in etymologies, I'm interested in the alchemy of the word," and you realize alchemy means changing things and coming to know their essences, and transformation and permutations, is the other aspect, the feeling of what creation is that underlies the Kabbalah is not only of the nature of god, but of the nature of creation itself, that it's permutations and revelations....

The antagonistic mood lightens momentarily as, in response to Meltzer's example of the Hebrew word YHWH—"Yod is the seed letter, a generative letter. Etc."—di Prima recalls, "I had a dream one time where the pronunciation of YHWH was "Yo, Heave, Ho!" As in the Paul McLaughlin song. Guys were lugging this boat and the river was time and space together and they were trying to lug it out, 'Yo, Heave, Ho!'" The audience laughs, Duncan says, "Oh, marvelous," and Meltzer replies, "That's called shipping out!" Then Duncan gets back into it, via Joyce, H.D., Milton, Blake, and Victor Hugo:

This tradition, by the time you come to Blake's time—in Milton's time much of this in England is still in the hands of learned people like Milton, but in Blake's time probably I would still trust it was just like it was in Germany. Milton belongs in the educated classes so we're not seeing as much in Milton as we see in Blake because Blake belongs to the real current of craftsmen, of people who make shoes, people who print books, people who weave cloth, and so forth and that's

where the real mixture goes. And they too tend to learn languages. They never get degrees in the languages, they don't graduate from Oxford and so forth and so everything mixes. One very great poet who is deep in this is Victor Hugo.... He was deep into the mystic Jewish—*World* mysticism by that time demanded—think how much world mysticism demands today, that you know Hindu and Buddhist systems! Now that wasn't demanded of Milton. I'm talking about the whole world feeling of what would be the spiritual nature of man. In Milton's time you could have the spiritual nature of man and not know what in the world is a Chinese, or something—it could be that local. In Blake's time, it's already disturbed. In Whitman's, it's enormous. Like these people who were no longer paying attention to “are they Jewish?” and they begin to realize, no, what's implied is even deeper, so we can find perhaps Chinese kabbalists today. There are Chinese Jews, of course, but you can find Chinese Kabbalists who will read it in Hebrew. The first step of that is Muhammed, who says that religion is not a racial thing and that anyone who reads the Koran in Arabic is reading the Koran, and if you don't read the Koran in Arabic then you're not reading it. And the Koran means “reading.” Bible in general means “the book,” but Koran means “to read.”

Meltzer, gesturing back to di Prima's dream, expounds on the act of reading in Hebrew, before the application of vowel points:

You had to determine what actually the words were. You had to put your own vowel points on these clusters of words. You could read this un-vowel-pointed text, and the more you knew about the language the more possibilities you had to take these letter clusters and say, “Well, maybe it's this word, because this and this sounds like this.” In other words you have a text that on the one hand is very literal and on the other hand is like entering into the molecular structure, something very tiny disappearing into the woodwork.

Duncan:

That's another thing that happens, because then it's possible to divorce yourself from being a writer. The typewriter is not the writer, and you have increased repression about seeing what your handwriting would reveal to you. I have a page in which I write and

then go back to ask what does it mean that I dot the “i” five over, you see the rhythms. Now graphology, usually, you turn up and ask, “Now what do you know about me?” to somebody else, but that is not what I’m talking about. And beginning with printing—Let’s just think about having a very elegant type that your work is going to go into, Eric Gill, which is the very high point of Roman Catholic spiritual type and Roman alphabet, all the way through. Now your work is printed in that and that level is so strong that it contends throughout, and you had to ask, “Do I really have this character?” And that was there right away with the moveable type. And the typewriter, the business from the hand writing to the typewriter is still the anonymity of the type reassures you about it, and you do not look at how curious when the word—When you write, it is an event in writing, and the way the “r” goes, what I have done to the “r” is characteristic I find and absolutely individual. Would anybody else do that to the “r”?

Meltzer:

In the synagogue, the Torah scroll in the ark, which is central to most orthodox synagogues I know—what it is in reform synagogues nowadays where there’s some sort of stainless steel rocket ship or something—um, but, that’s done, traditionally, on this sort of leather or hide, and it’s done by someone called a *sofer*, a scribe who his whole life essentially is involved with taking a quill into inks that he creates and writing out, for instance, the Torah, but un-vowel-pointed, by the way, and also writing out *mezuzahs*, those little talismans, or whatever you want to call them, that are hide, again with specific inscriptions and initials of various things, and are wrapped around a little metal container that’s put on doorways of any entrance, you know. There’s a Talmud tractate which is something over a hundred pages of laws and dictates and the man who takes that quill, and again he has to know how to sharpen his quill and make his ink, if he misses one letter out of anything that he writes in his work—god forbid, it’s all over, the ramifications of this! So deeply responsible is he to all of it, which is what this has to do with me being a poet.

Duncan:

So instead of saying discipline in a poem, you could say care. Discipline of the poem, to my ears, goes over to the world in which it's a device, an invention and you learn how to keep yourself disciplined like in a factory or the army and so forth, but care means immediate care to what's happening and it means ultimately recognition of what's happening. I'm on a typewriter so I can register poems. I know how far off I am from the [margin], but I was that far off that it was disturbing to me to look at my handwriting, but I came to look at my handwriting because I realized that's one area that's almost forbidden. Or you're going to be ashamed because you can't read your handwriting. Olson was a person that couldn't read his handwriting, but that means something very profound, psychically. It may be the condition under which he could write. He could write provided that—

"He didn't have to read it!" Meltzer interjects, laughing: "Like one of those doctors with the prescription." "The suggestion in Kabbalah is you don't just write, you also read what you write, low and behold, and you don't read it to say, 'Did I mean that?' You read it to say, 'What does this mean?'" says Duncan. "These aren't my hands!" quips Meltzer. After a bit more banter, Duncan again:

The *Zohar* no matter what else it is, it is a work of the creative imagination of the same order as the Divine Comedy and there's nothing else in that period—oh, and another 13th Century work, in the Muslim world, of Rumi. It's a tremendous actual work to read. No wonder anybody gets ensnared! For that to be hidden and be only in the Jewish community and not to be known at all, or only by a few that work in Kabbalah! It's just a marvelous work. Period. On the human ground. And that today you can have full university education, and know the Divine Comedy, and not know nothing about Rumi and nothing at all about Moses de Leon just really shows what a wicked thing we have to bend heads into what's called "education." If you want to know why somebody starts a program of another kind of education.

I've offered these last several pages of transcription for a number of reasons. The wonderful sense of proportion, the blend of humor and seriousness that Mary Margaret Sloan and others highlighted is on full display, as is the quick-shifting, far-reaching, synthetic thought so characteristic of the three. More importantly, perhaps, it says a lot about what these members of the Poetics Program were trying to *do*, not only what they taught. Yes, clearly, di Prima's talks, and Meltzer's, too, were in part quick surveys of the material they were teaching—as noted, both were rounding out their year-long signature courses that summer session—but they were also indicative of the stance they were taking in that historical moment vis-à-vis the wider poetic community and vis-à-vis Western chauvinism and logical positivism in higher education. It is clear that they were trying to stake out a certain ground, not for the mythic, *per se*, as Duncan notes, but for the theosophical imagination, a kind of poetic intelligence admitting anything, nay, *everything* to consideration and emphasizing especially that which has so often been aggressively de-emphasized or even excluded from consideration in “respectable” circles.⁶¹¹ It seems significant that the actual course Duncan was teaching at that moment was not about Swedenborg or “ideas of electricity, forces & energies” (as his public talks were billed), but about *Political Vision in Poetry*, for this was a decidedly political stance. As many have noted, Duncan's own classes tended to be rather public affairs, with numerous visitors unaffiliated with New College dropping in to hear the poet speak, and the various study groups that spun off from classes frequently included persons who

were likewise unaffiliated, but by and large these groups and the program coursework might reasonably be considered the Poetics Program's monastic private sphere, their complement then being the public talks by the Poetics core faculty, which seem to me to have the creation of an Arendtian "space of appearance" as their reason for being. As Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, "The public realm...was the only place where men could show who they really and *inexchangeably* were."⁶¹² Here the faculty could make their positions plain, could state clearly their oppositions to what they saw happening around them. "There was a sense that Robert [Duncan] had this kind of mission," Carl Grundberg said, "and part of it was providing some alternative to the Language poets."⁶¹³

Trouble in PaRDeS

I. Space for Politics

Two years prior to the launch of the Poetics Program a now notorious incident, which some have seen as precipitating the program's formation, took place at the San Francisco Art Institute and touched off perhaps the hottest period of the cold war between the Language poets, then truly ascendant in visibility and influence on the local poetry scene, and certain others whose poetics stood in stark opposition to theirs. In November of 1978, Robert Duncan and Barrett Watten were invited to speak about Louis Zukofsky in conjunction with a screening of outtakes from 1966 NET TV documentary about the poet and his work, one of a series of such short films produced by Richard O. Moore under the title *USA Poetry*, the first of which had been about Duncan himself. For years this incident was the stuff of rumor, of legend, of myth for those of us who were not present. Although audiotapes of the event exist in multiple archives and personal collections, Watten long fought, aggressively and with the occasional threat of legal action, to keep them from the public, so my own first impressions of the event (as well as of the ensuing, extended spat) came from interviews, blog posts, articles and letters to the editors of such publications as *Poetry Flash*, that vital organ of the busy Bay Area poetry scene, and the main regional daily newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Perspectives remain beautifully splayed across a wide spectrum, but are pegged pretty consistently to

how deeply allied to one or the other side the teller stands, or stood at the time of telling. One would have to read scores of accounts to get a full sense of the event, I'm sure, but as Carl Grundberg remembered it:

Barrett was trying to be very careful and scholarly—and for my money a bit dull—and Robert was so mercurial and so full of the creative spirit that he just started jumping up and down, “Well, I just thought we could have some fun with this!” And he kind of just took over and asked for a slide to be projected, and it was Zukofsky's poem “Zinnia” from *80 Flowers* and it was interesting because I think Robert wanted to use it almost as a put-down of Zukofsky, how Zukofsky could just go out there to where he wasn't really communicating, but in the course of talking about it Robert noticed, “Oh, Zinnia!” Just the title: “It begins with ‘Z’, which is Zukofzky's name, and it ends with ‘A’ which is the first letter of the alphabet and the title of Zukofsky's life work and in the middle there's a palindrome, ‘inni!’” And he was jumping up and down because he was just discovering this for the first time. It was very electric.⁶¹⁴

Robert Archambeau, who was no more present than I was, offers a somewhat more thoroughgoing synthesis of several different sources, albethey, like Grundberg's, more sympathetic to Duncan's position than to Watten's, a sympathy for which I, not pretending to impartiality myself, can find little fault:

Duncan spoke first, and, by all accounts, manifested very much as the poet-magus, in a broad-brimmed Spanish hat and cape, praising the mystical side of Zukofsky and looking, as David Bromige recollected, like he was there to “ward off evil magic.” Then another speaker took the stage—Barrett Watten, then just 30 years of age, looking every inch the junior professor in his sport coat, khakis, and buck shoes. He began by drawing a diagram of a Zukofsky stanza on the blackboard, and proceeded with a clear, rational analysis, to which Duncan took immediate, vocal exception. He heckled, he cajoled, and ultimately he pushed Watten from the stage. The moment was many things: an older poet worried about the Oedipal drama of rebellion, and a

generational conflict, Black Mountain vs. Language Poetry, among other things. But it was also, and definitively, a moment in which the magus of the irrational turned against the Apollonian representative of reason. The breach of decorum and the incivility are entirely explicable, if not necessarily excusable. Here, at a celebration of poetry from beyond the mainstream—in what to Duncan’s mind must be a center of resistance to modern rationality—was a representative of our enemy, rationality. Indeed, from where Duncan stood, the breach of etiquette was all Watten’s, and “breach of etiquette” hardly touches the seriousness of the offense. Poetry, charted, mapped, and analyzed theoretically? We murder to dissect! It was heresy, blasphemy, a desecration of the temple. The great and domineering enemy has found us in our catacombs, and must be cast out!⁶¹⁵

Sometime in the spring of 2017, the audio of the Duncan/Watten/Zukofsky event was anonymously posted online, and to my ear, the recording affirms both Grundberg’s memory and Archambeau’s synthetic retelling. Apparently, however, this posting reignited an often vitriolic exchange, which has since flared up a number of times, on various blogs and social media platforms between parties and loyalists to parties in the original debacle. The stakes of the larger debate on poetics, myth, and materialism behind it all still matter, though time has tempered many of the primary antagonists’ stridency, and most poets and critics of more recent vintage are able to approach the issues with cooler heads, but as the recurrent blog- and social media-based battles of recent years indicate, many of the psychological wounds remain raw forty years later. When the audio surfaced and these public spats revived, I’d recused myself from social media, so the first I heard about it was from Steve Dickison, during a conversation about this very book, which I’d just begun writing. Dickison echoed Bromidge’s above-quoted description of Duncan’s

behavior as the casting of a spell of expulsion or aversion of some evil influence, and indeed, many of those involved in the original manifestation of the Poetics Program felt its founding was, at least in part, just such an apotropaic action. David Levi Strauss insisted that, as far as he could see, the main reason the core faculty “came together for that short period of time [was] to try to counter this thing that they saw happening [with Language writing]. That’s why this thing with Watten was such a watershed for us because we could see it, we could see the split.... It cleared out an opening for something else to happen.”⁶¹⁶ The idea, as Grundberg put it, was that “we [could] read Saussure and all these linguists, too, but we [didn’t] have to go the same direction as the Language poets.”⁶¹⁷ Strauss concurred: “Ostensibly, they were drawing on the Russian constructivists, but we were reading all that stuff at the same time and getting something different. We were reading Jakobsen, and we were taking something different away.”⁶¹⁸

The Poetry Wars, as they’re commonly known, ebbed and flowed for several years, characterized as much by a general tension as by the occasional flare-up of actual conflict. The most significant instance of the latter occurred in June of 1984, when both the Duncan and Zukofsky *USA Poetry* films and outtakes were to be screened at the San Francisco Art Institute. *Poetry Flash* published an advance notice by Strauss, where he briefly runs down the history of the project, gives his impressions of the films, and then recaps, from his own perspective, that night five and a half years previous when Duncan and Watten had clashed over Zukofsky. “In

the interests of fairness and dialogue,” a brief note from the editors at the end of Strauss’s piece “encourage[d] responses to this article, to be printed in the July issue.”⁶¹⁹ And the responses came. The next several issues each featured multiple letters to the editor, including a lengthy defense of Watten and attack on Duncan, Strauss, Darrell Gray, Andre Codrescu, and others from Silliman, as well as rebuttals of Silliman’s piece by Strauss (wherein he enjoins anyone who will to actually listen to the tapes of the event at the American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State), by Gray, and by Codrescu, as well as letters from Jacqueline Cantwell defending Watten and Silliman, letters from Dawn Kolokithas (Dawn-Michelle Baude), Alastair Johnston, and Carl Grundberg defending those Silliman maligned, and letters from McNaughton and Steven Rodefer taking a more central tack. The letters kept coming in, but the editors cut off the exchange after a few issues, and when challenged on that decision (in another letter to the editor, of course), replied, “We simply felt the subject under discussion had been more than sufficiently aired, milked, chewed, bashed, beaten to death and otherwise exhausted. We did and still do hope the creature of intelligent, constructive debate will be reborn in other *Poetry Flash* reviews.”⁶²⁰

In speaking with members of the Poetics Program, these ongoing Poetry Wars were brought up, often in passing, but almost always by my interlocutors themselves—and after a while, if the Language writers hadn’t been mentioned, I felt obliged to bring them up myself, hoping for a new angle in on the issues, events, and

actors. Interestingly, discussion thereof assumed what became a fairly regular pattern—though obviously with plenty of variation as to the details. First, there would be reference to the Language group at large, with general criticism of the personalities that comprised it and the overall effect the group had on the atmosphere of the poetry scene, sometimes an opposition articulated between those personalities and their atmospheric effect to the personalities of the Poetics Program and their atmospheric effect, and sometimes an articulation of how those respective personalities and atmospheric effects related to the opposed poetics of the two groups. Then this criticism would be tempered somewhat by the acknowledgement of individuals associated most closely with the Language group who were actually friends, or had actually a lot in common, but Barrett Watten, well, the brunt of complaints against the group would be laid at his feet. Still, nearly everyone acknowledged the seriousness and rigor of the Language writers, and insisted that their presence and the conflict itself immeasurably intensified their own experience. Students were challenged in the Poetics Program with a full immersion in the heavy theoretical material that underpinned much of the Language project, and many of them took it upon themselves to also engage Language products. Baude recalled, “I wrote a lot about the Language School. I actually read all those books, even those obscure essays that are absolutely useless now. Some of them are *so* dense, and *finally* you extrapolate.... What a waste now that I think of all of the things that I

could have been reading, but it helped establish a rigor of mine, the intellectual rigor to decode some of those things.”⁶²¹

As we have seen, Duncan was never one for straw-man arguments, nor were any of his Poetics Program colleagues, whether it be about some rising hegemon of the avant-garde or some resident hegemon of the academy. That was simply not their *modus operandi*.

Rigor and honesty, if not necessarily generosity—as we have also seen, they could all be “wonderfully dismissive” of certain things—were the orders of the day. While none of them agreed with the Language project, they took them seriously. In an interview shortly before the Zukofsky event in 1978, when Duncan was being drafted to help build out the poetry collection at UC Berkeley’s Bancroft Library, he named several “very strong personalities” among the younger Bay Area poets who he would look to for input, including, in order, “Michael Palmer, Lynn Lonidier, Ron Silliman, Barry Watten, Bill Berkson,” and others, and when the interviewer made what might be construed as a snide comment about Watten, Duncan admonished, “Never underestimate Barrett Watten.” Two years later, when the New College Poetics faculty met for curriculum planning he again lauded Silliman’s intelligence, while now disparaging Watten’s. He was clearly ambivalent about the group and given individuals. Matt Haug recalled that during his time at New College, “if you said the name Barrett Watten, he would sneer or boo,” but again in a 1982 interview, Duncan said he still thought “the most interesting group” of poets in San Francisco

was “the Language poets.” In this same interview, however, he did lay out in simple terms his basic disagreement with their project:

I find them reductionists.... All sorts of things that are ruled out in language: it can't refer and so forth. So language is turned over to a kind of logic. I'm never illogical, but I'm never logical, for in my head logic is zero—zilch. I'm a poet, not a logician.... The Language group has set logical rules on their language. And I see them not merely as being reasonable or rational, but as rationalizing. They set their premises, and then they rationalize what language should do, so now there is depreciation, because they begin to rule out subjects. That is, they rule out that language really can't express love, really can't express emotions, and can't have subjects. Well, I think you see the absurdity. What they really say is it shouldn't, because it obviously can....

It stems from how much linguists, and semiotics, especially (a field having nothing to do with writing), were beginning to tell us more than we were noticing about the act of writing. At times I think there are ways in the art in which you begin to be, you can dangerously come close to becoming sophisticated. And then you have a puritanical backwash. And the Language group that we face at the present time, almost all of them are a form of puritanical backwash. Their rules are clean lines, shouldn't have—shouldn't go overboard, you shouldn't be... So proprieties show up. No, it isn't very popular to be passionate..., and Olson would say, sailing into the wind with an overload.... He really loved extravagance. What is it that he said...you've got to overdo it?...oh, exaggerate, exaggerate.”⁶²²

As student Dawn-Michelle Baude saw it:

Language poetry was about control and contrivance and artificiality, all about the artifice and all about control. Control and artifice, control and artifice. You could not get further [from the poetics of the New College faculty]. For Duncan, it's about channeling, it's about authenticity, it's about unpredictability. It's the opposite of control. Duncan wanted to let go of control and let things speak through him, and this is what was inculcated in us.... They were all about letting go and the Language poets were all about control, control, control....

They were so opposed aesthetically, but also in terms of temperament. ⁶²³

Thorpe said,

Duncan was mainly a poet of feeling, and specifically of feeling problems in their tension and extremes. His form isn't achieved—this is clear at a glance—but develops dynamically from the problematic difference of his words over time. Sign led for him to field, both in its Maxwellian form and as a pun of the felt but one began with the not-field and proceeded towards the field out of unfeeling comes action generating feeling. Something easy enough for one to say, but requiring considerable art to sustain. So, for example, remaining loyal to what one does not feel—a typical Duncan tone row on this theme—poses an almost insurmountable problem for immediate feeling, which can only be resolved by unknown components in the system of derivational feeling. He was actually wrestling, like Jacob, he said, with his own semiology of sense and nonsense. ⁶²⁴

As Thorpe's comments suggest, in the early years of the Poetics Program at New College the Language group proved a great intellectual spur and spiritual foil:

If at first [Duncan] had worried about a fashionable deluge of persons asserted in poetry unambiguously, when they should have been composed with full ambiguity in mind, [later] he equally worried about a fashionable deluge of signs so randomly impersonal that they could only be disambiguated by a losing sequence of guesses. Personalities were flying short of craft and composition, while arbitrary signs were flying past craft and composition. It's not that that was wrong, but that these were wounds or symptoms requiring particular attention.... [Duncan's teaching moved] in the direction of linguistics, because the reduction of poetic art to arbitrary signs seemed a more prevalent crisis of the 1980s. During the problems of personality phase, he'd brought in Roland Barthes's *Elements of Semiology*, which delighted him as a scheme of counter attack. So we moved more and more into a theoretical study of the sign. Somewhere along the line, I think that Robert recoiled from what he saw as a potential mechanistic and meaning-neutral manipulation of signs in poetry. He'd been inspired by Roman Jakobson's view of the

unbound features of language as an area of superfluity which could be invasive and potentially compositional, but he worried about reductions of poetic language toward this assemblage into emptiness.⁶²⁵

The disagreement wasn't strictly poetical, but also political—though if anything has become clear over the course of this book, it's that the two can hardly be separated—in the most fundamental sense of that which has to do with the *polis*. I would try to get, say, [Barrett] Watten and Bob Kaufman" together for a reading, McNaughton said, but "with those Language people, they'd come to hear Barry and then they'd just walk out. They were like that."⁶²⁶ The feeling was that they were a closed circle. David Levi Strauss characterized the group as "corporate":

Everything was all tied down. You couldn't wander in and out. It was all nailed down and paranoid about incursions from outside. I thought that at the time, but it really has grown with time. The politics of that were really bad.... They were accused of being Stalinists, famously, and I think that's about right.... It would be difficult to overestimate just how oppressive that environment was, and Watten was the worst of it.... I always got along with [Ron] Silliman, personally, but I just found the group's approach was really bad politics as far as I was concerned. Silliman and I agreed about a lot of political stuff, in the larger political world, but their internal politics, my god, it was very corporate. ... There was a hierarchy and you had to pledge allegiance and if you varied from that—and this can probably be said about a lot of avant-garde groups—but going to Perelman's Talks series, just the atmosphere was really oppressive.... It was mainly Watten. He was autocratic. Either you were with the program or you weren't. The central issue was that Watten had this idea that certain types of formal approaches are intrinsically superior politically, and I thought that was wrong. I still do, and I still run into. I find it in artists and writers of various stripes, but that was the underlying belief, that certain forms were more politically *correct*.... I just didn't buy that.⁶²⁷

Strauss recalled “one point, I guess in [Bob] Perelman’s Talks series, [when] Watten starting going on about how ‘we could’ve been doctors and lawyers, we could’ve been the elite,’ and I just thought what the—why would you want to do that? But they mostly went to Ivy League schools and his argument was, ‘we could’ve been guardians of the world, masters of the world, but we chose this.’”⁶²⁸ So if they’d given up being masters of the whole world, then, they wanted to be masters of this little avant-garde poetry world they’d chosen as their own, and their struggle to achieve that status created an extremely contentious, if also often quite generative, environment throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Lyn Hejinian, a central figure in the Language group who would come to play an important role in the New College Poetics Program, too, acknowledged that the group consisted of “a bunch of alpha men and some alpha women, and it could be tense.” Perleman’s Talks series “was like some combination of scholarly circle and debating society and it could get pretty brutal,” as she recalled.

You’d be invited to give a talk and you’d get maybe three sentences into it and Barrett and Bob, Tom Mandel or Ron would throw a twenty sentence query at you.... I remember being upset after a talk I gave.... I’d had a great idea—and I still think it was a great idea—but Ron Silliman savaged it and then I was riding back to a bar with Barry Watten and my husband and I guess maybe Carla (Harryman) was in the car and I was clearly upset..., and Barry said, “You know, I realize that the males in our group all grew up playing contact sports, of some kind, and all this is, is contact sport. It’s not personal, and don’t take it personally because it’ll do nothing for you....” I took that to heart.⁶²⁹

Easier to do, of course, when you're already in the inner circle, when both the abuse and salve are offered by your own friends. Harder for someone on the outside looking in, especially for younger poets trying to find their own ways. One of the younger graduate students in the New College Poetics Program, Steve Klingaman, recalled the Language poets being outright "dismissive towards the various tracks of poetic tradition that coursed through the Bay Area.... I just found that there was too much of a toxic environment from the point of view of artistry, it was too much polemic..., [not] an artistically encouraging environment." Klingaman insisted that while some members of the Poetics Program "were snobby or intolerant or full of ourselves or just overly sure of ourselves, we all had growing pains together, and it was a community that hung out together, so you figure each other out." Though students were certainly to some degree "competing for the attention of the faculty members, because they were heavy hitters," Klingaman felt "it was kept in a reasonably communal context," but eventually, fed up with the vitriol of the wider poetry wars, Klingaman "just walked away from the poetry scene."⁶³⁰

II. A New Dance

Any new students who came to the program in the fall of 1982 hoping to study with Duncan would have been disappointed to find that he had accepted a temporary post at Bard College as Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Division of Languages and Literature and so would not teach in the Poetics Program that term or in the spring, though the short four-weeks sessions at Bard would allow him to “continue to be available to students...for thesis work and other advising purposes,” as the catalogue put it. “It is also reasonable to expect that he will be popping up unexpectedly at the College, in classes and at readings.”⁶³¹ And so he did. Norma Cole, who’d caught wind of the program too late in the summer to witness the panel on Poetry and the Occult, but nonetheless enrolled that Fall, remembered, “I came to New College one morning, and I was going up the stairs, and I heard someone’s voice. It was a beautiful voice. I didn’t know what he was saying yet, but I heard the voice. It was gorgeous, and I knew that, ‘Oh, Duncan is back!’ He was back for a visit, and he was in the room with Michael [Palmer].”⁶³²

At Duncan’s behest, and with the rest of the faculty’s happy acquiescence, Palmer had been hired for the year to teach essentially in Duncan’s stead. Having taught at New College on three previous occasions, as poet-in-residence on Spicer in fall of 1979, in McNaughton’s stead on Prosody in spring of 1981, and again as poet-

in-residence in spring 1982, he was a welcome addition to the core faculty. Carrying on from his poet-in-residence theme the previous spring, "Some Aspects of Silence and Measure in Contemporary Poetics," Palmer would teach a sequence, defined by his ongoing discussions with Duncan in light of what the latter's previous Basic Elements courses had proposed. The fall course, *The Articulations of the Poem: Segmentations and Coordinations*, was concerned with "sounds – letters – syllable – word – sentence & line – syntax – stanza – page – text – the potential fictions poetics facts may 'belong' to: the poem, the book, the Poetry," while the spring course, *Temporal and Spatial Propositions of the Poem*, was concerned with "the text and page as notation of space and time. Linguistic and typographical signs – immediate frames and forms of movement – junctures, boundaries – series and sets – ideas of field – What is "closed"? What is "open"? The architectonics of the poem."⁶³³ I first found these course descriptions in the official catalogue, but later also found them written out in Duncan's hand, and labelled "Robert Duncan and/or Michael Palmer," so it seems the degree of Duncan's involvement was uncertain. According to some schedules and advertisements these classes were to be team-taught by Palmer and Duncan, though in actuality Duncan only made the occasional appearance when he returned to San Francisco in the interstices of his Bard appointment. When Duncan returned to teach in the Poetics Program in the summer of 1983, he offered a course called *The Poet, the Ruler, and the Saint*, described in the catalogue, quite succinctly, as "Studies in Medieval and Renaissance poetics: Dante and Shakespeare,"⁶³⁴ which

seems clear enough. The reader of this book will have to refer to the innumerable passages in Duncan's prose and poetry where one or the other or both of those foundational poets appear to divine what might have transpired in the classroom, as I've gathered no useful information.

Meanwhile, Palmer's courses were juxtaposed to Meltzer's two-term sequence, Letter, Word, Sound, Number, continuing a Kabbalah-rooted, but increasingly multicultural study of mythic, mystic and magical traditions as they pertained to poetry, and also increasingly as they pertained to contemporary critical and linguistic theory, "in a sense equating [these mystical traditions] to contemporary hermeneutics and so forth, just to show this ground and lineage for this process of receiving a text and having your way with it." He insisted that "Wittgenstein was saying a lot of the same things as these 13th Century and 16th Century writers," whether or not he was directly familiar with the literature. "Wittgenstein came out of an upper class German Jewish family, and you're sure something seeps in [from the tradition], but you don't know." And the same went for Derrida, he said: "I always found that *On Grammatology*, once you got past Spivak's mind-numbing introduction, was in that kind of spirit, again, the mystery of letter, sound, meaning. I always felt he either knew it intuitively or culturally because it was on that level. And I recommended it to students who were interested in the alphabet, and writing systems."⁶³⁵

Meanwhile, di Prima taught her more narrowly tailored courses on the Grail legend in the fall and the triumvirate of Paracelsus, Dee, and Bruno in the spring; McNaughton taught the aforementioned course, Story. Measure.; Patler taught Standard Texts, followed by 20th Century Compositional Poetics, as previously described; and Epstein offered his year of Poetics and Theater for the third and final time, while Grenier, too, rounded out his New College tenure that fall with a class he called Writing/Conditions:

Investigations of the interrelations among/between writing & its circumstances, the specific conditions out from & inside which composition functions. Haunts, habits, predilections, operational sets of particular writers in relation to those materials (which?) which yield (how?) very different language/results. Olson's typology of topos/trope/type presented as a 'model' (*Poetry & Truth*) approach, from which examination of correlations among/differences between written works, activity of the writer & agency of 'place' may proceed. Focus on contemporary writing & writers' practice; testimonials from the space in which each lives.

That same fall 1982 term, co-founder and director of Naropa's summer writing program Anne Waldman would join the faculty temporarily. to teach a course on Gertrude Stein, described in the catalogue as

A close reading aloud of some of the principal texts of Gertrude Stein covering the following stylistic periods as suggested by Donald Sutherland: Naturalism and the Continuous Present (1902-1911); The Visible World As Simply Different (1911-ca. 1921); The Visible World with Movement (First Plays) (1913-1922); The Play As Movement and Landscape (1922-1946); Calligraphy and Melody (1920-1932); Syntax as Movement, Vibration and Drawing (1928-1940); History and Legend (1930-1946). Texts will include "Melantha," *The Making of Americans*, *Tender Buttons*, "Stanzas in Meditation," "Lifting Belly," *Ida* & others.

Her own exegesis will include "Composition as Explanation," "Narration," "What Are Masterpieces," "How To Write." Course will include background informations & relevant discussion.

In the following spring 1983 term, Bill Berkson, who had taught a class on Frank O'Hara as poet-in-residence in the fall of 1977, returned to New College to teach a course on Vernacular Poetics &/Or "The News From Poems," which was described as

an emergency course in common sense to deal with the present "splendid state of confusion" re poetic intentions and requirements, assuming most of the usual terms (like "imagination," "verse," "voice," "sublime," "lyrical," "formalist," "abstract," "real," and so on) are questionable, and that, poem by poem, such poetic/esthetic definition and pronouncement is up for grabs. (The unusual historical state for poets being the more we practice openly the less we know what's being done.) Topics: Traditional Modes in Current Practice (Oratory, Dramatic Monolog, Eclog, Story, Landscape); Including vs. Accumulating; Transmitting; What is Fact, What is Attitude; Surface and Scale. (What is the relation, say, of Destiny to the Scale or Expanse of a whole poem – and what of these qualities in "long" poems, "short" poems?) Some time will be taken to discuss painting, architecture, movies, and music sensibly vis a vis poetics.... Films and slides will be shown, tapes played; required reading will be announced.

At the first class Berkson handed out a reading list, which consisted of some ninety works, with the following marked with an asterisk as "required": *On the Sublime* (Longinus), *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideals of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Burke), *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* (Poe), "After the Pleasure Party" (Melville), *Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets* and *Collected Poems* (Denby), *Meditations in an Emergency* and *Standing Still and Walking in New York* (O'Hara), *The*

Tennis Court Oath and *The Vermont Notebook* (Ashbery) *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (Smithson), *Party Going* (Henry Green), and *La Vita Nuova* (Dante). The rest of the list ranged from Horace to Jonson to Goethe to Shklovsky to Guston to Ponge to Whitehead to Godard and more, including Duncan's "The Sweetness and Greatness of Dante's *Divine Comedy*" and John Thorpe's *Exogeny*.

While Waldman and Berkson both taught their semester-long classes as visiting faculty, Waldman was also one of the fall 1982 term's poets-in-residence, offering three talks in October under the title "Interest in Surprise," which drew on Dada, Pound, Williams, Stein, Riding, Creeley, O'Hara, Ashbery, Denby, Kerouac, Burroughs, a range of Romantic, Metaphysical, Elizabethan, and Jacobean poets, and of course Waldman's own work, to discuss all manner of rupture and disjunction, i.e. surprise, in poetry, with informing forays into music and film, with reference to Satie and Cage and Brakhage. Waldman was followed by key Language poet and polemicist Ron Silliman, who gave three talks under the titles "What Is Prose?" "Writing: an other," and "Prosoids y mas." Gregory Corso followed with three talks of his own, but I've uncovered no details. They no doubt contrasted sharply, however, with the returning John Clarke's three resident lectures, presented in April 1983 under the peculiar umbrella title, "The Mole as Insatiable Beast: The Negation of Negation." Lucia Berlin was advertised in summer issues of *Poetry Flash* as another poet-in-residence for the upcoming school year, but I have found no other information about her appearance, or about who may have been the term's third

resident. Perhaps, like Waldman in the fall, Berkson coupled his semester-long spring course with poet-in-residence lectures, but I can't say for certain. In some capacity, in each of the fall 1982 and spring 1983 terms, Christopher Gaynor and Leslie Scalapino again joined the fold. This time they had no announced topics, but joined McNaughton as the lead participants in a year-long orchestration called The Meeting, which bore this explanatory note in the program catalogue:

There are several purposes subsumed in The Meeting. Foremost is the need for all faculty and students in the program to meet on a weekly basis, in order to counter the dispersal our schedules and lives otherwise produce. This will be our one common forum.

Three meetings each month will be given over to subjects-presentations-events brought forward by each of the three faculty. One meeting a month will be used as an open session, in which we can discuss matters we see to be at issue in our mutual work in the program. This open session will thus be the time to ventilate problems of common importance; to permit examination of at least some of the essential disagreements which exist among us; and to call out any and all propositions of poetics, including that of poetics itself.

Individually, the three faculty will be lecturing or talking in areas which concern them and which they wish to present to the other members of the program. That is, Gaynor will be extending his preoccupation with the relations between poetry and music; Scalapino will be offering lectures on painting and poetry; and McNaughton will be proposing topics germane to his studies in poetry and belief.

In addition, The Meeting will be open to lectures, etc. by all members of the faculty, and to lectures/readings by guests. We want to provide a regular chance for faculty to address subjects which lie outside their coursework.

The success and interest of The Meeting will therefore depend on the active participation of everyone in the program. It is our expectation that faculty and students will feel free to use The Meeting as a clime of mutual question; and that we can thereby amplify our conception of poetics through common discussion.

The Meeting will be scheduled for a class-length period of time one afternoon a week. At least some meetings will be open to the public, on the

hope that people outside the College may be interested in visiting the program and learning what we do here.

Matt Haug recalled these “informal” sessions happening around midday: “You’d bring your lunch and there’d be some topic, maybe Leslie is reading *Ulysses* or she’s reading the *Odyssey* and she talks about it, or she saw a movie...over the weekend and she wrote a page, so she’d talk about the movie, then read a page from this diary and say, ‘What do you think about this?’” Gaynor would “talk about different songs and analyze them.... He had his own vision of what music was about,” so he covered a wide range, from Roy Orbison to Javanese Gamelan. “People talked about different things. It was really open. Interesting,” Haug thought, and a worthy effort “to build community at the school because people were all dispersed.”⁶³⁶ The same intentions expressed in the above description would motivate a major reorganization the following school year, both of the poets-in-residence series and of the Basic Elements curriculum.

Alongside Duncan’s course on Dante and Shakespeare, the other courses offered the summer of 1983 were di Prima’s aforementioned Texts of Alchemy, and what appears to have been the first truly team-taught course in the Poetics Program, simply titled “HA!” It was fairly common for faculty to sit in on and offer remarks or full guest lectures in one another’s courses, but now at the end of the program’s third full year, the sardonic, acerbically witty McNaughton and slapstick, irrepressibly wise-cracking Meltzer would together offer “a six week selective overview of humor,

some history and theory, with appropriate side turns into ongoing philosophical and psychological explanations towards a definition of what's funny and why," as the catalogue has it:

Our special emphasis will be on the joke and how it embodies various cultural approaches to humour. Are there universal elements of humour and is there a universal joke? What is the difference between "good" and "bad" humour, "clean" and "dirty" jokes? Does comedy utilize a special language? / We'll listen and respond to specific examples of humour in the American and British idioms, paying attention to all the above as well as defining a joke's structure, the structure of puns, one-liners, insults. As part of the overall inquiry we will also attempt to delineate comedic archetypes and stereotypes. Sound-patterns, delivery, timing. The controlled glossolalia of double-talk. / Other areas touched upon: the joke as wisdom-teaching device and the metaphysical and linguistic implications of humour and the joke. / Some reading preparation is advisable. Here is a general list to work from. (Another listing will be provided at the beginning of the semester.) / Ben Johnson's introduction to *Every Man Out of His Humour*; Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors*. Aristotle: *Poetics*, Chapters 1-9. *Oriental Humour* by R. H. Blyth. *A Fragment on Comedy* by Donatus; Francesco Robortello's *On Comedy*; *On The Ridiculous* by Vincenzo Maggi; Pierre Goldoni's *The Comic Theatre*. Emerson's essay, "The Comic." Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*; Grotjahn's *Beyond Laughter*; *The Fool* by Enid Welsford; "Comic Rhythm" in Langer's *Feeling and Form*; Gershon Legman's *The Rationale of the Dirty Joke*. *Breaking It Up: The Best Routines of the Stand-up Comics*, edited by Ross Firestone; *The Last Laugh* by Phil Berger. Constance Rourke's *American Humour*. Any of the three available collections of *Goon Show* scripts.⁶³⁷

In the fall, Duncan and Palmer offered the first semester of a two-semester sequence they team-taught on Field Theory as a Poetics, which Duncan initially proposed to teach himself as:

a course in IDEAS OF CONSTELLATION, FIELD, and PROCESS POETICS A & B, to go into the sequence of mystery poems—the Helen of H.D., *Paterson*, and the later Cantos (Pisan Cantos on), the *Maximus*, and Creeley's *Pieces* as a composition by field (as he saw it) as texts. But designed to open up questions of boundaries, sequences, teleologies, non-intentional creativity etc. etc. Where the Hell is Heaven? and so on—Add *Finnegan* to the above texts.⁶³⁸

With Palmer brought into the fold, the course “propose[d] an extended research into the ideas of *field* from early agriculture and the “field of battle,” from Langland in English Poetry with “a faire felde ful of folke,” through the development of ideas of electrical and magnetic fields, and in the 20th Century Gestalt psychology,” as the catalogue has it. “Given the term ‘composition by field’ as it appears in Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ essay,” all of this would be “related throughout to propositions of potential forms of the development of linguistic concepts, as these in turn lead to new ideas of the basic elements in the poem itself and to poetry as a primary ground of experience and reality.”⁶³⁹ Recalling the experience to Lisa Jarnot, Palmer said, “To co-teach with him was to hold on for dear life,”⁶⁴⁰ but to me he said it was “great fun.... There were people who didn’t like being in the room with Robert because he would dominate the conversation, but I always felt I had plenty of room for what I wanted to bring in.” There was a certain “set of information that Robert didn’t have about poetics theory and philosophy that pertained to this question of the field, the ever-expanding field, so to speak.” For example, Palmer continued,

Robert was not that versed in the objectivists, oddly enough, but I was, and so we could bring in that whole sympathetic generation that wasn't part of the New American Poetics, simply because Don Allen had neglected them pretty much. They were pertinent, anyway, so I could bring in another set of tools and references and was able to do that. I never felt cramped by Robert, and there were times I didn't feel like talking and that was alright, just let him be himself. I don't know how the students ultimately felt about it, but I think for some of them it was a delight.⁶⁴¹

The previous year, while Duncan was away, no Basic Elements course was offered, though as we have seen his subject matter was partially addressed, albeit from an alternative way, with an alternative set of referents, in Palmer's courses (in which Duncan made the occasional surprise appearance) and had always overlapped in ways with what di Prima, Meltzer, McNaughton, and others were teaching. When he returned to San Francisco at the end of his year at Bard, the other faculty proposed to convert the Basic Elements course into a more collaborative offering akin to the previous year's Meeting, only with greater focus and structure. Remembering "Diane talking about when they made the switch," Matt Haug said:

at first it was Robert Duncan's class, then they decided to take it away from him, and he wasn't so happy with that. He made a face or something, but the faculty decided ok, we're going to do it this way, and when I took it, they were all teaching it. The idea was the core faculty would all show up. They'd all be there together.... If Duncan was giving a talk, all the other faculty would show up and give their points of view. They wanted it to be like that. Not just Robert Duncan talking. Because the critique you would hear about Robert was he'd talk for three hours straight and nobody else could get a word in, he'd just be going.... They wanted to mix it up a little bit I think.⁶⁴²

Of course, as Judith Roche recalled, “they were all teaching, but Robert was far out ahead of everyone else.... Robert did more of it than anybody else, too, and even when somebody else was supposed to be leading it, Robert would take over.”⁶⁴³

David Meltzer felt “the thing that was most interesting was that not only a professor that had to say something—we’d just rotate—but students would have to do it, too, a little talk.”⁶⁴⁴ “Robert would make us all look like pinheads. But he was great,”⁶⁴⁵ Meltzer insisted. “Robert was very supportive. If you got it wrong, he was very supportive, too, but you’d know it.”⁶⁴⁶ Steve Dickison recalled every week beginning with Basic Elements on Monday morning: “Basic Elements was a convocation.... It wasn’t a huge group at any time, maybe twenty in the room and there would be a subject for the day, and argument.” As Michael Palmer put it,

That weekly thing, the Basic Elements, they were basically whatever people thought they might be, in other words practically anything could be a Basic Element, for instance the page, space, etc., reading... The Basic Elements was exploratory in the most interesting way. It’s a course I think I would always teach and some things that would be Basic Elements [at one point] wouldn’t be anymore [at a later point, e.g.] the page as a part of a compositional measure. Well, with people working on computers now, I’m not sure the page matters at all. I mean things end up on the page in the end..., [but] it’s a mutable thing, and you go back in time and there weren’t pages. There were scrolls, and this and that, tablets, but that’s part of the exploration of the page, too. The ephemeral nature of some of the Basic Elements: Is breath a basic element? Is the body a basic element? And each of those is not proposed as a given, but as a point of exploration and debate. The role of the body, is it in the Olsonian sense, or is it not, and does that depend on the poet? Is the body relevant to Wallace Stevens, let’s say, or to Marianne Moore. Certainly not in the same way as the proprioceptive body is to somebody like Charles [Olson].... I would come in, not with a lecture, but with a prepared set of talking points

and notes. It was an open discussion. I would bring in what I had been thinking about, and I would encourage people to intervene at any point, if they wanted to add to it or subtract from it, whatever it might be, so we were leading the class, but we were leading it in a sort of interrogatory way. It was all open questions.⁶⁴⁷

I've been unable to find any detailed documentation of the first iteration of this new arrangement in Fall 1983, but the Spring 1984 Basic Elements was opened by di Prima with a lecture on Melopoeia on Monday, January 23. She led a seminar on the subject the following week, with Patler lecturing on the same the week after. Seminar sessions alternated with lectures by Duncan and McNaughton on Logopoeia, and Meltzer and Palmer on Phanopoeia, while the final two weeks consisted of roundtable discussions of "the question of Basic Elements as such," which appear to have taken them well beyond the bounds of Ezra Pound's typologies, as subsequent semesters would have the faculty speak on much less immediately Poundian subjects, as follows:

Fall 1984: "Sound: Phoneme: Silence" Michael Palmer; "Letter" Diane di Prima; "Number" Duncan McNaughton; "Word" Robert Duncan; "Rhythm" David Meltzer; "Line" Louis Patler

Spring 1985: "Speaking" Louis Patler; "Writing" Robert Duncan; "Reading" Michael Palmer; "Source(s)" Duncan McNaughton; "Memory" Diane di Prima; "Book" David Meltzer

Fall 1985: "Coding" David Meltzer; "Source" Diane di Prima; "Imagination" Michael Palmer; "Hand Writing" Robert Duncan; "Sound" Louis Patler; "Rhythm" Duncan McNaughton

Spring 1986: "Symbol" Michael Palmer; "Form(s)" Robert Duncan; "Body" Duncan McNaughton; "Metaphor" Louis Patler; "De-Coding" David Meltzer; "Process" Diane di Prima

While it must have been intimidating, even downright terrifying for some students to stand before the room and hold forth following Duncan or di Prima or any of the other faculty, this weekly forum—"required for all degree pursuers," according to Meltzer—exemplified again the participatory, collaborative ethos of the Poetics Program, an ethos further exemplified by the simultaneous restructuring of the poets-in-residence series.

Over the course of the first six years of the official poets-in-residence series—the three years leading up to the institution of the graduate program and the first three years of the program, proper—individual poets had been invited to speak on whatsoever they wished, with the faculty member overseeing the series offering students some preparatory readings in the visiting poets' own work, but with no necessary link between the poets or their respective topics. Beginning with the Fall 1983 term, however, the series was organized around a common subject, in relation to which each of the three invited poets was asked to give three talks—what angle the poets chose was up to them—while the faculty director would essentially run a parallel, semester-long course on that same subject (each of the three visiting poets and the faculty director, incidentally, receiving the same \$1,000 payment for their part in the proceedings). This format lent far greater cohesiveness to the series itself, incorporated the series more fully into actual coursework, and gave students an opportunity to more comprehensively engage a single poet's work. Anne Waldman's class on Stein the previous year had been the first official course to focus

on one particular oeuvre. Though McNaughton had his on-going, unofficial Shakespeare course, and Patler had focused mainly, if not entirely on Wieners in his repeated course on “Reading the New Poem,” with other courses focusing on small numbers of poets—Duncan having taught Whitman, Dickinson, and Baudelaire in conjunction in Summer 1981, and McNaughton preparing to teach Dante, Balzac, and Milton in conjunction in Spring 1984, though “address[ing] the background rather more than the literary foreground of the texts; that is, the Muslim Sufi ground for Dante; the Seraphitan ground for Balzac; the Dionysian for Milton’s *Comus*” —as we have seen, the majority of the courses were quite astounding in their range not only of poems and poets, but of poetics and of what some might consider “extra-poetic” material, e.g. linguistics, history, philosophy, etc. The rest of the catalog from the 1983-1984 academic year included Patler’s wide survey of Primary Texts covering the Pre-Classical period through the 19th Century in the Fall and 20th Century Modern Epic Verse in the Spring, Meltzer’s single-semester Kabbalah course in the Fall and *Genesis* course in the Spring; di Prima’s two-semester Hidden Religions, and the two-semester Field Theory course, team-taught by Duncan and Palmer. The restructured poets-in-residence series would offer something of a counter-point to such diversely “psychedelic” (to borrow Strauss’s term for Duncan’s “mind-manifesting”) studies. Instead of one poetic mind acting as prism, gathering and refracting again all manner of ideational light, four such minds would

be turned to one common fire, relating some aspect of what they each could see in its flames' dancing.

For the first subject, the faculty chose Sappho, and per a page of notes from a planning meeting among Patler's papers, di Prima suggested her old friend Audre Lorde, Susan Griffith, and Judy Grahn as possible poets-in-residence. Also named were Guy Davenport, Jack Winkler, Lawrence Durrell, Robin Blaser, and Ed Sanders, though it is less clear from these notes who may have named each of these others. Ultimately, and no doubt in part for reasons of availability and affordability—it is difficult to image Lawrence Durrell coming to San Francisco to give three talks for \$1,000, even in 1983—the visitors would be poets Judy Grahn and Robin Blaser, joined by the classicist Jack Winkler. The core faculty's own resident classicist McNaughton would act as "program supervisor" for the series, and he had suggested, according to Patler's notes, that this new format might warrant inviting a more formal scholar to complement the two poets. Clearly the suggestion had been accepted, and Duncan suggested Winkler was an appropriately progressive choice, despite his affiliation with nearby Stanford University, which was as much the antithesis of New College as was Princeton or any East Coast Ivy. Forty years old when he came to speak at New College in November 1983, Winkler was an activist as much as he was a scholar, having founded, before coming to Stanford, the Women's Studies program at Yale, where he also co-produced a gay-themed radio show called "Come Out Tonight," was the only faculty organizer of the school's first

Gay Rights Week, in 1977, and was both the only faculty member and only male to join a class-action lawsuit “brought by women students against the University for its tolerance of sexual harassment of students by faculty.” He would be diagnosed with AIDS in 1987 and die three years later after a period of furious scholarly activity during which he produced, among other things, his seminal work, *Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*.⁶⁴⁸ His talks at New College, titled “Beginning with Psi: Co-ordinates of Sappho’s World,” “Reading Sappho/Sappho Reading” (listed elsewhere as “Mis-Reading Sappo”), and “Women and Maidens, Men and Boys: Erotic Connections on 7th C. Lesbos,” were very much in keeping with his project of scholarly activism and activist scholarship and well received by those in attendance. The trio of talks presented the previous month by Duncan’s Berkeley Renaissance compatriot Robin Blaser bore no individual titles, but were collectively concerned with “Sappho, the Contemporary, and the Sacred: The Reappearance of Process.” Blaser was ever the brilliant thinker and charming presence, though his talks were underwhelming to several who recalled them, including Matt Haug, who said:

I was probably too young a person to get everything he was saying, but I was studying with Diane and I think me and Diane both got up and walked out of that at the same time, just because, with Diane, going back to the magical tradition, this thing is really right in your hand, and he was talking more in an abstract way about some books he had read or some world cultural history of what it was, but completely divorced from his experience. That’s my memory. I was frustrated.⁶⁴⁹

As a large poster advertising her talks noted, Judy Grahn had been an important figure on the local scene since at least 1970 when she co-founded the first lesbian press on the West Coast, The Women's Press Collective, which rose out of her membership in the Gay Women's Liberation Group. She'd co-edited *The Lesbian Reader* and published several books of poems in the 1970s and early 1980s, and it was no doubt on account of this work *in toto* that Grahn was invited to inaugurate the reconfigured poets-in-residence series on September 27, though the poster makes special mention of her "major nonfiction work, *Another Mother Tongue: Stories from the Ancient Gay Tradition*," which would soon appear from Beacon Press with an alternate subtitle, *Gay Words, Gay Worlds*, winning the 1985 Gay Book Award of the American Library Association. Grahn's talks, presented on three consecutive Tuesday afternoons under the umbrella title "Homopoetics: American Lesbian Poets in the Sapphic Tradition," concerned "Modern Lesbian/Feminist Themes Discernible in Sappho's Fragments," "Sapphic Elements in the Work of Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, H.D., and Gertrude Stein," and "Sapphic Elements Developing in the Work of Adrienne Rich, Olga Broumas, Paula Gunn Allen, Audre Lorde, and Judy Grahn." The tapes of all nine talks, by Winkler, Blaser, and Grahn, were transcribed with an eye toward publishing them together as the second issue of the Poetics Program's official journal, *Convivio*, but due to the persistent financial difficulties of the program, the reluctance of Tombouctou Books publisher Michael Wolfe to sink any

substantial funds into a second issue, and the failure of grant applications to the national Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines and several local foundations, the volume never appeared. Versions of Grahn's talks did appear the following year, however, in her book, *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition*. The occasion of these talks was hugely important to Grahn, both for the opportunity it provided to develop and air her ideas and for the opportunity to engage with the community of poet-scholars on the faculty. As she recalled,

When...I first met the then-faculty of New College of California's Poetics Program, I had instant and distinctly Medieval déjà-vu. That is to say everyone I met on the staff seemed completely familiar to me, and as though we had all known each other in a cloistered group centuries before: say in 1296 A.C.E. I was too embarrassed to thoroughly explore or say aloud what strong past-life memories I felt around them, nor have I yet shaken the impression.

Seeing the teachers grouped at their tables with students or talking to each other in the offices, I was struck by Duncan McNaughton in his iron grey Caesar haircut resembling the head knight, protective and battle worn and someone I had known well: David Meltzer, Michael Palmer and Louis Patler were familiar-seeming scholars from their respective Jewish and Pagan and Christian village districts; Diane di Prima has always been to me an intriguing combination of the Lady of the Lake and the scrying Morrigan, going her own ways with her own information; and Robert Duncan of course was grand old wizard Sorcerer and central, burning core.... I was flabbergasted and very flattered when he attended my series of lectures at New College....⁶⁵⁰

Meltzer recalled these talks being "a big thing for her. She really came alive there."⁶⁵¹ And they were a big thing for the New College community, as well, in its relations with and extensions into the broader poetical and political milieu of the

city. Michael Palmer stressed the importance of “Judy Grahn and others...bringing in gender questions very early on, at a time when those were just beginning to be part of a curriculum.... The so-called burgeoning poetics of the gay community and the lesbian community were there, and the pioneers were doing the work, but it was nothing like queer studies and gender studies now, with a wealth of scholarship that has gone into it, and theory. It was much less available then, so that was also part of a pioneering time.”⁶⁵² Norma Cole recalled the impact of the publication in 1980 of Elaine Marks and Isabelle De Courtivon’s anthology of *New French Feminisms*, which for USAmerican readers was the first time the writings of such now-canonical theorists as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig, and others, were widely available: “We were all reading it at that time. Women were reading that book..., all translated, and we were like WOW!” Around the time of Grahn’s talks in 1983, “many of us were just getting to the point where we were talking about that,” said Cole.

Only six months earlier the first issue of *HOW(ever)*, the seminal journal of experimental feminist poetics, appeared, edited by poet Kathleen Fraser, then a professor, director of the Poetry Center, and founder of the American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State, with fellow San Francisco poets Frances Jaffer, Beverly Dahlen, and beginning in 1985 Susan Gevirtz, as well. Like the Poetics Program, *HOW(ever)* was concerned with identifying and building out of a particular, and peculiarly occulted, lineage. Its inaugural issue’s opening salvo,

penned by Fraser under the title "Why HOW(ever)?" is worth quoting at length for the sake of highlighting the similarity of the journal's aim and of its approach:

And what about the women poets who were writing experimentally? Oh, were there women poets writing experimentally? Yes there were, they were. They were there and they were writing differently and a few of them were chosen and did appear in the magazines for people writing in new forms. And then several women began to make their own experimentalist magazines. What about that? Well, they read each other. But we hardly ever heard about their poems where I was sitting listening. You mean in school? I mean where poems were being preserved and thought about seriously and carried forward as news.

And the women poets, the ones you call experimentalist, were they reading Simone de Beauvoir? Firestone? Chodorow? Irigaray? Some were. They were reading and they were thinking backwards and forwards. They were writing to re-imagine how the language might describe the life of a woman thinking and changing. And the poetry they were writing wasn't fitting into anyone's anything because there wasn't a clear place made for it.

They must have felt displaced. Yes, they must have. They must have felt unreal. Unrealized. Effaced. Did they know it? Yes, they knew it. Did they talk about it? Yes, they talked about it. We were sitting in a writing group two years ago and we talked about it. One year ago, we were sitting there talking about it. Last summer, I was walking around talking to myself about it and feeling displaced and I wrote to one of my scholar friends and asked her about it and she said you are right. There *is* this gap. But perhaps we don't know how to acknowledge something, how to think about something, unless it resembles what was already there. I thought of Dickinson. I thought of Stein. Woolf and Richardson. Slashes, anarchies, sentences, disruptions. I was listening and I said to her, but if we could somehow talk to you and tell you about us, would you be interested? Yes, she said, I would be interested.

HOW(ever) proposes to make a bridge between scholars thinking about women's language issues, vis-a-vis the making of poetry, and the women making those poems.

HOW(ever) hopes to create a place in which poets can talk to scholars through poems and working notes on those poems, as well as through commentary on neglected women poets who were/are making textures and structures of poetry in the tentative region of the untried.

HOW(ever) had no direct affiliation to the Poetics Program, but I want to highlight its affinities, because Cole, Mary Margaret Sloan, and others in the Poetics Program would find constant company and the occasional place for their own work in its pages as well as close friends among its editorial committee and broader community.

The so-called Second Wave of feminism had washed away many legal and social obstacles over the preceding two decades, but many of the women who studied in the Poetics Program had come of age in a decidedly more repressive culture, and of course the patriarchy had hardly collapsed by the 1980s. Many of those I spoke to 35 years later stressed how challenging it was to grow up in that culture and how important these years were to them. Mary Margaret Sloan's story is indicative:

I had decided that I wanted to be a poet when I was 15 or 16—though I didn't remember that until later. My daughter found a box of papers in my parent's basement, and it had a piece of paper in it that was dated, so I know I was 16, and it said, "I would like to be a poet, like Keats, Byron, Surrey..." and then there's a little "dot-dot-dot" and then it drops down a few lines and says, "but they're all men?" With a question mark. So that would have been about 1960, 1961, around then, and that was an era when it was difficult for women to pursue their dreams, so I sort of wrote a little bit here and there but I didn't follow up on it much and later I actually married a writer, a Stegner fellow from Australia—which was another dodge of women, you know, instead of being one, marry one, and I didn't actually marry him, initially. I just ran off with him. I lived in Australia with him—that's where my daughter was born—and then when I left him I came back to the United States and met a very supportive, feminist, much

younger man, who said, “why don’t you write?” So he really supported me, helped me, and we’re still married today, which is almost 46 years later. He suggested I go to a women’s writing workshop in Santa Cruz...called Women’s Voices—I think it was in something like 1976. That’s where I met Kathleen Fraser and Kathleen invited me to take her classes at SFSU, which was very generous of her because I wasn’t even a student there. I was living in Palo Alto at the time. So I did. I took several of her classes, and then I did a lot of independent studies with her, but I wasn’t really that satisfied. I can’t really quite characterize it, I just felt that I was looking for something else, something deeper and more serious. I continued to write for a couple of years and then I think it was in 1983 or 1984, a friend called me, actually the woman who had started that Women’s Voices workshop, her name was Marcy Alan Craig. I was living in San Francisco, in Bernal Heights at that moment, and she said “Did you know that Robert Duncan is teaching at New College, and it’s right down the hill from you?” And I said no, I didn’t know anything about it, but I immediately got off the phone, got in the car, drove down the hill, parked, got out, found Duncan McNaughton, and signed up, all in about two hours’ time.

The work Sloan began while a student in the Poetics Program, cross-pollinated by the *HOW(ever)* and Language milieus—“I was lucky to have these three groups that I was friends with.”—ultimately would develop into the monumental anthology, *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing By Women*, published by Talisman House in 1998. As Sloan recalled,

I finished all the coursework for the Masters [in 1987], which coincided with the collapse of the program, and like many people I had trouble getting around to a Masters thesis. I couldn’t even settle on a topic. I’m sure I had a variety of topics, I can’t remember any of them anymore, but then I was asked to do this anthology, and it turned out to be just a phenomenal amount of work. It was more of a dissertation, really, because of the way I approached it. It was years of work and when I got pretty close to the end of it, by then Lyn [Hejinian] had been teaching at New College, and I ask Lyn, “Do you

think they would accept this as a masters thesis?" And she said, "I'll see." And they did. It was a good thing, too. I made my living off of it for many years....⁶⁵³

Sloan writes in her introduction, "the writers emerging in the 1960s had been preceded by important (though not adequately regarded) Modernist women writers such as Gertrude Stein, H.D., Mina Loy, Marianne Moore and Laura Riding, [but] it is the increase in the *number* of innovative women writers in the past few decades that is striking.... In the late 1960s and early 1970s, women innovative writers began editing magazines, forming presses, organizing reading series and symposia, teaching workshops, and running poetry centers and projects, thus developing resources to which they indisputably had access and participating more directly in the control of the means of production."⁶⁵⁴ Sloan lists many of these, and includes no fewer than 50 poets in her anthology, but acknowledges that "definitions of innovation are contingent and transformed over time.... Another editor or even the same editor at a different time would have selected differently."⁶⁵⁵ Clocking in at over 700 pages of poems and statements of poetics, the book is weighty evidence of the kind of mapping of personal lineage encouraged in the Poetics Program, and the particular lineage identified here was integral to the New College Poetics curriculum, too. H.D., of course, was central, especially to Duncan's and di Prima's teaching, with Duncan making a full course on her later poetry his last offering to the program in the Spring of 1986, but making frequent reference to her work and continuing to see portions of his monumental H.D. Book into print throughout his

tenure, and di Prima offering a set of lectures as part of the visiting poets series focused on H.D.'s work (along with Janice Robinson and Albert Gelpi) in the Spring of 1987, the final semester of the Poetics Program's original incarnation. Gertrude Stein was the focus of the Spring 1985 visiting poets series, with set of lecture by Judy Grahn, again, and Lyn Hejinian (along with Philip Whalen), and as previously noted Anne Waldman had offered a semester-long course on Stein in the Fall of 1982. Extending the lineage back in time, *HOW(ever)* associate editor Beverly Dahlen and Susan Howe offered sets of talks on Emily Dickinson as part of the Fall 1985 series (along with Robert Creeley), and extending that lineage further back, Magda Bogin, author of the groundbreaking 1976 book, *The Women Troubadours*, offered a set of talks as part of the Fall 1984 series on the Troubadours (along with George Economou and recent Poetics graduate Carl Grundberg). Grahn's talks on Sappho (along with Blaser and Winkler) extended that lineage even further back, in direct conversation with Diane di Prima's investigations of feminine/feminist lineages in poetry and myth manifest in her visionary epic *Loba* and throughout her teachings in the Poetics Program and outside of it. As Poetics student and Grahn protégé Betty de Shong Meador wrote, the Hidden Religions classes "gave dimension to the underground strand of a female-oriented spirituality,"⁶⁵⁶ and it was this dimension that drew a good many students to New College in the first place, but di Prima was the only woman on the core faculty.

During an early planning session, when the core faculty drew up a list of possible visiting poets, Duncan exclaimed, as the list reached eleven names, that they were all men, and so a half dozen women were quickly added, and, though Meltzer claimed “people selected for seminars, one-shots, or semester programs [were] from a list of names we all proposed, [and] who finally [was] ‘chosen’ [was] so by process of availability, not gender or ethnocentrism,”⁶⁵⁷ in retrospect this seems to have been one way the faculty at least attempted to adjust its gender imbalance.

As far as the poets-in-residence series and other extended teaching contexts went—there were simply too many one-shot readings and lectures and too unreliable a record of them for me to venture an analysis of such—during the program’s original seven-year incarnation, women, though still marginally outnumbered, taught nearly as many sessions as men—and the women were formidable, intellectually and artistically. In addition to those mentioned above (Anne Waldman, Judy Grahn, Magda Bogin, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Beverly Dahlen, and Janice Robinson), the reader will recall that Helen Adam, Joanne Kyger, and Leslie Scalapino, also played important roles in the early going, and Bernadette Mayer, too, would be counted among the guest faculty (lecturing on Walt Whitman) before all was said and done. The student body included many formidable women as well, as we have seen, but of course, names and numbers hardly tell the whole story. Matt Haug thought di Prima “probably felt bit under siege by the male faculty in the Poetics department,” recalling how after a couple of years “the faculty wanted her to teach different

material and not always do Hidden Religions, but Diane liked HR. McNaughton was like, 'Well at least change the name of the class.' The alternate name she came up with was A Rebel's Guide to Europe. But she never used that name."⁶⁵⁸ In an exchange of letters with the broad Poetics community about which I'll have much more to say later on, di Prima wrote, "It's...no fun to be the only woman amongst all of you guys and feel there are certain ways of perceiving and acting that I have to carry alone—and that are often written off as 'kooky.' As, for example, the 'Hidden Religions' course itself."⁶⁵⁹ McNaughton replied unequivocally that this charge "needs no comment from me. 'Kooky' is not a way I have thought of Diane. All of us, singly and as a group, have extended to one another the freedom to go about their business as they see fit."⁶⁶⁰ Meltzer wrote that the complaint was "difficult to address.... I'm sympathetic and sorry, but I never saw it that way—that you were the band's 'chick singer'—ultimately dismissed as 'kooky'—and 'Hidden Religions' regarded demeaningly. It further depresses me for my inability to perceive it. I feel, as you did, that we mesh as a faculty in both the actual and metaphysical continuity—despite diverse vocabularies and mentalities."⁶⁶¹ Meltzer was moved by di Prima's complaint to look back at his own teaching and he offered the following assessment to his class:

The first year I took both semesters for an introductory overview of Kabbalah's history & concepts & while some female students questioned the patriarchal base & bias of Judaism, I didn't, & insisted that she was included in the Kabbalah—which she is but only set against her exclusion. The second year I compressed the 2-semester

Kabbalah course into one semester so that we could read Genesis for the 2nd semester & again (& again) His presence & Her absence was brought up & questioned & discussed, which led me to more studying, searching, re-searching. In any event, this is my 5th year here..., but once again—& it always occurs mid-spring semester—she emerges questioning all of it, which gets me questioning all of it & I go back to sources, to studying, questing, re-searching w/out a program or plan, strictly a chance operation, whatever book I find in the library or thrift-store announces itself, & invariably book leads to book, a name a title is referred to an adventuring contrary to my usual scholarly procedure.

Meltzer professes his deep gratitude “for Simone De Beauvoir’s *The 2nd Sex*, read at 16, never forgotten, despite whatever I could not expect to understand, I see how important her book was/is to my resistance to so much operative in our patriarchal mono-tone,” then turns to two “diverse/same texts: *The Mermaid & the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements & Human Malaise* by Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) and *The Moon & The Virgin: Reflections on the Archetypal Feminine* by Nor Hall (1980),” adding “Stein’s *Geographical History of Americans*” and “Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson*,” to the list of books he’d been recently reading:

Howe’s work was wonder-filled; her way of seeing & read & writing essential for/to my sense (& need). A discovery, her book the unfolding journey writ w/ wisdom & enthusiasm, too often absent. Like Stein, her book remains identifiable as hers alone, in the same way Dickinson’s work insists its self. Hall is a Jungian analyst & as I’ve mentioned before I distrust hierarchies (systems, theories) when/especially when/they get fixed & immutable. (Freud, whether or not you’re a believer, persisted questioning & re-thinking his theories to his death. Like all of us, when alert, we keep finding questions in answers and answers in questions. Not a circle like a dog chasing its tail. A spiral.)... 25 years ago, in the early 60’s, David the rational entered Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, & Reflections*; amazed, invigorated, &c, I quickly accumulated every available volume in the

Bollingen Jung project & read systematically & chronologically— starting w/ early papers on hysteria & hypnosis, psychological typing, into, for me, lush territory of *Symbols of Transformation & Alchemy & Psychology*, along the line reading whatever was available by “Jungians” like Gerhard Adler & Erich Neumann. Along the way I read Esther Harding’s *Women’s Mysteries* which made more immediate imprint on my quest than Jung. (As fascinating as Jung’s way of correspondences were to me, allowing me into a rich vocabulary, so much of his essential “theory”, anima, animus, quadernities, archetypes, seemed as impositions or positions capable of dis-allowing & possibly dis-possessing the adept’s psyche; it seemed binding & boundary-fixated like those marvelous alchemical illustrations or Kircher’s cosmic charts or Fludd’s all the way to our present spiral mandala imago of the DNA molecule.) Also I was becoming aware of Jung’s Christian bias reflected in his minimal attention to kabbalistic thought while linking abundant ore from other culture quarries. Jung & Harding led me to 2 similar/dis-similar in-spiritors: Jane Ellen Harrison, British classicist, & Gershom Scholem, German historian of the Jewish mystical tradition(s). Despite my assumptions, reservations, &c, Hall’s a lively writer & like the poet cares for each word, tries to see/know its history, what’s enfolded, inside. Yet Jungian mytho-romanticizing the feminine into 4 aspects didn’t un-question or re-distribute or re-place the unease created by Dinnerstein’s work.⁶⁶²

I quote at such length from Meltzer’s discussion because it exhibits what I take to be a characteristic willingness to carry out and exhibit the kind of tracing and interrogating of self, source, and lineage the faculty of the Poetics Program so impressed upon their students, not because it in anyway deflects di Prima’s criticism of the perhaps unwitting machismo of the program, a current many students also swam against. This is not to say that the environment of the Poetics Program was any more oppressive to women than the environment at any other institution of higher learning, or in the society more broadly—indeed, I would venture to guess,

from my admittedly distant vantage, that it was a good deal less oppressive—but it was easy to be a woman.

“I think it was unfortunate [that di Prima was the only woman on the core faculty],” Kerry Tepperman said: “It would have been better if there were more women in that program. I know some came later, but it was a lack. I’m not sure other people felt that way, but I did.”⁶⁶³ “It was a very male-oriented group, and it was hard for the ladies to even speak,”⁶⁶⁴ said Dawn-Michelle Baude, especially in Duncan’s classes. “Those classes of Robert’s were full of people who were just coming in from the community and sitting in, and people who were friends of his. I remember Ebbe Borregaard was there. A lot of outspoken young men were there. I know I sat as far away from everything as I possibly could,” said Mary Margaret Sloan: “I was just terribly shy. I felt like I didn’t know anything, like I was undereducated and hadn’t heard of this or that. I was really fighting to catch up.”⁶⁶⁵ As previously noted, Duncan was expected a great deal of his students, and could come down hard on them when it seemed they weren’t putting in the work he expected them to, but Aaron Shurin acknowledged that Duncan came down hard more often on women than on men in the program: “Part of it was misogyny, clearly, part of it was unconscious, because it got leveled at them in ways it didn’t get leveled at anybody else, but the context was a kind of weak effort,” as with Duncan’s ongoing spat with Bobbie Louise Hawkins. He recalled “a first year student named Debbie [Fass], who also got the shit from Duncan,”⁶⁶⁶ and Sarah

Menefee remembered “some younger women” who endured a seemingly disproportionate amount of Duncan’s wrath. Norma Cole said “I saw him be hard on Dawn Kolokithas [Dawn-Michelle Baude], at one of those Tuesday night gatherings. She was talking about HD, I think and she was saying a name of a person and he was correcting her and then she said it again the wrong way and he was mad.”⁶⁶⁷ Baude herself said, “Duncan was horrible, but also great, really great. I loved Duncan, but I hated Duncan.... He was probably one of the most important influences on my life, personally, and on my writing..., but he was vicious too, just vicious, particularly towards women.” Initially, she recalled, “Duncan seemed to really like me,” and when she decided to write her thesis on H.D., she said:

Duncan took a special interest in me, and I was allowed to go to Duncan’s house and type in his studio—because [H.D.’s] books were not available, I had to retype them..., so I would sit up, at the top floor of their house and I would be allowed in and out to go and do this, and talk to Duncan and run up to his little studio and type some H.D. and then leave. And Duncan was putting so much hope on me to be able to write this thesis, really a huge amount..., but the school was so poorly organized at that point, nobody said, “Do you have an outline?” There was zero structural help, and I had very little ability to write expository prose...at that point.... So I wrote the whole thing on H.D. all by myself, and it was completely unreadable, had no organization, and there was no way they could pass me.... It was so traumatic to realize that I had spent all this money, all this time, and I had failed. It was an epic fail for me personally, and I went off to Africa and walked through Africa for six months and came back and wrote a second thesis [on Jack Spicer]. That time I worked with Michael Palmer, and he said, “Do you have an outline?”

By then Duncan was ill and I couldn’t work with Duncan anymore anyway..., but when Duncan realized that I couldn’t write

the book that he wanted me to write, he turned against me and was very vicious. Publicly would say things if he saw me.⁶⁶⁸

At the same time, Grundberg recalled that the people in the program who seemed to have the most open relationships with Duncan happened to be women like Susan Thackrey and Julia Connor, though they were “older than most of the rest of us and completely unintimidated, unafraid of Robert. They could just talk to each other. The rest of us it was like, maybe every hour or so I’ll insert a sentence in there.”⁶⁶⁹ Norma Cole said that when she first began auditing Duncan’s classes, “I was a really, really shy person.... I was too shy to bring any writing for a long time,” much less speak up in class, but “there was a freewheeling attitude, so I could bring in a little bit of clay or painting or drawing and I could fit in that way,” and soon her confidence and familiarity grew. Mary Margaret Sloan, too, quickly overcame her shyness and “for some reason...was just never afraid of him,” she said:

I know a lot of people were, women in particular, but I just felt a kind of deep trust in his poetics, that his entire being, his personality, his character were one with the poetics. And so I felt very comfortable with him in spite of being so shy. I just barely talked to him initially. We had to give these little presentations. Your turn would come up and you’d have to give it, and I remember asking him—I was supposed to give a talk on Williams and the variable foot, and I remember saying, “But what *is* the variable foot? *Is* there a mathematical system? *Is* there?” And he looked at me and said, “Well...,” he talked for 15 minutes, and then I said, “I know, but *is* there, really? A variable foot?” He was just great. We just kept talking, and I felt comfortable insisting that this was metaphorical and not mathematical.⁶⁷⁰

All this, in the end, only goes to show what everyone knows, but too often refuse to acknowledge, that, as Sarah Menefee said, succinctly, “he was a human being,” as are we all.

Duncan had been dealing with the effects of high blood pressure for some time, and had been intermittently fatigued, muddled, and ill since his stay at Bard, but he’d continued a rather frenetic schedule, as Lisa Jarnot’s exhaustive and exhausting itinerary shows, until March 1984 when he suffered what was originally diagnosed as heart failure while in Baton Rouge for a conference at Louisiana State University. When he returned to San Francisco, further tests led to a diagnosis of “end stage kidney failure secondary to an unusual type of kidney disease called kappa chain deposition.” After a few weeks of hemodialysis, he would undergo the necessary surgeries to prepare him for chronic (or continuous) ambulatory peritoneal dialysis (CAPD), which required Duncan to perform the following procedure, as Jarnot describes it: “Waste fluids, essentially urine, were emptied into one bag, and another bag of dialysis fluid was warmed in a microwave oven and then introduced into Duncan’s stomach cavity through the surgical aperture in his abdomen.” It was a thirty-minute process, and had to be done four times a day, but Duncan soon incorporated it unabashedly into his routine and as Meltzer recalled:

came right back to teaching [with his] mind just whizzing away,
leaving so many of us intrigued, but in the dust, you know.... Once a

week [during] Basic Elements of Poetry...Robert would be there and he had this thing, and he'd unplug, pull this thing out, plop it on the table and reach over, plug in another one, and never missed a beat. And initially so many of the students we're just, you know, aghast—but like I always say, he taught us how to live and he taught us how to die and he went out in a blaze of Duncan-esque glory.⁶⁷¹

Dan Blue recognized that Duncan “had a performer’s eye for a good prop.... He sensed the theatrical possibilities and milked them for all they were worth, opening his lower shirt and undoing his belt with a sly portentousness that always gave us pause. He made it into a strip show, and when one day he stood up and his pants fell off, I couldn’t tell if it was a mortifying accident or theatrical coup.” Indeed, Blue’s description here recalls Grundberg’s recollection of Duncan’s performance of *Faust Foutu* two years earlier to inaugurate Shurin’s and Strauss’s “Works and Words” series at 544 Natoma: “As part of the performance of the poem it involves him taking off all of his clothing while he is reading, and he was in his 60s at the time, and it was this mind-boggling moment of vulnerability and exposure and in the text as he’s reading while he’s stark naked, saying, ‘This is me! This is me!’ and he kept reading and gradually putting his clothes back on until he was his usual impeccable self.”⁶⁷² As Susan Thackrey said

fear, failure, aging, and death...were basic elements that Robert brought with an awesome aplomb into his later poetics and into the poetics of his instruction.... Robert put everything into his teaching and so he put into it his own aging and dying.... True to his poetics, Robert performed his dialysis in the halftime break of his classes, without a blush, and often without a break in his own words.⁶⁷³

For “at least a year and a half,” after beginning dialysis, McNaughton recalled, “he was extraordinary.... He would do it during a class break at the table and so forth, and everybody would take a break while he did it. It wasn’t like everybody had to leave the room or anything. He was extraordinary. He was just great about it. Boom. Do it.”⁶⁷⁴ Several others I spoke to made similarly admiring, somewhat awed remarks. The impact of witnessing Duncan’s approach to his treatment was clearly significant, but no doubt more significant was the impact of witnessing Duncan’s condition deteriorate as it did over the next few years. As I’ve researched and written of this book, what has stood out perhaps most remarkably about the Poetics Program in the early and middle 1980s was the inextricability of the personal experiences and the poetical concerns of so many of those involved—a pervasiveness and inclusiveness highlighted as much or more by Duncan’s illness as anything else I’ve discussed. Michael Palmer noted:

It inspired people, because through this illness he struggled..., but...he didn’t have any bodily shame, so to speak, about exposing the process, or if shame isn’t the right word, hesitation, anyway. It showed some degree of commitment he had to continuing on, and of course what came into play as well was the question of once again a bodily poetics and what happens when the body is ill..., the relationship of illness to the proprioceptive body....

It did affect people in the program [poetically] and of course he was one of our closest friends and so it affected us personally, in a visceral way, and we were all taking care of Robert and to some degree Jess, at that time, Norma and myself and others, and so it had an impact on our daily lives and also the atmosphere of the program.... the emotional dynamic was intricate.⁶⁷⁵

On the one hand, Duncan had always been a bit “erratically authoritarian at times,” Palmer said, and he could “acquire a certain animus for people that was a little poisonous, and as he became more toxic, so to speak, as the toxins did their work, that became more extreme over time, including with his personal circle.” Palmer added that “at times people were subject to a kind of rage that came from the pressure in his blood and the toxins in his blood and he would think that, like Denise, they had insulted the sacred poetics. Betrayals. It’s not always very comprehensible.” Indeed, within the New College community and outside of it, tales of seemingly petty, if not arbitrary excommunications abound, as often as not with acknowledgement of easy reconciliations appended. I’ve no interest in relating these, for on the other hand, and at the same time, the circle of Poetics students and faculty already welcome in Duncan’s household became even more intimate, with Palmer and his wife Cathy Simon, joining Mary Margaret Sloan and her husband Larry Casalino, Norma Cole, Susan Thackrey, and others from outside the New College community banding together to form a “household support network”⁶⁷⁶ for Duncan and Jess, with countless others lending a hand. “Everybody was in a tizzy and...would...be swerving...between feeling like they wanted to...take care of [Duncan and Jess] and [feeling] ‘What can I do? What can I do?’”⁶⁷⁷ said Sloan. Curiously, as open and matter-of-fact as Duncan was about his treatments in the classroom, according to Cole (per Jarnot):

At home, he kept the dialysis paraphernalia out of his line of vision, moving it to the basement landing at the back of the house and completing the exchange on the unheated stairwell looking out into the garden. When Cole carried the equipment upstairs and left it outside the bedroom door, Duncan protested, and in a “grotesquely comic” gesture, dragged it back downstairs, keeping it there until he was too ill to navigate the house’s steps.⁶⁷⁸

The anecdote emphasizes the degree to which Duncan and Jess had conceived of their home as an altar built and tended to that “sacred poetics” Palmer mentions, an imaginal island in the material storm of the everyday. In comparison to the simultaneously celestial and chthonic essence of the poem and the home, his teaching was a decidedly terrestrial activity, but one which endeavored to realize, to make real, the interpenetrability of those three planes. In the Poetics Program, as Susan Thackrey put it:

He performed his body along with his poetics until a dangerous peritonitis invaded. (No classroom is and certainly no New College classroom was hygienically sterile as an environment.) Then he returned weakened and closer to his own death and went on teaching until one day at midmorning break he stopped and his public poetics of instruction stopped also.

But even hospitalized for serious illness at that point, in the imagination of fever he found the hospital to be a university and talked about the problems he saw his students encountering in their writing and in his instruction.... In his final illness, Robert said two things that stayed with me. He said, “It doesn’t seem to me to be a matter of life and death.” And he said, “Now I am the student and not the teacher.”⁶⁷⁹

Nothing that happened in and around the Poetics Program can be isolated from anything else that happened in and around the city, the state, etc. There is no Ivory

Tower. Though it is impossible to address the entire context, it cannot be forgotten that Duncan's illness did not happen in a vacuum, but against the increasingly apocalyptic backdrop of the AIDS crisis.

Melter recalled the shocking turn and acceleration of the crisis:

Gay liberation was in full swing, and the Castro was this wild utopia and then people started getting sick.... All of a sudden, within six months or so, the sun had set on all of that. Something unknown, unspeakable. Not enough information. Extreme death. Especially at the height of this great moment of exaltation and historic accomplishment as if—well then of course these rabid Christians would come to town. It affected much of what is reflected in a lot of work at the time. There were all these specifically gay magazines and journals, too. And it was the unknowability that was almost as lethal as the disease itself.⁶⁸⁰

It was in June 1981 that the Center for Disease Control issued its first report on the as-yet unnamed illness. In the next six months, after Los Angeles Times and San Francisco Chronicle coverage, 270 cases would be reported, and 121 people would die. In January 1982, the first AIDS clinic was established in San Francisco, and in April Congress held its first hearings on the epidemic. In July 1983 San Francisco General Hospital opened the first dedicated AIDS ward, which was filled almost instantly. In October 1984, San Francisco shuttered all its bath-houses in a controversial effort to stem the spread of the disease through the Gay community. One year later, in September 1985, President Ronald Reagan finally acknowledged the epidemic in public for the first time, though it was only in 1987 that the administration seemed to acknowledge the severity of the crisis and commit

substantial resources toward its amelioration. No one at New College, and certainly no one in the Poetics Program, was unaffected. Though to my knowledge no students or faculty contracted the disease themselves, each and every one of them had to have known someone who did, as engaged as all were in the various art scenes so ravaged by it. Meltzer recalled that the “treasurer at New College, a very sweet guy was stricken by it and we watched, and right across the street from us in that other mortuary that had been turned into a coffee place that we used to use as a performance space and gallery, people started getting sick.... It was a crisis, not only medically, but socially—and existentially for the gay community.”⁶⁸¹ He likened it to “the Cold War, the Red Scare, [in the way they] effected various generations of people in the United States, which then effected” their work, too; and there would develop a particular “literature in that historical moment,”⁶⁸² with one of its central works, *Unbound: A Book of AIDS*, written by Poetics alumnus Aaron Shurin over the course of several years, 1988-1996. In the immediacy of it, however, the pall cast over the Poetics Program by the AIDS crisis and Duncan’s illness was darkened all the more by the failing health of di Prima and Meltzer. As McNaughton recalled,

It was [also] during the last 2-3 years of the thing that David’s health went south. It was like overnight almost it seemed. We spent a lot of time together. I was living in Berkeley, he was living in Richmond. We would go back together, go to the bars, drink, talk, fool around and so forth. I had a car. But the onset of the arthritis, which was a byproduct of the hemochromatosis, etc., in retrospect it seemed like overnight he was in pain, walking, standing, the works. And Diane was having trouble. Back trouble, which she continued to have a lot of, a lot of pain.⁶⁸³

In a letter to Peter O'Leary, whose book *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness* opens with a three-page glimpse of the New College Poetics Program, Michael Palmer wrote that these various maladies "seemed to me part of the atmosphere of the place..., [and] I made a very distinct effort to monitor the emotional state of the program's students in the aftermath, as I think most of us did," noting "the constantly high emotional pitch of that student body, which left many of them quite vulnerable."⁶⁸⁴ We have seen how many of the first cohort of students themselves fell ill in various ways, and as the program continued, Palmer wrote, "there was much discussion that perhaps students were coming under too much pressure to perform in some unspecifiable way, that perhaps the 'mystique' of the Poetics Program had gotten a bit heavy."⁶⁸⁵ Indeed, the question of the connection between the intensity of the program's demands on both students and faculty and the illnesses many suffered would arise again and again as the program lurched toward its ultimate dissolution.

There was much at play as the program entered what I have come to see as its second phase, marked as much by the sudden deterioration of Duncan's health as by the change in structure of Basic Elements and the poets-in-residence series, and by the curtailment of the academic year from three terms down to two. There would be no more summer session of the New College Poetics Program. Instead, the 1983-1984 catalogue simply states that "graduate and undergraduate tutorials with the core

faculty may be arranged.... Topics will vary according to mutual interest." Exactly why the New College summer session was curtailed is unclear, but it seems likely, at least in part, to have been on account of a desire among the faculty for greater flexibility to accommodate other activities in their own schedules. In July 1984, Diane di Prima returned to Naropa to teach at the Summer Writing Institute of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, which she'd co-founded a decade before. While there, she met with Randy Roark, representing the Kerouac school, as well as dean Judith Lief and Frances Harwood, "who has some title like 'Head of Academic Standards,' but is additionally a very intelligent and forceful woman," as di Prima wrote to Louis Patler, to discuss "possibilities for combining NCOG and Naropa Institute Poetics Programs." At the time, Naropa only offered "a BA 2 year program in Poetics w/ 2 yrs previous work @ another college" and "a 2-year certificate program," while New College offered "a BA in Humanities w/ an emphasis in Poetics, a BA/MA combined program..., [and] an MA in Poetics.... The idea wd be to give students an opportunity to study @ both institutions while working toward any of the above." Although "the poetry program looks unusually weak in the coming 2 yrs..., in the long run," di Prima noted, "I don't see how we can all do anything *but* benefit: the programs *are* 'complementary' —in the sense that we offer no writing courses; + that we cover 2 of the main aspects of the poetry outlook of 2nd half 20th Century between us—+ we both need students. People who are 'torn' [between] the 2 programs (I have met several here) *might* wind up doing neither—in this way they

can do both.”⁶⁸⁶ As New College Poetics would have no more summer session, an sort of exchange with, or residency at Naropa for the summer seemed an excellent alternative. These possibilities were explored in some depth, but ultimately the logistics of how to incorporate the two programs couldn’t be worked out, and Naropa would eventually offer its own MFA in Writing & Poetics, beginning in Summer 1988, one year after the collapse of the original incarnation of the New College Poetics Program.

III. Two Steps from Babel

When Robert Duncan returned to the New College classroom after adjusting to his dialysis routine in fall 1984, he offered a course on Linguistic Approaches to Poetics, “an introduction to Saussurean problems: metaphor, metonymy, person, semiotic analysis,” which richly paralleled David Meltzer’s “survey course on language mysticism and the occultic use of letter and word” entitled Sound, Letter, Word, Name, as well as that term’s collective Basic Elements course, the chronology of lectures for which was “Sound: Phoneme: Silence,” by Michael Palmer; “Letter,” by Diane di Prima; “Number,” by Duncan McNaughton; “Word,” by Robert Duncan; “Rhythm,” by David Meltzer; and finally “Line,” by Louis Patler. In the spring, the Basic Elements sequence would be “Speaking,” Patler; “Writing,” Duncan; “Reading,” Palmer; “Source(s),” McNaughton; “Memory,” di Prima; “Book,” Meltzer; and Meltzer would reprise his *Genesis* course from the previous spring, but otherwise, “it was all poetry for a change,” as “someone wrote” to an absent Judith Roche.⁶⁸⁷ Of course, I suppose it must be said that *Genesis* is a poem, too, if perhaps a poem of a different order and of a different age.

The residency program focused on the Troubadours in the fall, the course co-directed by Duncan and McNaughton, with lectures by George Economou, Magda Bogin, and Carl Grundberg, who just that spring, some six month previous, had

completed his thesis, *La Bella Semblansa: Bernart de Ventadorn and the Troubadour Moment*, to become the second official graduate of the Poetics Program, a full two years since Shurin had been awarded the first degree. Grundberg's talks—"Texts and their Milieu: What the Texts Reveal," "Trobar Clus and Trobar Leu: Troubadour Poetics in their Songs," and "Devotion and Ritual in the Troubadour Love Code"—were largely drawn from that work, which had gained a great deal of momentum from a previous, stand-alone lecture he'd given on the topic at New College as he concluded his coursework in spring 1982. George Economou had served as the "outside" reader on Grundberg's thesis committee and, in 1978, edited and written an introduction for the much expanded edition of what in 1953 had been the first publication of Robert Creeley's *The Divers Press*, in Mallorca, *Proensa: An Anthology of Troubadour Poetry*, selected and translated by Paul Blackburn. Just beginning his tenure at the University of Oklahoma after two decades teaching at Brooklyn Center of Long Island University, George Economou gave talks on "Marcabru," "Dante and the Trobadors," and "Theory and Practice of Translation of the Trobadors." Bogin, too, gave a talk on "Issues in the Translation of Medieval Poetry," as well as "Writing *After* the Troubadours" and "The Women Troubadours," drawing on her groundbreaking book of that title published in 1976, two years before Economou's edition of *Proensa*, which, incidentally, was all-male.

In the spring the focus of the residency sequence again took a big temporal leap, this time from the early modern period to the early modernist period, to look at

Gertrude Stein. The course was co-directed by Diane di Prima and Michael Palmer, with guest lectures by Judy Grahn, Lyn Hejinian, and Philip Whalen. An intimate reader of Stein since his undergraduate days at Reed College, when his roommate and dear friend Lew Welch wrote his thesis on her work, Whalen also had been McNaughton's initial choice to round out the trio, with Duncan and di Prima, of core faculty for the Poetics Program, so expectations no doubt ran high for his appearance. However, I've been unable to track down tapes or elicit many memories of these talks—"Works and Life of Gertrude Stein," "Gertrude Stein and the Representation of Women in American Fiction," and "Gertrude Stein's Theories of Composition, with Animadversions upon Stein as Art Collector"—except for McNaughton's disappointedly curt description of them as "Zen Sloth."⁶⁸⁸ If Whalen's efforts were underwhelming, Judy Grahn and Lyn Hejinian both rose to the occasion. Grahn's talks—"The There That Was and Wasn't There," "Calling Without Naming," and "MephistopheStein"—would form the basis of her 1990 book *Really Reading Gertrude Stein: A Selected Anthology with essays*. Drawing on work she'd begun during a residency at 80 Langton Street four years prior, Hejinian gave talks under the titles "Gertrude Stein and Realism" and "Grammar and Landscape" that would be published as "Two Stein Talks" the following year in Leland Hickman's *Temblor* magazine and later form one of the cornerstones of Hejinian's essay collection, *The Language of Inquiry*. Her third talk, "Language and 'Paradise,'" was reprised three months later at the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver and

published in *Line* magazine, and again in *The Language of Inquiry*, presumably in the form given at the Kootenay School, without any mention of Stein, of which there had not been a great deal in the New College presentation anyway.

Alongside the residency series, Louis Patler continued to use his own courses as a forum for self-edification in Fundamental Texts in Poetics, in the fall, “reading works in pairs, chosen for obvious reasons of sympathy and/or antagonism between them[, with] a ‘modern’ work...juxtaposed upon each twosome. For example: Shelley / Peacock / Olson; Sidney / Scalinger / Spicer; Aristotle / Longinus / Williams.” In the spring, he taught Poetics in Correspondence, “an unencumbered reading of person to person correspondence of espoused and/or encrypted poetics,” as he put it in his course description: “Letters as publications, questions of reading, the emergence of poems during letter writing, and issues of discourse and ‘public address’ will, no doubt, arise.” Readings included Spenser’s famed letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, selections from the correspondence of Coleridge and of Keats, letters from Whitman to Emerson, Hart Crane to Harriet Monroe, Williams to Creeley, Creeley to Olson, Olson to Jack Clarke and John Wieners, Wieners to Duncan, and more. Also in the spring, Robert Duncan taught on the Poetics of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, focusing largely on those poets’ long works, *The Cantos* and *Paterson*. Meanwhile, di Prima and McNaughton each taught year-long courses focusing on the poets of the English Romantic movement.

The previous spring, coincident with Robert Duncan (along with his longtime—and for some time estranged—friend, Denise Levertov) being given the Shelley Memorial Award by the Poetry Society of America, the New College poets-in-residence were to address themselves to the work of Percy Bysshe. Names floated for the following semester's course on Shelley, which would be supervised by Michael Palmer, included Jackson Mac Low, Amiri Baraka, Robert Creeley, Gregory Corso, Clark Coolidge, and British poet Kathleen Raine, whose two-volume critical magnum opus, *Blake and Tradition*, and other work on Blake, W. B. Yeats, and visionary poetics were key texts for Duncan, di Prima, and McNaughton, and much admired by Meltzer as well. Unfortunately, the paltry honorarium wasn't enough to draw the august Raine from England, but her younger countryman, the poet Lee Harwood, did come across the pond in March to give talks on "The Sound of Shelley and His Contemporaries," "Shelley and the Radical Tradition of the 17th and 18th Centuries," and "Shelley: The Question of Poetry and Politics." The previous month, Michael McClure had come all the way across the bay to present "Shelley Speaking," "Life's Triumph," and "Romantic Exercises." The third set of lectures, in April and May, was given not by a visiting poet at all, but by the Poetics Program's own core faculty member Diane di Prima. Shelley being perhaps the second poet, after Keats, that di Prima discovered in her early teenage years, the topic was close to her heart, she began with a brief "Personal View" before proceeding with her three talks on "Shelley and Neo-Platonism," "Shelley and Dante," and "Shelley and 19th Century

Anarchism." Carrying on from these spring 1984 lectures, di Prima turned more broadly to the Poetics of the Romantic Movement, i.e. "the revolution proposed and set in motion by [Wordsworth and Coleridge's] *Lyrical Ballads*, and the historical and philosophical background of same." Examining "letters, notebooks, and essays, as well as the poetry" of these two poets along with "the early Byron" in the fall of 1984, and in the spring of 1985, continuing with later Byron and turning to Shelley's "'Defence of Poetry' and the letters of Keats [as] complimentary statements of the poetics of the second generation Romantics," students in di Prima's course undertook "an inquiry into influences on these poets, the implications of their poetics and a reading of their major works."⁶⁸⁹

McNaughton for his part began what was originally intended as a complementary two-semester sequence on the work of William Blake, "his written opus; at least a selection of his engravings; his letters; and the Gilchrist biography. The intent of this course will be a scrupulous reading of the Blake opus for its direct meaning." As he put it in his course description, though either of the semesters could be taken alone, "the virtue of this course will effectively depend upon the depth and exhaustion of a full year's study."⁶⁹⁰ This proved something of an understatement, however, as the planned two-semester course of study turned into a *two-year* sequence. The subsequent course description was written with marked equivocation:

This year's study will depend for its content on the material read during 1984-85. It is likely that Fall 1985 will center on *Milton*, with review of the previous semester's work (including *Vala/Four Zoas*). [Spring 1986 will center on Jerusalem.] But these subjects are tentative. We will in other words have to stay with individual works until we feel ready to move ahead; it is impossible in this study to forecast a working schedule. The aim of this protracted study of William Blake's work is to reach at least an elementary grasp of his meanings and their situation in the prospect of contemporary poetics.⁶⁹¹

A fifth semester, on the Shorter Works of William Blake, was slated for the fall of 1986, but by then McNaughton would no longer be a part of the New College faculty. The circumstances of his departure will be addressed shortly.

In the meanwhile, however, as McNaughton continued with the second year of Blake, in fall 1985 and spring 1986, di Prima returned to her two-semester sequence of Hidden Religions, and Louis Patler embarked on his own extended study, teaching a course on the Poetics of Charles Olson: *Call Me Ishmael* through the Black Mountain Era in the fall and the Later Years in the spring. It was also something of an extended celebration of what would have been the poet's 75th year, as in addition to reading from a wide range of Olson's then-available works, students also listened to tapes and records and watched film of his readings and talks, and were treated to several guest appearances by poets in the Olson community, including of course Robert Duncan. David Meltzer again tweaked his perspective on his ongoing field of attention, focusing on "the function and role of letter, word and text within the classical and contemporary Kabbalistic tradition. Beginning with the varied aspects

attributed to the Hebrew alphabet and concluding with diverse contemporaries Carlo Suares and Edmond Jabès..., the historical and metaphorical relationship with Word, the Book, and the mystical significance of writing [were] explored." Scholem again provided a core analytical text, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, while students read the 13th-century writings of Abulafia, in the edition published under Meltzer's Tree imprint a decade earlier, *The Path of Names*, and a critical edition of the *Sefer Yetzirah* recently translated and annotated by New College Poetics student Scott Thompson, along with work by contemporary mystical scholar and core *Tree* contributor Suares and poet Jabès, whose seven-volume *Book of Questions* had recently seen its last book brought into print, in English, from Wesleyan. In the spring, Meltzer would shift again and offer a course on The Prophets and "the prophetic tradition, its relationship to the history and mystery of poetry, along with an alternative reading of some key Old Testament prophetic books." The core text was, of course, The Old Testament, in any translation, though, as Meltzer noted, "the King James is said to sing the best song to Western ears."⁶⁹²

Michael Palmer offered a course under the title "The Subject and the Subject" on "person and ideologies of the personal in American poetry since approximately 1950." As one might imagine from such a broad description, "a wide range of writing [would] be studied, including very recent work," alongside "parallel readings in [Walter] Benjamin, [Roman] Jakobson, [Emile] Benveniste, et al." Both of Palmer's "subjects" interfaced with Duncan's proposed course for the term on the

“Eternal Persons of the Poem,” a sort of revisiting and revising of the first year course, “The Nature of Persons as Proposed in Poetry.” As Palmer said:

We were always thinking about subjectivity..., which was preoccupying in many ways, because the canonical verse at the time—and maybe it still is in its own way—was the confessional memoiristic narrative.... That’s the magazine verse model.... We were interested in something that was much more transgressive, and it wasn’t a matter of the death of the subject or anything like that. We understood that in both senses the subject survives its death. Maybe it’s an afterlife of the subject. But more a sense of how does that subject in all its multiplicity survive? To some degree a Borgesian question, but [we were concerned with] a notion of the subject that wasn’t simply part of bourgeois Freudian psychology, that stale model. And that was something of course that radical feminism was thinking through in its own way, too. It wasn’t just a question of the poets, and it’s not a question you resolve in your life. You just keep going, working things out. What is the voice of the page? As distinct from the creative writing cliché of “finding my voice.”

Robert of course [was interested in] the mythic dimension that he carries on in relation to his own studies and spiritualism and so on and his background in that, H.D.’s sense of personae, mythic personae, doubles. I thought through it in a rather different way, in relation to questions of voice and address that were sympathetic to Robert, but not the same. I was leery of mythopoetics, because Modernism had ground it up into little pieces, and I felt there was a certain degree of that carried over into Black Mountain, too, some of Black Mountain, not all of Black Mountain, obviously. It’s not that I’m not fascinated by myth and I don’t feel aspects of myth welling up in daily life all the time in a way, but that’s quite a different proposition....⁶⁹³

Duncan was also slated to co-direct, with di Prima, that term’s Visiting Poets course, but unfortunately became “too ill to continue beyond the first session, troubled again by blood pressure fluctuations that blurred his concentration and led to blackouts.”⁶⁹⁴ According to Aaron Shurin, “unbelievably they asked me to step in

[for the Dickinson course], and foolishly I said yes,"⁶⁹⁵ though Todd Baron felt him a worthy stand-in: "Aaron was an amazing teacher—a 'little' Robert is you will."⁶⁹⁶ The triumvirate of visiting poets were Beverly Dahlen, Robert Creeley, and Susan Howe, invited to offer their respective considerations of aspect of the work and person of Emily Dickinson.

Born forty years, almost to the day, after Dickinson's death, Creeley had been raised a mere seventy miles from Dickinson's hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts, and his work is deeply inflected by a generally shared regional experience and more directly influenced by the former poet's own work (both her poetry and her letters), and yet, despite his voluminous writings about his peers and predecessors, Creeley wrote nothing of substance about Dickinson, so the three talks with which he opened the series in September 1985 stand as his sole testament to this key figure. In the first, entitled "The Girl Next Door," Creeley sought to complicate the common depiction of Dickinson as a reclusive and overly sensitive eccentric by reading "the letters as an act of writing of equal distinction as the poems themselves" and airing selections from both against several reductive biographies, thereby painting a far more complex image of the person and poet. Here and in the subsequent talks, "Going Places" and "Inside Outside" Creeley emphasizes her actual engagements with her contemporary world, and likens her sculpted poetical self to his own and his comrade Charles Olson's, in a way that also could well describe their Black Mountain collaborator and New College empresario Robert Duncan's as well, and

likens Dickinson's correspondence with Higginson to his own with Olson, offering a glimpse of how a poetics might come about out of conversation. Casual, but hardly lackadaisical, Creeley also offers a deep dive on Dickinson's use of the word "circumference," performing his investigation more or less in real time, and in conversation with his audience. The audio of these talks is readily available online and well worth listening to.⁶⁹⁷ As Jonathan Creasy notes:

Though some of his engagements with Dickinson's work miss the mark (especially when he talks off-the-cuff or gives quick examples), Creeley never claims to be making exact critical judgments. His lectures, he says, are "no scholarly measure." He admits the poetry's significant difficulty, particularly in forming a coherent critical stance toward its demands. Creeley also uses his reflections on Dickinson to clarify his primary position as poet, not critic. In his Dickinson lectures—as, arguably, with his reading of Williams and Olson—Creeley is interested in what seems relevant *now*, in his moment. In effect, he searches for the common ground between Dickinson, himself and the poets in his audience. He is not attempting scholarship, but an enactment of his own, a critical and creative interaction that illuminates his own work as much as it does Dickinson's.⁶⁹⁸

Thus Creeley's talks were much in keeping with the modus operandi of the Poetics Program, and the next poet-in-residence, acknowledging that "Robert Creeley's essays on American writing have been a model for me,"⁶⁹⁹ followed suit, though perhaps with a somewhat sharper scholarly, while simultaneously more impassioned bent.

While hardly her first rodeo—Susan Howe had already published several volumes of poems, including the American Book Award-winning *The Liberties*

(1980), and given talks in various venues—the occasion to speak at New College proved seminal to many of her future endeavors. In a 2011 interview, she listed New College along with Black Mountain College and the St. Mark’s Poetry Project, as sources of “work that inspired me” and places that “seemed open to collaboration between disciplines, to taking risks and testing limits,”⁷⁰⁰ and three years after her New College appearance, she would accept her first formal academic affiliation at SUNY Buffalo, where, three years later, with Creeley, Charles Bernstein, Raymond Federman, and Dennis Tedlock, she would establish a graduate Poetics Program, drawing on those former places and the Al Cook and Olson/Creeley lineage of that school.

When Susan Howe came to New College in the fall of 1985, *My Emily Dickinson* was hot off the press, so it formed the basis of her first October talk, which was initially advertised under the same title, but presented as “I Am One Thing and My Writings Are Another.” That book stands, as I have suggested, as an example par excellence of the kind of work encouraged in the Poetics Program. As Michael Palmer, who published a piece of the work in *Code of Signals* two years earlier, wrote: “*My Emily Dickinson*... bears much the same relationship to a consciousness of American language and speech as Williams’ *In the American Grain* did in its own time.... It is at once a deeply insightful feminist document and a reaction against superficial feminist readings of Dickinson’s work.”⁷⁰¹ In it, she tracks Dickinson’s poetical, intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and political lineage, from her engagement

with the Civil War and the work of contemporaries like George Eliot, Emily Brontë, and Robert Browning back through the likes of Shelley and Shakespeare, as well as the 18th-Century Calvinist Jonathan Edwards, his Puritan forebearers, and the captivity narratives so popular in the late 17th-Century colonies, including most importantly that of Mary Rowlandson.

This last work became the focus of her second talk, advertised as “The Founders Dream,” but presented as “Taking Captivity Captive,” which she would expand and publish in *Temblor* 2, and then again in her own book of essays, *The Birth-mark* (1993), as “The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson.” Her third talk, advertised as “Of Imaginative Penetration,” but presented as “Women and Their Effect in the Distance,” under which title it would be published the following year in *Ironwood* 28 (fall 1986), an issue titled, “Listening for the Invisible,” half of which is dedicated to Dickinson, the other half to Jack Spicer. Along with a piece on Dickinson by New College faculty member and brief Poetics Program–affiliate Lynn Luria-Suckenick, *Ironwood* 28 also features a transcription of Creeley’s first New College talk, “The Girl Next Door,” as well as “A Reading: Emily Dickinson: Powers of Horror,” a version of the first two talks given in November by Beverly Dahlen, who thanked Susan Howe for her “wonderfully speculative” work, citing it as “exemplary in the sense that her reading of Dickinson seemed to be an open-ended quest rather than a set of finished and reductive conclusions,”⁷⁰² just as Howe had written Robert Duncan: “This is for me why your H.D. Book is such an inspiration. You follow trails

and drop them and pick them up again and search yourself and use H.D. as a path into what is unknown and *unspoken*, what will always be beginning.”⁷⁰³

I borrow this quotation from Stephen Collis, who cites it in *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism*, a work that has been central to my attempts to define a predominate *poetics* of the New College Poetics Program, which wanted so fundamentally to resist any singular definition. The term “anarcho-scholasticism,” which Collis coins “to name a presiding ethos, a peculiar *merging* of concerns in...critical, or better, scholarly writings by poets – poets’ attempts to write their responses to other poets,” seems more apropos than any other term I’ve encountered or come up with on my own, and I found this description of such works particularly apt: “They are Janus-faced works – part exegesis, part original expression – ‘creative’ in their own right..., [with] their creativity...often located in the collagist’s eye for the found object and critical juxtaposition.”⁷⁰⁴ Both the idea and activity of collage are central to understanding Howe’s work. Many of her poems are comprised of rotated and overprinted lines—about which Collis writes, “emblematical inlaying is indistinguishable from sometimes confusing overlaying (which is, indeed, on top of which—which text is ‘upside down,’ which ‘right-side up?’).”⁷⁰⁵—while many of her essays are largely structured by juxtapositions of quotes from other sources, and the manuscripts of her New College talks reveal just how central the practice was to their development. Each sheet is layered with several pastings of typewritten passages, both quotes from others and her own comments,

all amended and marked up elaborately with blue, red, and black pen, replete with oratorical notes-to-self—for example, “Don’t rush”; “Don’t tense up”; “Quiet / Don’t get nasal”; “Ease / let words carry”; “Triumphant.”⁷⁰⁶ They’re quite lovely to see and to hold, and remind me as much visually of Jess’s “Narkissos” as they do conceptually of Duncan’s “grand collage.” Collis sums up the fundamental principle of collage, poetic or otherwise, when he writes, “A poet must make her own world no matter rights or rules: non-connection is distinct connection, if she wills it so,”⁷⁰⁷ noting elsewhere that “the eternal regress of the citational economy [in Howe’s work] eradicates any sense of authority, ownership, or ‘intellectual property.’”⁷⁰⁸

Howe’s ‘mind,’ in her ‘Bibliography,’ enters into a weave composed of a host of competing voices. If her ‘set of strings’ (the givens of source and history) compose a music, it is a ‘rough music’ of the sort E.P. Thompson describes as ‘a ritualized expression of hostility’ employed against those offending the common custom—the intent being to thwart externally imposed authority. Ariadne does not lead Theseus to the outside of mythic victory and spoils. Here they are kept in the emblematical tangle. Narrative untangles where poetry is the tangle. This is the difference of *poetic* history.⁷⁰⁹

Indeed, this is the difference, as I see it, of the Poetics Program’s demand, that its students contend with the echoes of history in their own present, eradicating authority and willing those connections that authority might preclude or proscribe.

It is hard for me to imagine a more exemplary poet the Howe to have been in residence during these years of the program, but Beverly Dahlen was very much on par. Her talks on Dickinson at New College in November 1985 were a part of an

ongoing project, *A Reading*, begun in June 1978, which she described as “an open-ended work...based to some extent on the Freudian principle of free association. I thought of it as an ‘interminable analysis,’ [though] perhaps it is less analytic and more free with all the difficulties that freedom implies. I was curious about evading the ‘editor’ as I worked and was interested in revealing facets of the ego of the ‘writer.’ As a *reading* it was meant to address language, the language of the works one read as well as one’s own language.”⁷¹⁰ Indeed, “A Reading: Emily Dickinson: Powers of Horror” approaches Dickinson both directly and through Nicolas Abraham, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva (from whose book, *The Power of Horror*, the final third of Dahlen’s title is borrowed), but rather than reading Dickinson’s work psychoanalytically, Dahlen reads that work as an actual contribution to psychoanalytic theory, *avant la lettre*, by way of which she wrestles with writing, thinking, and being a woman in the world.

Comprised of a series of entries of variable length, dated from March 9, 1985 through August 17, 1985, Dahlen’s Dickinson reading is serial, both in the commonly understood sense of that word as being in a “series” and in Duncan’s slant definition of it as “serious, meaning it follows through and has consequences.” She vacillated quite fluidly between well-researched critical reasoning, inspired poetic passages, and fragmental entries, including a letter addressed to “Rachel” (Blau DuPlessis) in which Dahlen confesses her struggles with the terms and intensities of her own engagement with Dickinson: “Here I would like to be able to write in a straight line;

I envy (deliberately, in the Freudian sense) that ability, and distrust the deviousness of women. Do I echo Riding? very well. I distrust it. Reasons for my reiterated: I would not have been a poet."⁷¹¹ But poet she is, and it is as poet first and foremost that she engages Dickinson, and it was as poet first and foremost that she presented her engagement to the sympathetic audience at New College. Like Howe, Dahlen traced Dickinson back to a Puritan affinity for the antinomian:

To put it simply, the Anglicans claimed that the founding authority of the church rested in the Scriptures as interpreted by reason; the Puritans claimed divine revelation. Though the Puritans did not oppose revelation to reason, their founding belief was that in a world darkened and distorted by sin, reason could not take precedence....

The Puritans are, like all tragic figures, flawed in ways we cannot wholly fault and which we partly admire. If, for instance, they sought the authority of grace in habitual introspection and contemplation, who among us has not done likewise? And yet their rigorous self-discipline must in time come to seem narrowly obsessive, as Miller and Johnson note in this passage: "Simple humanity cries at last for some relief from the interminable high seriousness of the Puritan code, the eternal strenuousness of self-analysis, and the neverending search of conscience... [T]he general impression conveyed by Puritan writing is that of men who lived far too uninterruptedly upon the heights of intensity...."

Dickinson's absolute refusal to accept the debased God of a now liberal and prosperous America has its correlate in her radical subjectivity, her reinvention of the introspective soul living 'upon the heights of intensity.'"⁷¹²

She could very well have been describing Duncan and company in those earliest years of the Poetics Program here, as well as in her later remark that

If the task of the great Puritan poets had been to "justify the ways of God to men," Emily Dickinson subverts that justification. Therein

perhaps lies the truth of Tate's claim that she "would have [been] burnt...for a witch."

She was a heretic in hiding, and she probably knew it, knew how far her heresy had cast her beyond the pale of ordinary understanding. Sense, for her, was not common:

It would never be Common—more—I said—
Difference—had begun—

... ⁷¹³

When the spring 1986 semester began, Duncan returned, and with great fanfare, for he was scheduled to teach the Later Poetry of H.D.—a class subtitled in some materials "Occult Readings"—focusing on *The War Trilogy*; *Helen in Egypt*; *Hermetic Definitions*; *Vale Ave*, "with special attention to the Imagist tradition from which it develops and to the Hermetic, Occult, and Psychoanalytic sources that inform her work."⁷¹⁴ On the first day of class, the room was so full of enrolled students and auditors (with and without New College affiliation) that at least half would have to go. Rather than beginning with the official roster and accepting as many additional persons as space allowed, Duncan made what Steve Dickison remembered as "the most egregious anti-institutional move" by having each person in the room perform "an individual reading of a poem from *Trilogy* to decide if you could stay in the class or not. I stayed. Some did not. They read and [Duncan was] like 'Get out of here....' It didn't matter who was on the roles," Dickison said. Even after the cull, so many remained that they sat in two concentric circles, a literal and figurative inner circle of elect Duncan familiars and an outer circle of the rest. Unfortunately, after only three or four sessions,⁷¹⁵ "by around March of '86," as McNaughton recalled, "[Duncan]

was at the end of his rope. He was weak. So to be able to continue teaching was just—that was the end. So my memory is that I took over that class for the rest of the semester. Not that I taught it so much as met it.”⁷¹⁶ And it must have shrunken considerably in size, with those who were in it primarily to hear Duncan presumably dropping out. Dickison’s memory was that “it just didn’t happen” after that, so McNaughton may have met only a handful of students a handful of times in Duncan’s stead.

Meanwhile, McNaughton continued meeting with the rotating cast of students (Dickison among them) in his own on-going Blake class, now in its fourth semester, Patler continued with the later work of Olson, di Prima continued with the Hidden Religions, and Meltzer taught the Prophets, while Palmer turned his students attention full onto the Objectivists: Poetry and Poetics, reading “selected poetry and related documents (essays, interviews, letters) of Reznikoff, Zukofsky, Niedecker, Oppen, Rakosi.”⁷¹⁷ Dickison was in that class, too, and he remembered “going to Doe [Library, UC Berkeley], finding on the shelf the objectivist anthology, checking it out, making copies of it, and circulating [those].” The poetry was central, he said, but “history was always a part of it,” i.e. a studied explication of the social, cultural, political conditions of the poets’ world from the from the late 1920s on as well as “a kind of personal history, like the story of [Palmer] and Clark [Coolidge] meeting at Harvard and doing...*Jogglers*.... And they went to [see] Zukofsky, so you’d hear the story of Louis and his contributing poems to the magazine and then getting in touch

urgently about a period that did or didn't need to be there, you know. And stories about visiting them, and Celia serving tea, so you got this personal history."⁷¹⁸

Not disconnected from these concerns, though perhaps of a somewhat different tenor, was Palmer's other curricular responsibility that spring 1986 term: co-directing with McNaughton the semester's poets-in-residence course on Walt Whitman, whose "work and thought stand at the center of American poetics both an extraordinary clarity and equally, an absolute mystery," as the catalog put it:

While Whitman has had a huge symbolic and inspirational extension in time and space since the 19th Century, there is need too for us to examine as rigorously as possible the minutely useful, practical disclosures of his great poetic intelligence. Much of what is specifically American spiritually has its locus and expression in the Whitman opus. Texts will include *Leaves of Grass* (1855 edition and those later, including the final 1891-92 version); selected prose, including *An American Primer*. Suggested to students are available biographies; Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*; D. H. Lawrence's remarks on Whitman, etc.

The resident poets were Ken Irby, Bernadette Mayer, and Nathaniel Mackey. Irby's trio of talks was offered under the collective title "Whispers, Sands, Fancies, Echoes, Reaches." Unfortunately, I've found neither tapes nor transcripts and elicited from those I interviewed no significant recollections of these talks, so I can offer little insight into their evocative title. Likewise with Mayer's talks, though these were more lucidly titled: "'o you whom I often and silently come where you are that I may be with you' (On Whitman's Syntax)"; "Large Healthy Poetry and Prose"; and "Whitman—the bad poet." Both Irby and Mayer were long-time associates of many

of the New College faculty and well-established poets, Mayer having published at least ten volumes and Irby twice that many by the close of 1985. In contrast, though Nathaniel Mackey is now rightly renowned, his first book of poetry (after two chapbooks), *Eroding Witness*, had just been published when he presented his talks at New College in February 1986.

Mackey had written a dissertation on Duncan's work (along with the work of William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson) at Stanford a decade earlier and published substantial essays in 1979—"The World Poem in Microcosm: Robert Duncan's 'The Continent'" (*ELH*)—and 1980—"Uroboros: Robert Duncan's *Dante* and *A Seventeenth Century Suite*" (*Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous*),⁷¹⁹ but he first met Duncan in person when the latter gave a reading in Santa Cruz in April 1981, where Mackey had recently begun teaching. Duncan invited him then to read at New College that June. When Mackey relaunched his magazine *Hambone* in the fall of 1982, a reading was held there the following January with contributors Duncan, Dahlen, Ishmael Reed, Gail Sher, bell hooks on the bill. Mackey and hooks, who were a couple in those years, and grown close to Duncan and Jess, becoming regular visitors to their household, as well as regular attendees at New College events. Mackey had actually gotten in touch with Meltzer first in 1974, sending poems for possible inclusion in *Tree*, with intermittent contact in the intervening years, but with the time spent at New College they too grew closer, as did Mackey and McNaughton, who would maintain a substantive correspondence for years to

come. His talks on Whitman were presented under the collective title “Bump City, Phrenology, Manifest Destiny, Foreground” — “the last word of which taking up on Emerson's remark in the letter he wrote to Whitman, ‘I greet you at the beginning of a great career,’ and he marvels over *Leaves of Grass* and wonders and imagines that there must have been a long foreground leading up to it.” Giving the three talks “different accents” — mind, body, and soul — Mackey proposed “situating Whitman in the context of his times, some of the events that were significant to his work, and some of the intellectual currents that contributed to his work as well.” The talks “all overlap and run into one another because they're really more like...notes in a chord...sounded at the same time,” and were reworked later into essay form, published more than a decade later as “Phrenological Whitman” in *Conjunctions* and later issued in his second volume of essays, *Paracritical Hinge* (2005). These lectures’ impact on various students would be immediate and enduring. Shortly after Mackey’s talks, Todd Baron wrote a note of thanks: “The talks placed things in a certain position that now makes it possible to plot a few things with Walt. As with Dickinson, there’s too many places to begin from, too many that is in relation to wanting one opening (trying as ‘student’ here, to fix, perhaps.)”⁷²⁰ Upon listening again to the tapes of the lectures on Whitman, Baron wrote that he had “decided to try my thesis there. Can’t read him without feeling the physical, the devoted pull, of the line, and the pure excitement there, again, generating.”⁷²¹ Mackey was invited to return as poet-in-residence the following fall to give another set of lectures on

William Carlos Williams, but unfortunately New College failed to pay him and his fellow spring poets-in-residence for several months, causing him to withdraw his commitment and thereby exposing the administrative malfeasance that had hitherto been hidden from much of the student body and some of the faculty, and which would play a large part in the impending collapse of the Poetics Program as they all had known it.

IV. Writing on the Wall

It is impossible to identify with any kind of precision “the beginning of the end” of anything. In retrospect one can always find an earlier harbinger of doom, and in the case of the original Poetics Program the actual end may even have been written into its very beginning. After all, according to di Prima and others, Robert Duncan, in agreeing to join the Poetics venture, had committed to only five years of teaching. Discounting his year at Bard but allowing for briefer interruptions of illness, this turned out to be just about how long he would teach. Of course, if he had not been ill, perhaps he would have continued on. It is, again, impossible to say. He *was* ill, and David Levi Strauss acknowledged to himself in an undated notebook entry “how thoroughly his illness affects us all.” Though Duncan was hardly the only vital organ of the program, it would be fair to call him its heart. I’ll stop short of arguing causation, but in retrospect the correlation is obvious. When his heart first failed, the program as such began to falter, and in the spring of 1985, certain simmering tensions came to a boil, prompting Diane di Prima to pen an open letter, headed simply “New College Notes,” which she sent to her fellow faculty members and the current student body of the Poetics Program, as well as many former students, encouraging and successfully eliciting a flurry of “responses[,] responses to the responses, and OTHER THOUGHTS ENTIRELY,” as di Prima put, “(we can always

use more of those)."⁷²² She provided a collated set of these notes and responses to Louis Patler for duplication and distribution as "New College Notes – II."

The ostensible (proverbial) straw that broke the camel's back was the decision to eliminate any degree of proficiency in a language other than English from among the requirements for attaining the Masters degree in Poetics. This move proved good occasion for raising a series of other issues, some related directly, others tangentially, and still others seemingly not at all to the language question, in di Prima's letter and in the various responses, which, I must say, are often quite eloquent and always heartfelt. As they reveal some of the shadows in the midst of the program's bright flame, I'll try to address as many of these as I sensibly can below, starting off with di Prima's own opening salvo:

The loss of the language requirement is for me a loss of aspiration in the program; a loss of excitement, the dream to know and explore, to attempt, anyway, the many languages of the world, knowing full well that what you have to know to "have" a language as a poet is very different from what you need as a scholar, *per se*. The barest grasp, plus a grammar and a dictionary, will open Dante or Homer for you, open it at least to your intuition.

Without this, a flavor is removed that for me at least was very inspiring, harking back as it did to the inspiration of my own youth, when, armed with dictionaries and grammars and the *ABC of Reading*, I plunged into a sense of world poetry, of all language as my medium. A sense that all learning was accessible and possible—which is part of what, for me, teaching is about—what I seek to communicate to my students.

The further problem with no language requirement is that we stand in danger of turning out students for whom the BOX of one reality (one language=one way of seeing the world) is closed and enough. Who never see or sense the language they write and speak in

from outside that language. And no amount of linguistic theory will give them the knowledge of how truly different the perspective of each language is, that they would get from even a poor and stumbling knowledge of French, or Italian, or Latin, etc.⁷²³

These sentiments were widely shared among the respondents. David Meltzer, professing total ignorance of the elimination of the language requirement, insisted that “the passion or need to know another language turns its learning into a revelation, an ongoing process.”⁷²⁴ Julia Connor recalled Meltzer’s Kabbalah course in which she and her classmates

acquired Hebrew dictionaries and thus armed poked our way into the *Sephir Yezirah*.... How else enter? It seems to me that the difference between a tradition and a convention is at stake here. For the poet is not asked to master a language but to enter it as a child, as naively as possible in order to make discoveries that enlarge not only his/her understanding of that tongue but language as a whole. Tradition points to it. Convention would leave language to the scholars, or worse, the linguists.⁷²⁵

Steve Klingaman noted:

The learning of a new language requires that one assume the role of the neophyte, struggling to say, or read, a single word or phrase. Something about giving oneself to an experience as an Absolute Beginner; this is a good antidote to the pride of knowledge, to the ego of the self-perceived "old hand". It is, literally, learning to read. The work and wonder of that process should not be forgotten in the context of Poetics.⁷²⁶

To Suzanne Edminster, it seemed “that the dropping of the language requirement comes as a result of the question about why there are not more degrees out of New College in the Poetics program. I think that losing this requirement will

perhaps result in it becoming easier to get the Masters. However, I question this, if it is a motive."⁷²⁷ But some students, like Judith Roche, were "relieved to find the obstruction of the language requirement removed from [their] path to completing the M.A.," though Roche insisted that "Diane's point...is well taken, and close to the heart of...the focus of all our linguistic study."⁷²⁸ McNaughton, too, was wholly sympathetic to di Prima's position, but from a practical, administrative point of view, he defended the decision, noting:

A. The College offers no consistent language instruction. When it has existed it has been limited to Spanish, and then without continuity sufficient to provide adequate skills. Thus

B. foreign language competency requirement for the MA would oblige candidates who have no other language skills to secure instruction elsewhere at a cost additional to the College tuition.

C. The Program could insist that all entering graduate students be in possession of a working ability in one foreign language—this would decrease an already small enrollment enough to put the Program out of business.

D. In another happier world faculty with foreign language skill could offer tutorials for preparation to take a competency exam, in e.g. French, Spanish, Latin, Greek, etc. This is not another happier world.

E. The requirement was not dropped to make the degree "easier"—it was an unrealistic proposition in the first place. This is not a "loss."

F. While Diane's desire for at least one other language to be demonstrated is one with which I sympathize, it is an error to mix that desire, or its frustration, with the matter of exposure to "linguistic theory"; as if the latter was being proposed to substitute for the former.

G. We are in no position in this College to remedy the extraordinary ignorance of Anglo-world culture of the languages & worlds outside itself. We are in a position to encourage others to make the effort on their own to break that spell, and to offer explicit reasons from the ground of poetry for making such an effort.

This last comment struck a chord with others, like Scott Thompson, who wrote, "I am still very disappointed that languages are not taught at N.C. It disgusts me every time I reflect on the dreary situation. Americans are simply isolating themselves into oblivion *und das ist die blosse Wahrheit.*"⁷²⁹

In lieu of adequate traditional language instruction at New College, and in the spirit of di Prima's remarks, Roche proposed "a translation class in which each student would work with a poet in a language of her/his choice, dictionaries, grammars, outside help from someone who knows the language well, whatever means, and get to feel what that's about. From my small and baby-step translation experience," she continued, "that seems important. It could be conceived as a language project rather than passing a language test."⁷³⁰ Edminster similarly proposed "something like a year of tutorials in reading and translation of poetry in another language, followed by a fairly substantial paper, perhaps including the student's own translation of a work. This would allow the student to grapple with the issues of the poetics of translation, as well as form a self-study course in another language."⁷³¹ Doug Lowell and others made similar remarks. "The only viable alternative" that Thompson could imagine was "for interested students and faculty to organize amongst themselves. Why is a credit necessary to learn something if a person really wants to learn it?" He noted that di Prima had "organized study groups in Latin around Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" and cited the Homer Group as well.⁷³² Indeed, David Levi Strauss recalled that the Homer Group "began, in part, as

a response to the 'language requirement', and has continued as an active engagement (Robert says marriage) for several of us for four and a half years....

We've picked up Homeric Greek as children would, out of necessity and immersion.

It has changed our lives."⁷³³ Thompson suggested

It would be possible for a Genesis reading group to start, and were anyone REALLY interested it could meet at my apartment. I have offered this before without any real response. The same goes for any poetic work in German. I've been studying German since 1972, and would offer my scant knowledge for free to anyone who was interested. It would be great to read Goethe or Holderlin in a group. Yet I remain skeptical that this will ever occur.⁷³⁴

Other students carried a similar tone of reproach of their classmates and of themselves for their lack of motivation or action in instigating such groups as characterized the first years of the program, from the Homer Group, to the Poetics Group, to the shorter-lived Latin group, Palmer's Linguistics group, and others, which served to foster a real sense of collectivity. One of the "chief complaints about the program is a tremendous lack of community," Todd Baron wrote. "It seems that sometimes New College is simply a school, not an actual place. Limited. & I understand staff not being able to deal with it completely, after all, WHY SHOULD THEY? Am I not a part also, not simply to be dealt with, to offer things to, but my own mind willing & able, wanting to participate in this created world....."⁷³⁵ This touched another of di Prima's complaints about the classroom environment. "I feel that the participatory context is being lost throughout," she wrote. "The students

make formal oral reports—a rather terrifying and threatening situation in some instances—or they do nothing at all, but listen. I have heard frequent complaints that except for David's class and mine they do not feel free to 'put in' their thoughts and comments in the classroom as they arise, informally." She felt that "the lack of openings for day-to-day communication [and] participation in the classroom" was at least in part to blame for "one of the worries and complaints that the last two faculty meetings centered on—the lack of term papers.... The even more glaring lack of Masters' theses may be a further reflection of this state of affairs."

These remarks elicited a wide range of responses. Some reinforced the line di Prima seemed to draw between her own and Meltzer's classes on one side and all others' on the other. Steve Klingaman "agree[d] that it [was] easier to participate in Diane's and David's classes, and would add Louis [Patler] to that participatory model of teaching," but insisted that "most of the better students who have passed through the program have had an ability to push past their fears in order to ante in to the discourse." Doug Lowell sounded a similar note:

I have never felt my opinion was not welcome. I have felt intimidated at first and scared to speak, but never because of what anyone has said or done.

Every faculty member has encouraged discussion and participation or has been open to it when it occurs. In some instances one must speak louder than a faculty member to gain the floor, but this is only due to momentum or excitement, never exclusion. Timidity must be overcome, it is true, but I have only found encouragement when I have offered an opinion—perhaps not

agreement, or even friendliness, but a hard-edged willingness to engage what I have to say.

McNaughton wrote, brusquely, “Anyone who expresses the sentiment that they do not feel free to speak in a class of mine had best ask themselves why—for I will find two for that one who say what they please whenever they feel the need to do so.” For some, the apparent degradation of “participatory context” had less to do with the teachers than it did with the students. Julia Connor noted that the mood in classes she’d visited since finishing her own coursework a couple of years prior was “still serious,” but “the vigor...seems pale. The student reports feel somehow reluctant, intellectual, somewhat tortured and dry—as if they were somehow coughed out instead of fathomed forward. Sitting in class, I have had the sensation that people are attendees rather than participants.” Carl Grundberg also observed “a tendency to passivity and spectator-sport mentality, people wandering in and out of classes like they were visiting the zoo. In the troubadour class last fall, it seemed as if no one was expected to write anything, read anything, or even show up for class.” Part of the problem, he remarked, was that Duncan’s classes “threaten to turn into a San Francisco tourist attraction, with assorted silent lumps sitting in and soaking up the vibes. Always a dedicated core of students work and struggle, but the proportion of dead weight seems to be increasing.”⁷³⁶ Klingaman, too, noticed “a tendency for people to act like spectators in various classes, especially Robert’s.” He further argued that “the numbers of auditors and others who attend solely to hear the

Master speak inhibit those students who have a hard time in speaking up. This attitude sets up a situation where the teacher turns into a commodity and a performer. I have seen students literally consume members of the faculty. Others never opened their mouths in public."⁷³⁷

As noted earlier, one of the unique advantages of the Poetics Program was its embeddedness in the City of San Francisco, with its diverse and highly energized literary networks, and the Program had from the beginning been committed to an extreme openness to and engagement with this city that surrounded it, tapping into these networks wherever possible with readings, public lectures, and the like. There can be no doubt that these activities enriched the lives and minds of faculty, students, and nonstudent denizens of the city alike, but at the same time, perhaps it was all too much, as at their very first planning meeting the core faculty had been concerned it could be. In a single semester, there were easily a dozen public readings put on by the college as well as a dozen public lectures. When this public openness extended even to the seminars, it seems to have inhibited those who were actually enrolled in the program, paying tuition, and working toward degrees. It was no doubt intimidating enough to a young poet to stand before a justly celebrated elder like Robert Duncan and present on a subject into which the latter was known to have made thirty years of deep study. Add two or three former students, not only accomplished poets themselves, but known to be close friends of the teacher, and then perhaps any number of strange faces, as like to be antagonistic as friendly, and

the anxiety must have been all the greater. As Klingaman wrote, "I agree with Artaud. Kill the audience. Make everyone participate. It is a beneficial tyranny. Better than the tyranny of silence."⁷³⁸

The situation also evokes the specter of New College's dilemma in its earliest years when many students realized that "they could learn what they wanted from New College without paying tuition" and ultimately decided that "a college degree doesn't mean all that much," as Bob Raines had put it then. Now, as it turned out, the question of the degree was a seriously divisive one. Whereas Roche had been happy to see the "obstruction" of the language requirement removed from her path toward a degree, Strauss' response to its elimination was that he "never saw the 'language requirement' as a barrier or an obstacle on the way to a degree because I didn't think very much about the degree. There was too much work to do." He went on to respond to the "glaring lack of Masters' theses" di Prima had mentioned:

If someone asks me about New College, and they are genuinely interested in what is happening there, they ask who's involved, what's being read and discussed, etc. If, on the other hand, they are asking about it rhetorically, in order to discredit it (as Ron Silliman has done repeatedly with me), they ask, "Is it true that only two people have ever actually graduated from the program?" I would rather be able to answer, "No one graduates from this program." Rather than a stack of Masters' theses that few people will ever read, I'd rather be able to point to a list of published work by people involved in the program.

Questions about the Masters' degree have all along been a focus for thinking about the purpose of the program in the world—but they have also been, I think, a decoy. Most of the decisions about the degree, acceptance of theses, evaluations, etc., have seemed to me to be characterized by

compromise and embarrassment, utterly incongruous with any active imagination of the seriousness of the Program.

At the "completion" of my required coursework in 1982, I balked at the Thesis (Did I want to graduate? I thought I'd just gotten started. What does a "masters" degree mean? What are Masters Degrees for?, etc.). I wrote what I thought would be a thesis (on Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*) and Michael [Palmer] published it [in *Code of Signals*]. Then I became immersed in writing. The thought of stopping, to go back and write a "Masters' thesis" made no sense. Since that time, I have always thought of the Poetics Program as a center around which my acts as a writer revolve.

I've written thirty articles for publication (all, to my mind, informed by my study of poetics at N.C.), published four issues of a journal of new writing, *ACTS* (also informed of N.C.), and written a lot of poetry (some published, some not). If I could continue the work with *80 Flowers*, toward publication, that would make sense to me, not to write something which would sit on a shelf in the New College library gathering dust. The test of a thesis should be does it have any effect, any influence on contemporary poetics. Does it contribute? Otherwise, it is only an economical expediency (teaching jobs) and should be recognized as such.⁷³⁹

And so it was, by and large, among the earliest cohorts of the Poetics Program.

Aaron Shurin, who completed his coursework and thesis exactly per the program's guidelines—three terms coursework, one term thesis—did so with the express intent of getting a teaching job, which he promptly did. Shurin's efficiency can be said neither to have lessened the depth and intensity of his New College experience, as we've seen, nor to have lessened the value and originality of his thesis. Nonetheless, few others followed suit. There were, certainly, multiple reasons why this was so. Situations were different for different people. Bobbie Louise Hawkins, for instance, had enrolled as a student with her eye on a degree, but when her occasional teaching at Naropa picked up toward a fulltime gig, and after her several spats with Duncan,

she walked away. She didn't need the degree anymore. Others had simply found the extreme demands of the program beyond their ability or desire to meet and had broken down or just dropped out. Many, however, had never been interested in a degree in the first place. They were just excited by the opportunity to study fulltime with the poets gathered at New College. As Strauss put it, "Everyone knows how unusual it is to have a group of poets of this quality (the core faculty) get together to do something. When this does happen, it generates a lot of heat."⁷⁴⁰

Moreover, McNaughton, in co-founding and co-directing the program with Patler, had never intended it to churn out degrees. They insisted from the start that this was no MFA mill, so it shouldn't have been surprising that there was, as Klingaman noticed, "a tendency among some students to equate the desire for an M.A. degree with 'careerism', implying that an interest in a degree is somehow unworthy of the TRUE student of poetry."⁷⁴¹ He noted that the anarchic educations of di Prima, Duncan, and Meltzer perhaps contributed to that view. For Julia Van Cleve there were "two kinds of students at new college. Those who need degrees and those who don't. By this I mean economically. For those who don't need a degree, the 'real' meets the 'ideal'. NC is the pleasure of poetry, discourse, and communion. For those who need a degree, NC is a failure." And this had become increasingly evident, as with each new cohort to enter the program, the proportion of enrolled students who were in fact seeking a degree steadily increased.

Though as yet only Shurin and Grundberg had actually graduated, McNaughton pointed out that “there are several theses in the works at this time. Dawn Kolokithas [Dawn-Michelle Baude] has finished hers and will take the MA in January.” In 1986, Baude would indeed become the third student, and the first woman, to graduate from the program, but the achievement had come only after a good deal of trouble. She initially attempted a thesis on H.D. and found a great supporter in Duncan, who “took a special interest in me,” Baude said:

I was allowed to go to Duncan’s house and type in his studio—because the books were not available, I had to type them, to retype them because they weren’t available. So I would sit up at the top floor of their house and I would be allowed in and out to go and do this, talk to Duncan and run up to his little studio and type some H.D. and then leave. And Duncan was putting so much hope on me to be able to write this thesis, really a huge amount, you know—but the school was so poorly organized at that point, nobody said, “Do you have an outline?” I mean nobody ever said, “Can I see a chapter?” or anything. “Do you have a plan?” There was zero. Just: “Dawn’s working on H.D. Great!” “Dawn goes to Robert’s and she talks about it.” But it was bad, really, really bad.... I had very little ability to write expository prose. Now I’ve published [widely], and prose is very easy for me to write...but at that point I could not. So I wrote the whole thing on H.D. all by myself, and it was completely unreadable, had no organization, and there was no way they could pass me.... That was a very painful period, and when Duncan realized that I couldn’t write the book that he wanted me to write, he turned against me and was very vicious. Publicly would say things if he saw me.... It was so traumatic to realize that I had spent all this money, all this time, and I had failed. It was an epic fail for me personally, and I went off to Africa and walked through Africa for six months and came back and wrote a second thesis. That time I worked [primarily] with Michael Palmer, and he said, “Do you have an outline?”⁷⁴²

Her second, ultimately successful, attempt at a thesis focused on Jack Spicer and the intense engagement with his work would lead Baude to organize, with the help of Alastair Johnston and Doug Lowell, a week-long Jack Spicer Conference in June 1986, about which I'll have more to say below. While she worked on her second thesis, she also started publishing short articles: "I thought, 'Fuck you, I can write expository prose.' I published for the *Oakland Tribune* first, a travel piece, and then I wrote book reviews for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and a ton of stuff for *Poetry Flash*. I just said, 'You're gonna tell me I can't write expository prose? Well, I'm going to figure it out.'" ⁷⁴³ And so she did.

Some students may have been similarly tenacious, and some may have been more "prepared" at the outset, but many others may have just giving up. Baude's complaint about the utter lack of structural support was echoed by others I spoke to. One consequence of the minimal-to-nonexistent guidance and oversight was a tendency for students to get far deeper into their subject and spend far more time researching and writing than any traditional MA program would have expected. Grundberg had spent three years on his Troubadour thesis, as did Judith Roche, who wrote on H.D. When she finished, "Michael [Palmer] very kindly said, 'Oh, you've done as much research as for a PhD dissertation,' which was very nice, because it was a *Masters thesis*." ⁷⁴⁴ Steve Klingaman "just got totally lost" on his thesis "on the Eleusinian Mysteries, or Greek Poetry that was related to that." As he put it,

I don't think the faculty members understood how to help students who were lost with a thesis concept. I kept researching like I was researching a book, or a dissertation, and nobody told me to just stop, here's where the deal is, you write about this and don't get caught up in literary archeology. Or, you don't need to learn Greek in order to do your thesis. Just do a frickin' thesis! And I didn't have that discipline at that point in time so I just got lost with it. Just took the research off the deep end and never really dug into any kind of legitimate writing on it.⁷⁴⁵

In his reply to di Prima's New College Notes, Grundberg wrote:

As far as I know the requirements for the thesis and for graduation have never been set down in black and white and issued to the students. The whole thing has been more or less folklore up to now, shifting drastically depending on whether students talk to each other, to different teachers, or to the same teacher on different occasions. Students have gone into the thesis arena with a very murky idea of what's expected and very little guidance. Then, halfway or all the way through the completion of the manuscript, one or several faculty members sense that Something Is Horribly Wrong Here. They attempt to restore order by a more or less metaphysical appeal to the "requirements". But it's really too late at that point; late-night effort has been wasted or devalued; students turn bitter and decide to take up woodcarving. Another thesis candidate bites the dust.

Again, various proposals for improvement came from the respondents, ranging from basic written guidelines to regular roundtable discussions. From the first years of the program, Meltzer recalled "periodic sessions for Thesis proposals by M.A. candidates for student and faculty input..., informal trying-out times, a preliminary exchange which invariably help[ed] clarify the project and its purposes." Among Strauss's papers are invitations to such sessions, along with outlines and proposals, from early students Klingaman and Michael Lazar, neither of whom ever completed

his thesis, however, so Meltzer's sense of the efficacy of these sessions seems to have been somewhat inflated.

For di Prima and others, it came back to the loss of "participatory context" and communality—in the classroom with the student's papers, and outside the classroom with the students poems. Here, even di Prima was included among the faculty that came in for some criticism from Julia Connor, who recalled similar "student complaints from '81-'83 to the effect that there was not enough 'community' by which I think was meant students sharing their poetry plus some way to rub elbows and hang out." She again cited the various extracurricular group meetings, especially the Tuesday night Poetics group, when members actually shared their poems on occasion, but, she wrote, "I do not recall any faculty member having attended except Robert.... I can understand not wanting to be committed to every Tuesday night but I cannot understand never having come. It's as if in one voice you said...'Robert can handle this human stuff...' Pity. For it was a place to talk and to process all the classroom stuff in a way that made us feel like, well...persons and poets." She went on to remark that "Meltzer's class, too, had a way of honoring the person. Perhaps it was the frequent writing. It seemed like we were always 'doing it.'"⁷⁴⁶ Grundberg, too, argued, "if students can be induced to write faster than they can worry, it will free up more heart, more creativity, more improvisation, and, curiously, more discipline.... Get the pump working, first of all," he wrote. "Exercises are great, like [Palmer's] translation perversions a few terms

back, [Meltzer's] devilish paragraph assignments, [di Prima's] write-yr-own Gnostic myth. A sense of play in the work." Suzanne Edminster also cited Meltzer's "technique of requiring a 'paragraph' (or poem story notes etc) each class, to be read aloud in class if the student wishes, but certainly to be turned in and noted. This small chunk is approachable for everyone, and the contentious students can use it as an opening for as much study and complex thinking as can be compressed into the space." One of the great advantages was that "at the end of [Meltzer's] classes, and also [di Prima's], each student already has a body of work, real words on real paper, not the chaotic mass in the head.... No, the Poetics program is not a poetry 'workshop' but we are all poets and as far as I know, the only reason to take the classes is to live in some of the same sources other poets have occupied. Our poetry...is the place...where all the work...is headed."⁷⁴⁷ Meltzer himself attested to the importance of celebrating, or at least exposing, the more so-called "creative" work of students in the program, professing to "miss brown-bag lunch-hour poetry recitals":

They happened sporadically during the first two years. All who participated by reading their work seemed charged with a confidence based on accomplishment. The "knowing" operated in the poem and was offered freely and often vigorously. Paradoxically, the very same knower lost all bearing in the classroom when asked to write a paper or give a talk. No blame and genuinely understandable. Yet all of us know what we alone know and that knowing is operative in all we do.... The poems read at those readings taught me more about the poet than I knew before the poems. It is the poem that brings us here."⁷⁴⁸

It seems that if the standard workshop's near-exclusive focus on student work tends to marginalize the tradition, the Poetics Program's near-exclusive focus on the tradition had the opposite effect, for some. The exclusion of their own poetry from the classroom could also make it seem anathema to conversation in other forums as well. Despite the many professions of faith on the part of faculty and some students that they were all participating in this live tradition, some clearly felt themselves and their work unworthy of such affiliation, or projected such feelings onto others. This had all along been true of the Poetics Program, but the proportion of students in the first few years who not only already knew one another, but already knew one another's work, and who not only knew the work of some of the faculty, but knew them personally as well, was far higher than it was in subsequent years. Relegating their own poetry to the background didn't cause those familiar students to feel embarrassed about it or isolated in it. Younger students and students who had come to the Poetics Program from greater distances had a different set of circumstances, and more often did feel that way. As Todd Baron noted, "I thought when I came here [to New College in the fall of 1984], that I was going to continue to expose my work to a world, instead, I'm still just publishing & have a readership 'out-there'."

Judith Roche knew that New College was "set up to be an alternative to both the writing programs and the lit programs. Actually, it's a different synthesis of the tradition we are exploring." And Roche believed it was successfully "passing on a

certain strain of the tradition. It's what I came for and so, I think, did others."

However, she continued, "if, smaller than but beside that, NC is also wanting to help train people who will keep that tradition alive in subsequent generations in the schools, the poetry journals, and the work," it seemed less successful. "You-all are tending toward raising a passel of passive poets, which seems to me to be, a contradiction in terms." Roche was not the only one who felt the unbalance between reception and production of ideas (poems being implied herein) and between the so-called critical and so-called creative, but she articulated the problem well and offered both actionable and affective suggestions:

The work tends to get over-intellectualized, talked all around. It seems rare that we really closely look at a poem. I know we are preserving our distinction from literature programs but there are ways to closely look at poems and the forms they pour themselves into without violating their spirit. I would like us to be much more grounded in our study, more examples of the concepts we talk about (or around, as the case may be), more poetry, less theory.

Maybe no less theory at all—we want that because we want everything—but somehow, with all of our distractions, there are appointments to keep we are missing and we all have a profound longing for what we are just missing....

The problem of feeling being relegated to the backseat, as Diane suggests, is as serious at NC as it is in the larger society. To break through that one is part of what we are all doing by being poets. We fight our whole acculturation to do it and it's not surprising that we fail. At least, as poets, we have identified that as something we hold as possible and work toward. Possibly the most we can do for ourselves and each other is to create an environment where the feeling response both to the work and the lives is encouraged and accepted and then allow the poetry to seep in us more. We could do better at that.

On top of her concerns about the “loss of aspiration in the program” represented by the elimination of the language requirement and the less “participatory context” as discussed above, di Prima had also identified “a dryness and dullness seeping in. Too much analysis, and the realm of feeling relegated to the background, as it is in most academic programs. The sense of wonder, of that which cannot be described or discussed, and that the poem IS, being left out.” Part of the problem, for di Prima, was the “proposal that came up at the last faculty meeting: to stick to texts, or poems, throughout all courses..., and not go ‘outside’ even to what the given poet might have read, or what was happening historically in his period, what ideas were current.” This remark elicited near universal condemnation of such a stance. Edminster called it “high snobbery.... This is just another version of the trap of traditional academia, that there is some unified philosophy that absolutely governs how we SHOULD learn.” Jill Duerr concurred: “We don’t need another doctrinaire, ‘critical’ approach.” She wrote, “I have thought often in the year I have been here, that finally I have the chance to learn things that I in my own heart really want to know. I am, b’god, gonna get educated. To see that opportunity dwindle into the same old hierarchy, the same old damn elitism, really angers me.” Moreover, she continued, “We run the risk of killing the thing by trying to figure it out, cutting it up and then saying there’s no life because we can’t find it in the corpse.” Lowell noted that the stick-to-the-text “admonition immediately smacks of New Criticism” and Thompson echoed these remarks, with vehemence:

such an idea immediately brings to my mind the spectre of “New Criticism”, and *explication de texte*, application of semantics and cognitive criticism..., [which] is precisely the arid pedantry which I came to New College to escape. That does not mean that I am opposed to close reading of poems as one way of appreciating poetry. But when structural de-construction of a poem into little brackets and diagrams becomes a substitute for inspired reading then all I can say is that once again the VIVISECTOR has attempted to supplant the healing grace of the Muse.... New Criticism is a form of academic resentment of poetry and is based on a profound lack of heart and inspiration. When this becomes the primary focus of New College, I will go back to philosophy.

Now, with that said, I pose another question. Is this really the trend at New College? I don't believe it. None of the classes that I've taken have gone off in this mis-direction. [Duncan's] class on Pound and Williams did not veer off toward New Criticism, nor have any of [Meltzer's] classes, and [di Prima's] classes certainly have not. I have not taken classes with Michael Palmer so I can't say anything about his methods[, but] the courses I've taken with [McNaughton] and [Patler] did not seem to be in the New Criticism direction either.

Lowell, too, expressed hope that the original comment was “either taken out of context or slightly simplified for emphasis,” and Roche thought it obviously “a matter of personal style and conviction that extends to the essence of the teacher. I can't imagine an official policy coming from NC that would impose the violation of one style on a teacher who has another. Obviously, McNaughton needs to do it that way: anything else would be a violation of his very being and the way the work moves within him. Obviously, di Prima needs to do it the other way and bring in all the richness of whatever she finds.” Indeed, McNaughton insisted that the “remarks I made concerning the centrality of the poem...would need to be placed in the full

context of my remarks, which cannot now be done," but in his own defense he wrote:

The most consistently usable definition for "poetics" is "what's going on in the poem." That's my view. This program was created in such a spirit that the working definition of "poetics" would be whatever the faculty or poets claimed for it. There was not to be, and there isn't now, any one or more proscriptive grids for what it is, nor is there understood to be any authority, past or present, other than the poets on this subject. It was felt that the poem would claim what it needs that way. It was not thought of by me as a branch of aesthetics or literary theory or linguistics or of philosophy of language. It is thought of by me as an open study the territories of which would depend on the person thus engaged.

So—the poem first. What is it doing—being. This is for me a matter of attention to the poem, not of ideas about it, structures of analysis to be applied to it, nor of reference outside the poem being brought to bear on it. Diane mentions in another place Pound's *ABC [of Reading]*, and it is the story of Agassiz's fish there that still feels to me basic—an act of attention.

This is not said to argue no context for the poem, it is said to argue that the poem leads out to its context, but that it is not an affect or cry proposal or description of context. If by "sticking to text" I am understood to mean that no contextual inquiry is permitted, then I am being simplistically mis-apprehended. It's a matter of what comes first. The act of attention is rare enough, among poets as among others, that it is to me the kindergarten of poetics; that I am myself in kindergarten is indeed so. Students who expect from me a means for placing or understanding the poem, apart from the revealed terms of the poem itself, are disappointed. Just lately Grant Fisher spoke to me about Blake, as of the numerous referential contexts evidently available to students of Blake (e.g. Miss Raine's work) and what he had found to be the uselessness of heading into those analyses in advance of finding one's own footing in the text, a finding which takes a hell of a lot of time to even begin. Too often ideas of context serve to explain what has never been in fact encountered in itself.

Rather than New Criticism, these remarks surely evoke our previous discussion of McNaughton's investment in the *ta'wil*, or personal spiritual exegesis, which was the mode he'd impressed on all of his students at New College since the first class he taught on Shakespeare a decade previous. He continued,

What I want from them in papers is to hear from them, to read their writing and to hear what is on their minds re: material at hand. They've been told I do not want much to read what they have taken or understood from secondary sources. It is their direct relation to text that interests me, that I depend on for help in my own work on that text, and that makes it worthwhile for me to be doing this stuff in the first place. It's literally a matter of asking, "What do you make of this?" I'm not looking to approve as right or wrong what someone presents, nor to in an academic manner pass on their ability to write organizations of the ideas of others, on their expertise or lack of it in preparing academic papers. I can't see any other reason for anyone to be doing this than to find out for themselves what they can of what is going on in the poem.

Meltzer voiced his own support for and understanding of such a position:

Based on a passion or need to know it fully, the poem like the beloved should be faced directly. First we want to know everything we can comprehend of the poem. It's natural that after we've essenced the poem in accordance with our capacity we want to know something or everything about the poet. It is hoped that we consider that knowledge as it applies to the poem. It is also hoped we do not become attached exclusively to external biography and lore, again abandoning the source.

The poem itself retains its mystery despite all we know and think to know. The mystery persists by its endurance and continual immediacy. Poems allowed to survive have a commonality of concern and intent which have almost nothing to do with fashion or critics. This is the mystery we approach in hopes of learning even one of its secrets.

McNaughton's appeal in behalf of the poem-itself should be considered fundamental.

If, in light of these defenses and the several years these poets had worked together in precisely these modes, di Prima's understanding of McNaughton's original remark seems an almost willful misunderstanding, it is an understanding shadowed by various other pressures, not least that of physical illness. "Last winter," di Prima wrote, "I was asked by a Poetics student—rather naively, as I thought then—'What's wrong with the Program that it's making everyone sick?' Presumptuous and simplistic as the question was, it opened up a lot for me." She continued:

"Why is everyone who's teaching Poetics getting sick?" can be a legitimate question about the use of energy and it led me to observe how indeed we use energy in our teaching. What I noticed is that amongst all of us the idea of excellence has turned into some straining after brilliance. (For example, if one asks after a colleague who has been ill, we are as likely to be told, not how his body or spirits are doing, but how fine his most recent lecture was.) I began to feel how far we have gotten from seeing ourselves or each other as human beings in quite vulnerable and inconsistent situations. How far we have become the product, the brilliant talk.

I began to examine the possibility that an ordinary class has as much to offer (and more ways in, sometimes, to what it does offer) as the "brilliant" class. Not that I feel a need to eliminate one in favor of the other, but to let what happens in the classroom simply happen. I feel a need to stop rising to the occasion.

And isn't the idea of consistent brilliance a little like the notion of sexual "performance"—hard-driving and aggressive towards ourselves and the Other?...

The further fallacy is that we can be brilliant to order, that is, promptly at 9:30 on a Monday morning, or whenever. It's a little like the Heisenberg principle: all classes can be great, if they are taught at the moment of inspiration; or classes can be taught on a schedule and be whatever they are at that time.

The weight of expectation and the burden of institutional demands had begun to weigh on her. While her last comments about “brilliance” here are quite simply right, McNaughton retorted, “Class times are part of the movie. Anyone with feeling knows very well the periodic, bleakly useless frustration in living on a clock not of one’s own heart.” As for “The question of being ‘up’ for class,” McNaughton wrote

Well, I don't know about “brilliance” or “performance” —rather that one does the best one can do. Some students like to judge performance or its absence in a teacher; and some students like to imagine that a teacher’s work in class is a sort of performance, and it may be that, why not? The way I work is my decision; not everyone is going to dig it or find it useful in relation to their own ways of working.

You know, I don't feel responsible to all the attitudes which students bring to a class or to the program, it's not my dept. An awful lot of bullshit can get put between doing the work and avoiding it.

He also found “the question [of] the Program being linked to physical illness...not simply naive, [but] offensive,” and Meltzer agreed, speaking from his own increasingly impacted condition:

I resist any implication that our work transmits some sort of plague. If anything, I'd rather say it functions more like a curative.

We're all compassionate to the suffering we see and we worry about each other because we care for each other—even when we know our work's essence is a mystery the body merely houses. That essence or “spark” charges the mind, the spirit, the imagination, despite illness or health. Our bodies die continually, its “spark” or spirit strives to be. I'm as guilty as anyone else of responding beyond the illness to the “other” it emanates. Robert's straightforward ability to share his illness acts to put it in its place as yet another element of the human (therefore) poetic process. But he also counter-balances this struggle by

letting us witness the ongoing power of the creative spirit. Nothing is hidden. And that's another mystery....

Many of the doctors and healers I've dealt with recently are rarely paragons of radiant physical health. You might know some others in the healing arts (or any art) whose remarkable inner abilities are shelled in sad skins of compulsion and dis-ease. It's often a paradox how some great teachers of the spirit fail to embody their teachings. Illness is no less a teaching than poetics, no less of a learning. It's a discipline similar to the poem or anything else that really counts. Illness is neutral like a page is.

Regardless, the wear and tear of defending the feminine in the face of the dominant masculine energy clearly contributed to di Prima's feeling "the light...leaving the program." She confessed

Whereas, when that flavor of inspiration was there, I felt an unequivocal urgency in presenting the program as important, as vital and relevant (and found myself often urging would-be students and poets to come to New College, and join us) I find that now I am doing this less and less often (though I may urge a particular person I meet to take a particular class.)

I feel now that we are falling into the rut of academe—without even the positives of a well-organized institution to back us up, or scholastically rigorous standards to justify us....

I still feel excited about the material I actually teach, but I have more and more questions about the context in which I teach it.

For all the conflict over pedagogical modes and mores, differences of opinion and attention, insult, injury, and illness suffered by various faculty, students, family, and friends, at the heart of the New College Notes and all the responses that circulated in the fall of 1985, there abided a genuine affection, indeed love for one another. Presumably many more persons received these notes than bothered to respond (at least openly, in writing)—of the faculty, only di Prima, McNaughton,

and Meltzer appear to have weighed in, along with a scant dozen current and former students—but those who did all professed great care and admiration for other persons in the Program, concern for their health and happiness and for the health and ongoing viability of Program itself, as well as genuine appreciation for the open opportunity of the exchange. Grundberg put it simply: “The Poetics Program needs to decide if it wants to be a brief moment in American poetry or an ongoing presence. Either choice is OK, but if it wants to go on the program should find a way of settling in and carrying through.” As David Levi Strauss wrote, “If ‘the light is leaving the program,’ if the Program is ‘falling into the rut of academe’, then it must be shaken out of the rut and lit up. Perhaps your correspondence campaign will get that started.” Doug Lowell agreed:

I think that the poetics program can only continue if people bring up problems as they arise, and they are bound to arise. My sincere hope is that conflicts can be resolved at least to that point that each member of the faculty is able to carry on teaching in the manner (they) see fit. Undoubtedly people need a break, and this should be possible, even encouraged. And nothing lasts forever. But the poetics program is so extraordinary that I want other students to have a chance to find it. Ultimately it's not the language requirement or the degree or the curriculum that makes it, it's the people.

Indeed, the people might have been worked through all the above conflict—will enough is evinced in these letters—but the faculty and students alike were also subject to the pressures and vagaries of the institution under the auspices of which they worked. At the tail end of her original Notes, Diane di Prima raised Black

Mountain as a point of comparison for New College. The comparison favored the former, though di Prima acknowledged that Black Mountain was “a different story, with no doubt its own problems,”⁷⁴⁹ and prompted exclamations of vicarious nostalgia from several others, but from Duncan McNaughton, this a curt reply:

[New College is] not Black Mtn. Black Mountain, as it exists now in the memory of various people, is not Black Mtn. either. Ed Dorn once told me that the day to day scene at BMC was as humanly divided, bitterly so, and despicable in its boring social aspects and frustrations, as any other ‘academic’ scene he’d seen, all the more so under the insistent pressure of no money and uncertain future—a pressure which is present to us in New College in an equal intensity.

In his response, Steve Klingaman, who served as grant writer and administrative assistant for the Poetics Program for several years as a student and after finishing his course work, noted the “unsatisfactory relationship with corporate N.C.,” pointing out that “Poetics has been severely underfunded since its inception. The strain of working under those conditions beats on everyone after a while.” Others acknowledged the same, and Scott Thompson expressed “real sympathy for the newcomers who are walking into what may be New College’s final days,” writing that

New College seems to be in danger of imminent collapse. Everyone knows that [President] Martin Hamilton has become incompetent. I don't care if that sounds crass. Everyone I've talked to (students and faculty) agrees with this. He should be forced to resign. We all know that the faculty is underpaid and that your checks are continually delayed, and I can't believe that this doesn't somehow enter into the picture. I have personally had nothing but miserable dealings with the administration of New College. Yet their jobs must be

tremendously difficult and tedious. The fact that a large group just quit seems proof of this.

In the spring of 1985, new revelations of serious financial problems precipitated the resignation and firing of several administrators, including the business office manager and the chair of the College's finance committee. In April, upon Patler's insistence, the new interim chair mounted a series of meetings with current and recent administrators and consultations with auditors and management consultants, findings of which were published in an August memo to the full New College faculty and administration, whose salaries went unpaid for several months in the interim. Though short of a full audit, the investigations revealed upwards of \$850,000 of debt on the school's books, including some \$400,000 of unpaid payroll taxes (with interest and fees mounting at a rate of \$1,000 per week), more than \$100,000 of outstanding back pay and fringe benefits to employees, vendor payments in arrears of about \$200,000, miscellaneous other debt and misused restricted funds. Furthermore, a \$100,000 loan secured by the College's real property would come due in six months, attempts to refinance of the Valencia Street building, valued then at \$600,000, had not been successful, and "hundreds of thousands of dollars of student tuition [had not been] billed in a timely manner. (In some cases student tuition bills were erroneously turned over to a collection agency when the students were not in arrears.) Billing records were almost non-existent." Several Poetics students were among those affected by false referral to collection agencies, as evidenced by

multiple series of increasingly upset letters among Patler and McNaughton's papers attest. At the same time, responsibility for legitimate collections devolved to the individual departments, so McNaughton and Patler had to personally contact others. A new business office manager was hired, an official audit commenced, and the board began to draft "motions to reorganize corporate management and monitor a budget which [would] insure the healthy survival" of New College. As the memo puts it, "Reductions in space and personnel cuts are mandatory."⁷⁵⁰

In December, at the meeting of the Board of Trustees of New College, Louis Patler made a motion, approved in advance by the entire Poetics faculty, "asking for the resignation of Milly Henry and Martin Hamilton..., based on his research into the College's current problems and on his judgment of key responsibility for these problems.... Patler's motion received no second [and] therefore died." McNaughton wrote in an open letter that it appeared to be "the will of the Board of Trustees...that responsibility for manifestly serious administrative errors at the executive level will not be assigned to the executive officers of the College." I quote from the letter at length because of its trenchancy:

The Board of Trustees and the executive officers are in agreement, tacit or explicit, that individuals will not be held responsible to the consequences of their actions at the executive level, although those actions may have jeopardized, and may now jeopardize, the integrity of the college.... The assignment of blame is a useless endeavor in any context, the mark of an immature or imperfectly shaped moral faculty. The recognition of the depth of individual responsibility of the consequences of action, however, is among the several signatures

of a mature person's grasp of proportion. This is not vanity of morality; it is the earth of morality.

When it is that in a context of mutual trust an individual is mistaken, makes an error, fucks up, abuses the trust, uses incorrect judgment or acts in any degree for personal gain or advantage—and when it is that such behaviors have consequences which are potentially or actually injurious to the other persons sharing that trust—then the duty of that individual is to recognize, admit and accept responsibility for the behavior and its consequences. This not in order to be blamed or punished, but in order that mistaken action may be corrected—in order that it not be repeated—in order that the persons affected can maintain the trust—in order that the purpose of their trust and association can continue to achieve the common end.

It is always a strictly personal matter. In my view, it is always a strictly public matter, as I do not in the customary sense distinguish between the private and the public. I follow Charles Olson, following Apollonius of Tyana, in seeing that “the private is public, and the public is where you behave.” Now I know there is an *actual* discrimination to be made between personal and public behavior. But, insofar as one's action has human consequence past one's very own intimate necessity, I do take it that behavior is public. The exigencies of moral proportion obtain in the public to a still greater degree, in my bias, than in the strictly personal dimension....

There have been sentiments expressed, which come to me secondhand, that the poetics group constitutes an obtuse element in the College—arrogant, precious, uncooperative and now subversive of the College-wide collective endeavor to remedy the damage done to the College that we are the one component of the College that will not subscribe to the general effort to bring the College back to its feet. Patler and I have been characterized as bearing a personal vendetta toward Henry and Hamilton.

There is no College-wide collective endeavor to remedy the damage. That is a sentimental at best, cynical at worst, description of what's going on. There is a maximum of ass-covering, of maneuvering to protect or enlarge elements of self interest, of *policy* in the Elizabethan sense—a sense in which our homely expression “Honesty is the best policy” has precisely the reverse of the meaning we give it. That there is sincere desire in many to work together to reconceive the College is a fact. That this desire is universal, in any component of the College, is untrue.

The poetics program is welcome in the College insofar as it adds a prestige which can serve to enhance the College's public report of itself, and can serve before WASC as one component of the College with which the accreditors find no significant shortcoming. The singularity of the program, its integrity and that of its regular faculty, of its long list of distinguished guest faculty, of the public events in poetry during the past decade, of the respect the program holds in the U.S. and elsewhere—all this has a use when that use is convenient to the College. That the poetics group should move to exercise its function within the College is another matter. It is an attractive ornament—less so as its actual meaning and function are brought to bear on the so-called real life of the College. It is a noble thing, but a thing best held apart from the actual behavior of men and women. It is for poets, not for real people; it is for poetic language, not for the necessary language of the real world....

From a fiscal point of view...poetics is a luxury, and has been the recipient of preferred treatment within the College's financial structure....

The poetics program's fiscal status...is one of the main and most frequently made criticism[s] against poetics—made finally in the refusal to grant the central role poetry has in the College, as had since 1974 when I came to work for New College. The criticism arises in the effort to discredit poetics as an equal member of the corporation. The integrity of the faculty and administration of poetics has never been susceptible to charge of instability, incompetence or irresponsibility. It has been susceptible, as now, to charges of arrogant provocation and of claiming fundamental moral authority. These latter charges are accurate—in a situation so explicitly bereft of clear moral discrimination, fools at the margin will have their voice, willy-nilly.

I wish to point out that the evaporation of College real estate holdings, the exceptional rate of turnover within the College administration and staff, and the reduction in the number of working toilets, do not derive exclusively from the posturing of the poetics group. Nor have our excesses resulted in any litigations, although this was, amusingly, entertained at the Board meeting as a possible response to Patler's motion.

McNaughton closed his letter by decrying “the College’s perennial refusal to meet face to face with itself as one of the very few possibilities for radical behavior in American education.”

It seems that his call had little effect, for some four months later, on April 27, 1986, he sent letters to his fellow Poetics faculty, his fellow Humanities faculty, Poetics students, and the College administration tendering his resignation, effective May 31. To his Poetics colleagues he wrote:

Believe me, I have given this decision sufficient thought and feeling; it is irrevocable. While I regret the end of this work with you all, my need to pull out now outweighs the aggregate of other considerations....

What we have been able to do in poetics has been, truly, the very most delightful, interesting and useful work I’ve been given. I have loved that work. I do indeed regret leaving the classroom and my colleagues in it....

I owe to Robert, to each of you and to each of the students, rather more than can readily be said. Your help and friendship has been great; I feel deep affection and respect for each of you, and I thank you....

Thank you again for your trust and kindness, and for the permission you've given me in the work.

To the Humanities faculty he attested,

The College has been at the heart of my life for all the time of our association, since the spring of 1974. Insofar as we have been able to work together with an essentially sympathetic intelligence, mutual respect and good humor, it has been an extraordinary pleasure for me.

I’ve deep affection and respect for this faculty. My hope is that each of you, singly and as you are a body together, have some greater good news than has often been the case here in recent times. I sincerely wish you success in the reorganization of the College.

I want to thank you, all of you, without exception, for your friendship and help to me during the twelve years I've been here.

And to the students of the Poetics Program, he wrote,

The material occasion for this decision is the long-standing disorder of the College's administration and the financial uncertainty thus produced. I have been unable to alter the status quo of the administration; and the frustration, even anger, I've felt has made it impossible for me to carry out my duties to the College well, including, most importantly, those to you. The weight of additional duties has grown past my ability to manage them, especially during the past year; and I know that my continuance here risks damage to myself and to my family.

Please do get to me well in advance of May 31st, so that loose ends may be resolved. I would like to leave here clear of the past.... No one ought to fear that outstanding work will not be able to be attended to after that date. Louis and I will stay in touch on those matters too....

Although I cannot foresee developments within the College, my hope and my most realistic sense of them is that you can expect the College, and the poetics program, to remain functional through next year. I have no reason at this point to believe that any of you are in jeopardy in that regard.

Louis, Michael, David and Diane will need help ahead, and I hope you will not be shy—that you are colleagues in this.

I want to thank you for the trust and kindness you've given me, and for the tolerant permission you've extended me in the conduct of the classes. I have loved that work, and feel deep affection and gratitude to you for your help and your friendship.

Upon receipt of McNaughton's missives, 18 students and 3 of the remaining core faculty of the Poetics Program convened a meeting, whereat, according to a letter signed by all 24 students then enrolled and sent to the College at large on May 7, they "decided unanimously to sever our connection with New College of California, effective for the fall of 1987, and to actively seek affiliation with another institution,

beginning now." In the letter, they cited their "gross dissatisfaction...with an administration that:

- a) cannot pay its teachers on time, or even for three or four month periods, which has caused many teachers financial problems and is the partial cause of Duncan McNaughton's resignation;
- b) this despite continual increases in tuition, and furthermore cannot manage these funds well enough to...[ensure] that there will be a school here long enough for them to graduate.

We deplore the lack of action with which the administration of the College has responded to this situation, and thus are forced to take some action of our own to protect the integrity of our community of study. We care deeply about the fate of the Poetics Program and, unless substantial action takes place on the part of the administration..., are ready to do whatever is necessary to find it a new home.

On May 30, McNaughton's "last act" was to send checks to his fellow Poetics faculty, for "1/4 of the payroll which was due to you on May 1st," as he noted. "When another portion will appear is anyone's guess. Please check with Louis.... Louis is now it. I am now not-it. Vaya con dios."

V. Fanfare and Farewell

Two weeks after McNaughton's official departure, all attention turned to the White Rabbit Symposium and Jack Spicer Conference, which ran from June 14 through 21, 1986, organized by Poetics student Dawn-Michelle Baude (Kolokithas) with the help of classmate Douglas Lowell, who orchestrated exhibitions of White Rabbit publications and manuscripts at the Gleeson Library at the University of San Francisco and Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, respectively, as well as a pair of talks by Robert Duncan and Joe Dunn with video screening at the San Francisco Art Institute. An exhibition of visual art by members of the White Rabbit/Jack Spicer Circle (including Paul Alexander, Tom Field, Russell Fitzgerald, Nemi Frost, Fran Herndon, John Button, Harry Jacobus, Knute Stiles, Jess, and others) was mounted at the Intersection Gallery, curated by Alastair Johnston, who also curated an exhibition at the San Francisco Public Library, under the title *White Rabbit in Context*. Panel discussions on Jack Spicer in Context, featuring Michael Davidson, John Granger, Gilbert Sorrentino, and George Stanley, with Bruce Boone as moderator, and on "Vocabulary/As in 'My Vocabulary'" (Spicer's reputed last words, on his deathbed, to Robin Blaser, were "My Vocabulary did this to me. Your love will let you go on.") featuring Blaser, Lori Chamberlain, Larry Fagin, Ron Silliman, with Michael Palmer as moderator were both held at New College. The week's festivities were capped with a blow-out reception and marathon reading at

City Lights Books, featuring Blaser, Alexander, Fagin, Stanley, Gail Chugg, Ebbe Borregaard, Harold Dull, James Herndon, Dora Fitzgerald, Joanne Kyger, Larry Kearney, David Meltzer, Graham Mackintosh, Stan Persky, Ron Primack, John Allen Ryan, Janet Thormann, Tom Parkinson and others, with Lew Ellingham as moderator.

It had been two decades since Spicer died in 1965 and a decade since Black Sparrow published *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* in 1975, making his body of work widely available to those outside his own extended community for the first time. However, aside from the single, albeit quite substantive, issue of *boundary 2*, (vol. 6 no. 1) produced in 1977, Spicer had received little critical attention. In 1998, when Wesleyan published both *Poet Be Like God* and *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, Spicer began to enter a certain academic canon, a position cemented a decade later with Wesleyan's publication of *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poems of Jack Spicer*, but in the intervening years, the White Rabbit Symposium and Jack Spicer Conference would be *the* major event of Spicer's afterlife. It was a remarkable week, not without disagreement, of course, bringing together as it did such an array of poets and critics, but as Kevin Killian wrote, "There seemed to be a lot of tension and irony in the air. People were saying, 'This is just what Jack would have loved,' staring right across the room at people saying the opposite. For displays of personality the Jack Spicer Conference was 'the cream of the crop, the top of the heap....'"⁷⁵¹ He felt the panels were particular contentious, in

no small part on account of the moderators' own stances, which tended to exacerbate differences and disagreements among the panelists rather than moderate them, but "no matter how one felt about the Conference, one knew history was being made as one walked through it. The anecdotal and biographical aspects of the Conference have been remarked on, ditto the intellectual fireworks, but in years to come I'll tell some little children, 'I was there when they reified Jack Spicer.' 'Oh Grandpa,' they'll say, 'no one listens to poetry.'" ⁷⁵² For Killian, who "came to the conference with a lot of trepidation" but would go on to collaborate with Lew Ellingham on the latter's book (then already well underway) about the Spicer circle, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (1998), the star of the week was Robin Blaser, for whose "return alone we owe Dawn Kolokithas (producer) and the Pacific Center for the Book Arts (sponsor) a thousand thanks. Kolokithas in fact did an admirable job throughout. Her energy, organization, and diplomacy were everywhere apparent, in a week and with a cast of characters that might have tried Mother Teresa." ⁷⁵³ Indeed, as remarkable as the conference was, it is perhaps even more remarkable that it was essentially a one-person affair, administratively. As others confirmed, and as Baude (Kolokithas) told me herself:

I ran that. That was me. I found all the funding independently, all by myself. When I became the Assistant Director of the Poetry Center at SFSU they all just looked at me and said you did this all by yourself? Yeah. I got private funding from everybody and just put it together and did it. I did it, I don't know, because somebody gave me seed money, some group, some guy gave me the first \$5,000. It was really

done over the phone. He said, "Ok, I believe in you. I'll give you 5,000 and see what you can do." That led to the other money, and eventually I got a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, which covered a lot, but I even had food at each event, the whole thing. That was all me.⁷⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the remaining Poetics faculty met to plan for the coming year without the two Duncans. The course di Prima had initially proposed to teach next was "a two-year course on Pound," but as she wrote in a letter to Louis Patler, dated June 12, 1986, "I haven't got the heart to begin a two-year course with things as they are. I've searched my mind and archives for some, say, one-semester stuff that I could quickly throw together, and find nothing that would suit. The Pound course is what I have set my sails for; I have for the past six months been gathering the books and materials; but I take it too seriously to start it in such a chancy surround."

Having taken "a good hard look at where I'm at, and what I can actually do," di Prima proposed

to remain on the Faculty of the Poetics Program, and be available to work with students on a one-on-one basis either on their theses, or helping them clear up problems (unfinished papers, incomplete courses, whatever) or doing Independent Study with groups of up to, say, three at a time.... I would really like the chance...to get to know some of the students who have not taken one of my courses; to light a fire under dear and recalcitrant thesis writers; to cause to materialize some of the renownedly non-present Blake papers, etc. To do tutorials with people in areas in which I have some expertise. This excites me.... [However,] I do not at this time feel capable or willing to teach a course under the present conditions of uncertainty and confusion.

It would not be fair if I did not mention that there are other factors besides the confusion at the school which have led me to this decision;

not the least of which is the point I am at in my own life and work. There is a certain amount of material (both personal and poetic) which needs to be addressed if I am to continue as a functioning artist. Perhaps this need would have been satisfied had we been in a program which allowed for sabbaticals, perhaps not. It's hard to say. I know that I am at present voluntarily engaged in a process more subtle and demanding than anything I've encountered in my life up to this time. Working one-on-one and with small groups is what seems most appropriate just now.

She also requested relief from the Basic Elements sessions, and colleagues acquiesced to both requests. While di Prima remained available “for individual projects” on Selected Issues in Poetics, such as “Metaphysical Lyric, Classical Latin Poetry (Virgil, Ovid), Poetics of the Romantic Period, Gnostic Cosmologies, Alchemical Texts, and selected individual poets,” as the catalogue description suggests, and she also committed to “write and deliver three lectures on H.D. for the Visiting Poets course,” in the spring, as she’d done with Shelley previously — “Looking forward to it.” — the core faculty was effectively cut in half.

Where there had been six sharing the Basic Elements load, now there were only Meltzer, Palmer, and Patler, so they set to work collectively compiling a reader of key essays, poems, and prose for a two-semester sequence, but assigned no advance “topics” as had formerly been the practice so that “readings and written assignments [could be] determined from week to week as the curriculum shape[d] itself in the context of what [was] most useful in a given semester.” As much out of habit or established tradition as out of a particular desire, David Meltzer offered a somewhat

streamlined course in the Kabbalah in the fall. After nearly two decades of continuous, intensive, study of the Jewish mystical tradition—from his first encounter in the middle 1960s with Scholem (via Duncan), through his 1970s editorial work on *Tree*, *Tree Books*, and *The Secret Garden*, on through his various framings and reframing in his New College courses—“towards the end I began to sort of reach the feeling [that I’d] ‘done that,’”⁷⁵⁵ as far as teaching was concerned. In the spring he embarked on “a preliminary philo-poetic venture into creative lexicography and etymology.” In a course entitled Words Worth with *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*—“any edition of it, as long as the appendix contains a listing of Indo-European roots”—as the only text, he and his students would “examine and address key words (and locked words) from the public and private vocabulary, unfolding histories of meaning and unmeaning.” Due to popular demand, or at least multiple suggestions in the previous year’s rounds of New College Notes, Michael Palmer offered again a proper Prosody course in the fall, concerned with “both classical and linguistic prosody and consider[ing] the historical significance of various prosodic paradigms,” with an emphasis placed on “the formal evolution of 20th century poetic practice in relation to its antecedents.” The following term, however, he picked up where he’d left off the previous spring, returning to his study of the Objectivists with a focus on “the poetry and prose of Louis Zukofsky,” namely “the first twelve sections of Zukofsky’s long poem, “A”, along with his writings on poetics..., *Prepositions*, *A Test of Poetry*, *Bottom: On*

Shakespeare, and selected letters." Louis Patler, meanwhile, refocused on an early area of interest, sparked on his first Semester at Sea. He offered a two-semester sequence under the titles *Drumming the Darkness: African Cosmologies and Creation After Creation After Creation: African Cosmologies and Poetics*. "Very little attention is given to African sources quite useful to students of Poetics," the catalogue notes, but "a pleasure in writing exists and awaits those who enjoy a startling preposition, an animate image, a chat with the living dead.... A range of readings is assembled here in the hope that an initial entry becomes plausible." Along with poems and prose by Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Diop Brothers, Kofi Anoor, Wole Soyinka, and others, core texts included the recently published *Ritual Cosmos* by Evan Zuesse, *African Worlds* by Cyril Forde, and *Conversations with Ogotemeli*, by Marcel Griaule, which had been a key text also in Patler's very first Poetics course in the fall of 1980 on Place & Image.

In the interest both of lightening their load and of diversifying the faculty (both in terms of poetics and in terms of gender), one of the previous year's visiting poets was recruited to lead the new year's visiting poets courses. In some ways Lyn Hejinian was an unlikely choice. If Robert Grenier, Leslie Scalapino, and even Anselm Hollo had been deemed too closely allied with the Language corporation, Hejinian was one of its board of directors, co-editor as she was of one of the group's primary magazines, *Poetics Journal*, along with arch Stalinguist (to harvest a neologism from Tom Clark's scorn-furrowed brow) Barrett Watten. Of course, the

faculty's great antagonist of Watten & Co., Robert Duncan, had left; di Prima, among the truest of an extremely tight-knit phalanx, had essentially recused herself from such decisions; and the screeching denouncements and saber rattling of the previous summer's Lakoff-Clark-et seq. exchange had damped down substantially over the ensuing year. Moreover, Hejinian had shown a marked levelness and frank sense in those jagged poetry wars, issuing no exaggerated recriminations of Language foes and not hesitating to contest the more absurd statements of certain Language allies. Most importantly, however, Hejinian had proven herself both an interesting poet and an incisive critic over the course of the preceding decade, from her inaugural Tuumba Press publication, her own *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking*, in 1976, to the now classic texts, *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (1978) and *My Life* (1980), through her 1981 talks on American Literary Realism at 80 Langton Street, her seminal 1983 lecture "The Rejection of Closure" at 544 Natoma, and not least her 1985 Stein talks at New College. Even if she might represent an element of antagonism, it would surely be "an intelligent antagonism," as Duncan would have wished. She accepted the invitation, leading the already orchestrated William Carlos Williams and H.D. courses in fall and spring, respectively.

Before his Whitman talks, Nathaniel Mackey had agreed to return again to lecture on Williams, but come September, after long delay, Bernadette Mayer had finally received her check for services rendered as visiting poet the previous spring, but he and Ken Irby still hadn't been paid. The faculty were "mortif[ied]" at the

“outrage,” to use Palmer’s terms, and though Patler assured him such an outrage would not be repeated, as a dedicated grant for the series had been received from the San Francisco Foundation, Mackey, quite understandably, still withdrew, causing great disappointment for many students—and for me, when I learned the advertised talks had never taken place. The others who were scheduled to give lectures that fall on William Carlos Williams, and in fact did, were Bill Berkson and Clark Coolidge. New Directions had just published the first of its two volumes of *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, an important event that must have impacted the choice of Williams for that term’s course, but Coolidge found the resultant textual object somewhat sterile and felt the experience of reading the work in that condition paled to the experience of reading the work in its original published state, so he orchestrated his October talks around the individual books, bringing in all the first editions he had in his own collection or could otherwise lay hands on. Meltzer, Coolidge’s longtime friend and 1960s bandmate in *The Serpent Power*, said “he was calling us back to the individual volumes, that these were the places that you should go, if you can, to get that sense, because everything gets kind of unified and standardized in the collected and you sort of miss the feel, the typography,”⁷⁵⁶ i.e. that sense of the book as a new and exciting object in the world, tied to its time in its materiality and design. Several students recalled this much, but neither they nor Coolidge himself could remember much else, unfortunately. Bill Berkson, who had recently begun lecturing on art history and literature as well as organizing a public

lecture and reading series at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he would teach for the next twenty-odd years, returned to teach at New College for the first time since his Spring 1983 course on Vernacular Poetics, &/or “The News from Poems” — the subtitle, of course, borrowed from Williams — offering a set of three talks in November under the umbrella title Williams: Improvisations & the Field of Action, focused on Williams’s attention to and interaction with the visual arts: WCW and Painting; WCW and Photography; WCW and the Improvisations. As one would expect, the audience was treated to a wealth of slides, from Giotto to Picasso to Guston to Durer to Stieglitz to Brancusi to Gris — to name just half of those covered in the first, introductory part of Berkson’s first, four-part lecture — and students were provided with a suggested reading list of some two-dozen books and a dozen magazines to boot.

Writing to Robert Grenier some 18 months later, Hejinian recalled

reading *Paterson* [as] a majory focus of the course on Williams that I taught. Ultimately, I wasn’t sure I liked *Paterson* at all, at least relative to the works collected now in *Imaginations* [i.e. the early experiments in prose *Kora in Hell*, *Spring and All*, *The Descent of Winter*, *The Great American Novel*, and *A Novelette & Other Prose*]. Maybe it is only the theme “a man is a city” is less interesting to me than “a woman and hell.”

I’ve been acting as the thesis advisor for one of the old students at New College who is writing about “Spring and All” and “the Eternal Feminine” but without making any connection between “Spring and All” and “Kora in Hell.”

I was only at the place for a year and after Robert Duncan’s reign had ended, but it seems to me a lot of those students were interested in very hokey ideas about poetry and poetics. I’ve got another thesis

on hand that I've been asked to read about Creeley and "body work," particularly Roling!

I'm glad I'm not teaching there anymore.⁷⁵⁷

When I spoke with her, she affirmed that the "kind of metaphysics that was driving the poetics and the poetry [of those involved with the New College Poetics Program] seemed most bizarre to us in the Language scene and I think also probably to the New Narrative writers." To paraphrase a brief exchange Hejinian and I had about the aims, approaches, and senses of audience for these three disparate but connected groups, "New College fit very awkwardly." Language writers were writing for a group of "intellectual," quasi-academic colleagues and so took a "scholarly approach...[that was] definitely not person- or persona-based," whereas New Narrative was very much "persona-based..., though more about the eroticized subject," with its writers forming and writing for a "coterie," but for those involved in the Poetics Program, "you wrote for a kind of brotherhood, which is different from a coterie..., more of a transtemporal...circle, like the Stefan Georg circle. *Mystical.*" It certainly wasn't an approach that fit with her own. Nonetheless, Hejinian recalled "just being fascinated by Duncan McNaughton," when I spoke with her:

You know that thing where you're talking to someone and you realize that you don't believe a word they're saying and you just lose interest, you dissociate? I did not experience that with any of those people [teaching in the Poetics Program]. They were all credible, and maybe fucked up or had ideas that I thought were unlike an idea that I could have, but they weren't ideas that had no credibility. You could imagine a world-view in which that idea could be appealing or have

enormous practical value. Like Robert Duncan wrote much great, great poetry, and if he thought it was coming through traditions of passing on the orb, fine, whatever.

What's more, Hejinian said, "one of the truly great things that I got from New College, which was a chance to teach such a range of periods" and subjects:

I would never have volunteered to teach H.D. I'd never read her.... I think being forced to teach H.D., was like, "Well, ok. I'm not an H.D. fan, I'm not an H.D. scholar, but I could do this—just read the work and read some secondary materials and think hard, and see some through threads." I remember dividing up—because there are so many areas, epistemological areas that she taps into, and cultural areas, so students could volunteer. I didn't force it on anyone, I don't think. It would be unlike me to force anyone, but the Mary-ology, the angels and devils, the Freudian references, the astrological references, I identified some keys, WWII history, like that. We were reading *Trilogy*, spent a lot of time on that, so I'd say, "Ok, in this stanza we've got a reference to Taurus. Nick, what did you find? How does that fit in here? It was great. It was like this collective enterprise and each person would look into one part of the data, like one data area, but everyone was bringing them in, and that was really cool. I can't remember examples, but of course they were interrelated, the word for *sea* and for *mother* and for *Mary* were all the same thing in some kind of cosmological way. That was great."⁷⁵⁸

As poets-in-residence for H.D., Diane di Prima was joined in February by the Stanford professor Albert Gelpi and in March by Janice Robinson, author of *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet*, published by Houghton Mifflin, in 1982. These were somewhat curious choices considering the Poetics Program's habit of inviting actual poets for these residencies, Gelpi's colleague Jack Winkler having been the only other academic to date. Despite his credentials, however, Gelpi was "a friend of the program,"⁷⁵⁹ as Meltzer put it. His decade-old book *The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of*

the American Poet, which “traced the development of American Romantic poetry both out of and against its Calvinist sources,”⁷⁶⁰ often in reference to contemporary poets, Duncan importantly among them, at least had shown him to be sympathetic to many of the concerns of the poetics faculty, especially the abiding concern for lineage, a sympathy further evidenced his brand new book *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950*, which “trace[d] the development of American Modernist poetry both out of an against American Romanticism”⁷⁶¹ and sported an epigraph from a Duncan interview in which he remarks, “I read Modernism as Romanticism; and I finally begin to feel myself pretty much a 19th century mind.... 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.”⁷⁶² Janice Robinson’s book, on the other hand, hardly seems to have been in tune with the Poetics ethos or up to snuff academically, and received universally poor reviews. One reviewer complains of the author’s “need to circle around certain biographical details , as if such details were innately explanatory..., assigning them a causative role in literary texts, as if other people were more in control of her writing than H.D. herself.... What results is a reduction of H.D.’s work to its lowest common denominator, as if to associate an image with a person were in itself interpretive. The palimpsest of H.D.’s work requires a mediated response that incorporates language, phrase, and poetic context. A truly palimpsestic reading would build upon such inherent biographical associations rather than erase

all marks on the slate except for the hidden and often seemingly unlikely name of a lover or fellow poet."⁷⁶³

In her own talks the following month, di Prima similarly took Robinson to task on more than one occasion:

It is too simple, it is incorrect, to conclude as Janice Robinson does that the vision on the *Borodino* was a dream—the H.D. ‘dozed off’ before dressing for dinner. One has only to read one of her many accounts of this event to be haunted by its intensity, its otherness—a kind of supernatural quality....⁷⁶⁴

Peter Van Eck was a mask, as she knew, for the being she called the Man. (He might, in fact, have been a mask for Lawrence, as Janice Robinson suggests—but nowhere does Robinson ask the obvious next question: who, or what, was Lawrence a Mask for?)

It even seems likely to me that H.D. might have recognized this event as astral, but was unwilling or unable to name it such—unwilling or unable to put her sanity and balance “on the line.”⁷⁶⁵

In these talks, notes from which were published in 1988 by Am Here Books and republished as part of the CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, *Lost and Found*, in 2011 under the title *The Mysteries of Vision: Some Notes on H.D.*, di Prima more broadly excoriates the “materialist interpretation of H.D.,” in which “the actual intent of the artist, *direction voluntatis*—the direction of the Will—is not taken into account,” and which “carries with it the hidden agenda that we, as critics, i.e., at that moment in possession of our reasoning and analytic faculties, have a better handle on their ‘reality’ than they do.”¹ Speaking specifically of *Hermetic Definition*, in terms

¹ DdiP *Mysteries* 3-4

much more broadly applicable, di Prima insists "the events that the poem describes 'take place' in another world than this one: they 'exist,' if you will, on another 'plane.' To deny that plane's reality is to make sentimental mincemeat of high art."²

What's more, the "materialist approach,"

leaves us in the unenviable position of tossing the baby with the bath-water: leaves us without the possibility of using the Other as a door to our secret places. For it is thru love that we follow Ariadne's thread into the labyrinth—into the deepest part of ourselves. We must be "in love" to meet our demon/daimon (angel)... Without "romance" what is lacking is the enchantment that makes it visible.

Hence the secret of the "love cults" thru the ages: to be "in love" is the severest discipline: it is thralldom, as any religious path is "thralldom," and can be chosen and even sought as such, as the troubadours, Sufis, *fideli d'amore*, etc. amply demonstrate. What we tend so eagerly to forget is that poesis, especially visionary poesis, *is a religious path, sought and chosen.*³

Riffing on Robert Creeley's remark "that criticism at its best should be...precisely the record of the journey through an artist's work," di Prima adds "that it is a journey we take alone. In reading the poem we can do no better than follow the oft-repeated axiom of one of my teachers to 'Stay with the feeling.' Else we are likely to lose the Artist in a thicket of ideologies not her own."⁴ So di Prima proceeds through H.D.'s later work, "taking my 'poet's license,'" as she puts it in a brief introduction to the published version of her talks, "applying the ideogrammatic method to critical prose, in the hope that 'something' will emerge—something more than I know."⁵

² DdiP Mysteries 7

³ DdiP Mysteries 5

⁴ DdiP Mysteries 9

⁵ DdiP Mysteries 1

There could be no better statement and exposition of the kind of investigation and adventure advocated in the Poetics Program, in its original incarnation, so it is appropriate that di Prima's talks on H.D. should have been the final public event offered under its auspices. All that remained was the denouement.

Halfway through the 1986-1987 academic year, nine months after their initial statement of intent, in a letter to New College President Milly Henry dated February 9, 1987, the Poetics students wrote that "as there has been no improvement—in fact, things seem worse—and as the administration's policy toward the Poetics Program has been quite negative, we fully intend to abide by our decision and leave at the end of this semester." Expressing their frustration "that a college which claims a philosophy of progressive education could be so unable to understand a program devoted to serious and creative scholarship that fully challenges the usual academic hegemony that has placed such a lock on the dynamic reading of poetry and diverse subjects," the students declared "any reconciliation between NCOC and the students and faculty of the Poetics Program virtually impossible." This letter came in response to Henry's announcement of a "New Poetics Program at New College," to begin in the fall under the direction of Humanities faculty member Adam Cornford. I have been unable to turn up a copy of this announcement, but it appears to have been made in a letter "rather haphazardly distributed to the Poetics students" at the winter recess, which "implied that [these] poor students were being abandoned by

an uncaring and selfish faculty.” Those students insisted “nothing could be farther from the truth,” and they mounted a rousing defense of their teachers:

As you certainly know, our resignation preceded the faculty’s resignation.... In effect, the faculty is following the students out of a hopeless situation.

We are extremely proud of our program and of our faculty. Outside of this present Poetics Program, nothing in the United States even closely resembles it. We have a high and honorable national reputation, and our faculty has been and is composed of poets of national and international stature. The long record of shabby, cavalier treatment and willful miscomprehension accorded our faculty is, to us, a source of warm indignation. Be assured, the love and respect we have for these men and women is vast and wonderful.

Obviously, then, our loyalties are to the current Poetics Program—whether it be located at NCOC or anywhere else. This loyalty can in no way be construed to favor NCOC, *per se*. In effect, our loyalty to *this* Poetics Program exists in an inverse proportion to our feelings regarding New College of California.

We wish you the best of luck with your proposed Poetics Program under Mr. Cornford’s direction, however, we are fully satisfied with the program and the faculty we have been and are now working with.

They sent a brief letter to *Poetry Flash* as well, explaining to “the Poetics Community at large” their “resignation” as a student body and the subsequent faculty resignations, announcing their “hopeful shift from New College to another academic institute in the very near future,” and asserting this while “New College is seeking to install a new Poetics Program” in the fall, “this new program will in no way be affiliated with any past or present students or teachers, and indeed is seeking to establish a completely different program with a different ‘philosophic approach’ to its study.” Printed just above this letter, in the May 1987 issue, was one from Cornford proclaiming “the Poetics Program at New College is alive and kicking”

and announcing “the faculty line-up for the 1987-1988 academic year” to include “Juan Felipe Herrera, Gloria Frym, and [himself], to be joined in the Spring by Tom Clark and Philip Lamantia.” Conford continues:

Faculty are committed to close reading of student work, while students are encouraged to establish informal apprenticeships with individual faculty; the emphasis, however, will be on a collective exploration that challenges the limits and preconceptions of students and faculty alike.... This reorientation of the program, occasioned in part by the departure of the current faculty, is also part of a much broader movement of change at New College. The Humanities program ... I believe that New College is about to become one of the most exciting centers of higher learning in the United States, and I invite your readers to join us.

Advertisements placed in the next few issues with the tagline “POETRY ON THE OFFENSIVE,” affirm the core faculty and add an “Advisory Board” consisting of Andrei Codrescu, Victor Henrnández Cruz, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Susan Griffin, and announce an open house and faculty reading on September 2 to kick the reconstituted program into gear.

Meanwhile, Louis Patler had been working furiously to find a new home for the original program faculty and students, and in these same issues of *Poetry Flash* ads appear “announcing the offering of Poetics Antioch” with the core faculty of Michael Palmer, Lyn Hejinian, Louis Patler, David Meltzer, and Duncan McNaughton, plus poets-in-residence, and largely familiar-sounding initial course offerings of Basic Elements (taught by the entire faculty), Dada/Surrealism (Palmer), The Unsayable (Meltzer), Language of Inquiry (Hejinian), Standard Texts in Poetics (Patler),

Angelology (McNaughton), Harlem Renaissance (Hejinian/Meltzer – perhaps a tripartite visiting poets course), and Issues in Poetics (TBA). It seems di Prima had decided to stick with SIMHA and her private teaching rather than make the move with her colleagues to Antioch University, or more specifically Antioch University West – San Francisco, one of several outposts of the Yellow Springs, Ohio-based college, whose history and philosophy were not dissimilar from those of New College. Though originally founded in 1852, with Horace Mann as its first President, Antioch opened dozens of satellite campuses throughout the 1960s and 1970s in New England, the West Coast, and elsewhere. Like New College, the San Francisco campus bounced around for several years in the '70s and '80s, but at the time was located at 650 Pine Street, above the Stockton Tunnel, a stone's throw from North Beach. The move, however, was never effected. The precise trouble is unclear, but there seem to have been a number of factors that ultimately conspired to undo Patler's arrangements. In an August letter to Nathaniel Mackey, Todd Baron remarked, "things are pretty shaky up here for our program at ANTIOCH. Seems New College is putting out a pretty good bluff and all of a sudden it's like prizefighting." All the uncertainty caused no little anxiety for many of the students who had stated their intentions to move with the program, wherever it should end up, and enrollments were low, too low for Antioch's liking. Moreover, Antioch had its own organizational and financial issues—both the San Francisco campus and its parent college. In a rather ironic turn of events, when the San Francisco branch lost

its home at 650 Pine, it spent its final months at, of all places, 50 Fell, in rooms leased from New College, which ultimately absorbed many of Antioch's students their school closed in 1989.⁷⁶⁶

The plan was ill-fated, and when it fell through, a handful of the students who'd left along with their faculty ended up returning to New College to finish out their degrees in the reconstructed Poetics Program. With them came David Meltzer, whose rapidly deteriorating health meant he could hardly afford to find himself without health insurance. He was welcomed back to teach a "minicourse" of five seminars under the tagline, "Unexpected Gifts: The Prophetic Tradition in Jewish Poetry Before and After the Holocaust," and then as a visiting faculty member for the full Spring 1988 term, before being restored to the core faculty the following academic year when Juan Felipe Herrera left to get an MFA of his own at Iowa. For unknown reasons, Lamantia's place in the first year of the reconstituted program reduced from the originally announced core faculty, to visiting faculty, and Lamantia, too, was gone by the following year. Despite the acrimony of the collapse and reconstruction, several of the departed faculty would see through thesis advising roles they'd taken on previously, too. Michael Palmer, for instance, remained on the committees for both Todd Baron (with Aaron Shurin and Meltzer) and Judith Roche (with Diane di Prima and Meltzer, again). And various poets who had played important roles in one capacity or another during the first incarnation of the program would return to play similarly important roles in later years, most

notably perhaps Lyn Hejinian and Joanne Kyger, but others, too, as teachers, guest lecturers, readers, and more. Even Duncan McNaughton would teach a few semesters in the later years of the program. There was, no doubt, a great deal of continuity between the original Poetics Program and its successor. Indeed, the anthology of New College Poetics writings drawn from across the program's full thirty years, *Roots and Routes: Poetics at New College of California*, which I co-edited with Patrick James Dunagan and Marina Lazzara, clearly posits just such a continuity. However, as much as the latter may have harked back to the former, with many students and teachers drawing their inspiration, at least in some degree, from the spirit of Robert Duncan, as so many of the earlier students and teachers drew theirs from his living, breathing presence, the Poetics Program before was quite distinct from the Poetics Program after. The rupture of 1987 was definitive, and so it seems a fitting place for me to end this study, though in so doing, offering a glimpse, at least, of what came after seems apropos.

Robert Duncan died on February 3, 1988. The next month's *Poetry Flash* was full of written tributes to him by Diane di Prima, Robert Creeley, Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg, Helen Adam, Judy Grahn, Michael Davidson, Thomas Parkinson, and Steve Abbott, and a reprinting of Duncan's poem, *My Mother Would Be A Falconress*. An advertisement announced a tribute gathering at Fort Mason, on April 4, featuring

some 30 poets, diverse in stature and poetic bent but alike in their admiration and affection for the late bard with the mercurial personality and erratic, encyclopedic intelligence, who had been the center around which the New College Poetics Program had, indeed, turned. On the next spread, of that same issue of *Poetry Flash*, another advertisement announced that on the preceding weekend, the annual meeting of the Associated Writing Programs (AWP) would come to San Francisco for the first time. It was with a distinct sense of irony and no little sadness that I noted this juxtaposition. AWP and the Poetics Program at New College had nothing to do with each other in Spring 1988, but the reconstitution of the preceding Fall clearly began the long march to incorporation in the very MFA industry anathema to the original core faculty. The rebooted program initially remained an MA program in Poetics, not an MFA in Creative Writing, and Cornford stressed in the official, if still propositional, announcement of “The New Poetics Program at New College” that “its primary concern is not writing but poetry—the nature of poetry and the various means for bringing it about, of which writing is one. Consequently,” he continued:

it expects more analytical thought and self-questioning, from both faculty and students, than creative writing programs typically do. Its aim is not to produce graduates capable through acquired training and/or innate talent of writing “interesting” and well-crafted verse, but to serve as a focal point for the study and investigation of poetics, that is, of fundamental questions about poetry. In short, it shares neither principal goals nor organizing assumptions with creative writing programs, even though it covers some of the same ground.

The new program would be “organized around three central and interlocking areas of investigation, study, and practice, as follows: POETIC LANGUAGE AND IMAGINATION / The relationship of language to poetic or artistic imagination.... POETRY IN AND BEYOND THE POEM / The idea of the ‘poetic experience’ as not exclusive to poems per se.... POETRY AND SOCIETY / The relationship of poetry and poets to the rest of society....” Coursework would be “organized under three general headings” corresponding to these “areas of investigation, study, and practice”:

THEORY AND HISTORY—the grammar, syntax and technique of poetic writing; lyric, narrative, and dramatic poetry; linguistics and poetry; politics and sociology of poetry; critical theory.

POETIC WRITING—workshop and tutorial teaching environments; collaborative writing; magazine production using “desktop” technology.

EXPERIMENTS AND RESEARCH—projects in poetic video, performance, graphics, etc.; investigation of the poetic quality in works of art and in unplanned environments urban and rural.

Proposed “areas for course construction and/or collective investigation” included:

The Poetic Experience; Poetic Cinema; Poetry and the Vernacular; Poetry and the Oral Tradition; Poetry as Performance; Formalism and Its Critics; Poets and Politics; Poetry and Work; Poetry in Public Places; Issues of Identity in Women Poets; The Prose Poem; American Eccentrics; Poets Writing About Literature and Art; Poetics of Short Fiction; Semiology, Psychogeography and the Poetics of Everyday Life; and Poetic Video. Many of the descriptions attached to these proposed course titles

sound quite appealing to me, personally, and there are numerous points of contact, here and in other parts of the document, with key concerns of the original Poetics Program; however, the departures are perhaps more numerous. What stands out most to me is the degree to which attention is turned away from the poem and the poet, as such, or as more traditionally conceived. Indeed, in the final section, Cornford cites among the fundamental “principles” of the new program “serious and ongoing efforts...to recruit students from non-literary backgrounds, both artists and non-artists” as well as the encouragement of “interdisciplinary projects involving other departments at New College, as well as other organizations.” These “principles” are neither to be celebrated nor to be denigrated in and of themselves, but that these should be two principles of a scant five offered as final thoughts is, it seems to me, quite remarkable. Two others are concerned with the collaborative shaping of the curriculum and other aspects of the program, among the faculty on the one hand, and with the students on the other. The final principle is that “faculty [be] required to read closely and comment on student manuscripts on a regular basis.”

This, then, is the other remarkable shift. Despite Cornford’s claim that the “aim is not to produce graduates capable through acquired training and/or innate talent of writing ‘interesting’ and well-crafted verse, but to serve as a focal point for the study and investigation of poetics, that is, of fundamental questions about poetry,” student poems were to become a central focus of the program, in a way they never had been

in its original incarnation, with the workshop and writing tutorial assuming a role equal to that of theory, history, experiment, and research. Initially, the New Poetics Program under Cornford continued to be an MA program, with Meltzer again offering his précis on the Kabbalah, Herrera offering “instruction in community ethnography techniques in order to chart the literary history of the S.F. Bay Area during the last thirty years,” and Cornford offering historical considerations of “the longstanding tension between poetry as a special, set-apart discourse and poetry as an extension of common speech” in its first year. However, this first year, the program also incorporated student writing more fully into the curriculum with Frym offering a hybrid workshop/seminar investigating “the prose poem, or the poem in prose...as an anarchic, antilyrical technique, unstable and contradictory...method of subverting genre,” and Clark offering the first proper Poetics Workshop, which was based in “group critique of individual [student] poems,” as any standard MFA workshop anywhere, but which was also particularly concerned with the “esthetic and philosophical issues [the poems might] raise.” Such workshops and hybrid courses along with individual directed writing and manuscript advising would continue to be central to the student experience after the reconstitution.

When the majority of Poetics Program activities returned to Valencia Street in Fall 1989, the balance of the curriculum would undergo a major reorganization, in response to the demand by a large part of the student body for more attention to the

traditional English and US American cannon to supplement the more contemporary and idiosyncratic course offerings, which also continued as electives. The new core curriculum, “rather than attempting to cover history as a continuum..., [was] built around four moments of rupture and rapid transformation” initially dubbed The Birth of the Modern, 1580-1660 (Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Herrick, and Milton); The Romantic Revolution, 1780-1830 (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and the Shelleys); American Vistas, 1820-1870 (Dickinson, Whitman, Emerson, Melville, and Poe); and The Great Divide, 1900-1930 (Crane, H.D., Hughes, Moore, Olson, Pound, Stein, Stevens, and Williams). Coursework was “designed to teach not only history but two different axes in reading and textual analysis... the *technical-interpretive*: reading for poetic craft and denotative content...[and] the *historical-analytic*: reading for ideological assumptions, for structure, for relation to genre, to the vernacular and other discourses of the period,” with each semester offering twinned classes: a historical-analytic “survey” (i.e. context) course and a technical-interpretive “major authors” course. This basic structure would endure over the remaining years of the program, with some variation, the workshops largely taught by Clark and Frym, the context courses largely taught by Meltzer, and the major author courses variously taught by Clark, Cornford, Frym, and Lyn Hejinian, who would rejoin the core faculty in the early 1990s.

In 1987, the returning students would be joined, and succeeded in the ensuing years, by others who would prove themselves no less interesting, active, and accomplished poets than their predecessors, and these students and their teachers, too, continued to publish magazines, run small presses and galleries, host reading and lecture series, conferences, and exhibitions, in and around New College as they pursued studies in the Poetics Program. When the program was reanimated in 1987, Poetics graduate students resurrected the magazine, *Cayati*, of which undergraduates in the 1970s, under the direction of Louis Patler, had published 13 issues—the cover of the final issue adorned with a tarot card, the 13th of the Major Arcana: Death—publishing a 14th issue in the spring of 1988, with a 15th issue following in the spring of 1989. A new magazine, *Prosodia*, took its place as the house organ in the spring of 1990. Initially planned as a semi-annual, the second issue did not appear until 1992, but *Prosodia* would be a far more regular, enduring, and integral part of the Program throughout the 1990s than *Convivio* had been in the 1980s, with issues appearing annually through 2001, produced by an ever-changing cast of Poetics students in editorial collectives of 2 to 8 persons and a series of faculty advisers, at first informally and then officially, with Gloria Frym advising on Issues 3 through 5, Adam Cornford on Issue 6, and George Mattingly on the final three issues (7 through 10). Whereas prior to the 1987 reconstitution of the Poetics Program, even the officially sanctioned and funded publications had been produced more or less

independently, *Prosodia* would be the subject and object of an annual, year-long course, much as most organs produced by MFA programs across the country today.

Also in the first year of the reconstituted program, Cornford recruited Peter Koch, his former roommate at a Situationist co-habitation in Berkeley in the 1970s who had published Cornford's first book of poems, *Shooting Scripts* (Black Stone Press, 1978), to teach a fine-press complement to the basic publishing class Ralph Ackerman taught to undergraduates at New College. Coincidentally, Barb Moskovitzi, wife and business partner of legendary Berkeley bookseller Moe Moskovitz, and co-founder in 1958 of Berkeley's Walden School, was looking to get rid of that school's unused letterpress equipment, including a Vandercook 219 proof press and a Chandler & Price platen press along with type, furniture, and other accoutrements, which Koch obtained for New College for the bare cost of moving it all to 50 Fell Street. He taught a single class, enjoyed it and talked Cornford, who in turn talked the administration, into establishing a course of study in the Book Arts under the umbrella of the Poetics Program. Koch, then a well-respected and by now a renowned fine press printer, produced two exquisite chapbooks with his class that year, Cornford's *Round Midnight* and Clark's *Little Cantos*. The modest stipend he'd been paid to get the program underway was to be cancelled the following year, however, so he left to accept a five-year appointment as Master Printer and Lecturer at The Press in Tuscany Alley, a teaching press associated with San Francisco State University, and went on to teach *The Hand-Printed Book In Its Historical Context* at

the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley for twenty years as well. He was succeeded in the New College print studio by Mary Laird, herself a fine printer, bookbinder, and publisher of *Quelquefois Press*, and one-time partner in the legendary *Perishable Press*, with her then-husband Walter Hamady. Laird soon left, as well, with graduate student Jeff Conant taking charge in the middle 1990s, and Eileen Callahan of the Turtle Island Foundation running the press in the early 2000s. Students in New College Book Arts classes produced a number of books and many broadsides of the faculty, student, and visiting poets' work, sometimes as coursework and sometimes as extracurricular activities. Indeed, as in the initial incarnation of the Poetics Program, many little magazines were produced and small presses run by students alongside the officially sanctioned publications, like Michael Price's and Dale Smith's *Mike and Dale's Younger Poets*, Renee Gladman's *Clamour*, Giovanni Singleton's *nocturnes*, Noel Black's *LOG* and *Angry Dog Press*, Jill Stengel's *A+ Bend Press*, Erik Noonan's *Snag Press*, and Micah Ballard's and Sunnylyn Thibodeaux's *Auguste Press*, to name only a few.

It's worth mentioning, as well, that shortly before the Poetics Program shifted briefly over to 50 Fell Street, Intersection for the Arts took up residence in what had been the Valencia Rose Café next door to New College's 762 Valencia Street gallery, and hosted many Poetics events, though the organization had no official connection to the College, as such. In the middle 1990s, however, Small Press Traffic Literary Arts Center founded in 1974 and long housed just a few blocks away at 24th and

Guerrero, occupied the gallery, with Dodie Bellamy as director, and with a more explicit affiliation with New College. There were, of course, numerous other organizations, bookstores, galleries, performance spaces, and other venues in the vicinity where Poetics students read their work, performed plays and music, exhibited their art, and otherwise engaged with the Mission district arts scene throughout the program's existence, but it is impossible to address the extent of that engagement here. Suffice to say the Poetics Program would not have been what it was had it not been where it was, and when it was—this goes for the initial incarnation in the early and middle 1980s, the reincarnation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the third and final phase of its existence, which can be dated to the middle 1990s, around the time of Hejinian's return and the arrival of SPT, when the Program underwent another major structural change.

Under Cornford's direction, the program had shown an increasing concern—responding in no small part to increasing demand by the student body and college administration—for what might best be termed “professional development.” The increased attention to students' writing (both “creative” and “critical”) and to students' facility with canonical texts was partly motivated by anxieties about long-term viability, i.e. marketability both of the program to prospective students and of program graduates to potential employers, so in retrospect it seems inevitable that the new Poetics Program should drift further into the orbit of AWP and begin to offer, in addition to its sui generis MA in Poetics, an MFA as well. Applications were

accepted individually for the MA and MFA programs as well as for a double MA/MFA program, requiring both a critical and a creative thesis. For the first few years thereafter, many students worked toward, and received, MA or dual MA/MFA degrees, but Hejinian's departure in 1998 (at first temporarily, to the Iowa Writers Workshop, and then permanently, to UC Berkeley) came as a blow to many students who were drawn to the Poetics Program by the opportunity to study with her. In another blow, Small Press Traffic left for the campus of the California College of Art in 2000—though a small but lively bookstore and gallery called Blue Books took its place in the Valencia Street storefront, founded by former Poetics student and then Program Coordinator Michael Price with the help of Brandon Downing, employing many students with federal work-study funds. Poetics graduate Micah Ballard assumed administrative duties in the undergraduate Humanities program and facilitated the returns of Duncan McNaughton and Joanne Kyger as guest instructors, intermittently turning his office into Lew Gallery to mount exhibitions. Independent, extracurricular activity may have ebbed and flowed, though it surely never ceased, and the core faculty soldiered on, as it were, but as the years went by, fewer and fewer were interested in putting in the work required of the MA, and the originary, singular ethos of the Poetics Program decayed. When New College finally collapsed in 2008, after nearly four decades of precarity, and the remnants of the Poetics Program were absorbed by the nearby California Institute of Integral Studies

(CIIS), there was little save its history to mark it out from myriad other creative writing programs across the country.

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- ¹ Meltzer, David. Personal Interview. 01-23-2015
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- ⁸⁷ Collis. *Through Words of Others*. 137
- ⁸⁸ Collis. *Through Words of Others*. 124
- ⁸⁹ Mackey. *Paracritical Hinge*. 3
- ⁹⁰ Collis. *Through Words of Others*. 65
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- ⁹³ Di Prima, Diane. Email to the author, Jan. 18, 2012.
- ⁹⁴ McNaughton, Duncan. Conversation with the author.
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- ⁹⁸ Whitney, John D. "Public Statement of the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus V. Rev. John D. Whitney, S.J. Provincial Superior." Posted at BishopAccountability.org. http://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2006/09_10/2006_09_08_Goodwin_PublicStatement.htm Accessed 9/21/2020
- ⁹⁹ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 59
- ¹⁰⁰ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 76
- ¹⁰¹ Raines, Bob. *In Good Faith: The Rise and Fall of Community Governance at a Small Alternative College; or, The Waterbag Caper: The Hoax and its Subsequent Coverup*. NP: privately printed, 1973. Print. 6
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- ¹⁰³ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 6
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- ¹⁰⁵ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 85
- ¹⁰⁶ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 85
- ¹⁰⁷ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 79
- ¹⁰⁸ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 79
- ¹⁰⁹ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 9-10
- ¹¹⁰ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 67
- ¹¹¹ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 8
- ¹¹² Raines. *In Good Faith*. 8
- ¹¹³ The Board consisted of professor Lewis Mayhew; attorney Donal Cummins; psychiatrist Romulo Gonzales, M.D.; academic administrator Delos Putz (a Gonzaga graduate); businessmen Andrew Polich, Raymond Roy, and Eli Thomas (also a Gonzaga graduate); and former teacher Mary Ann Sears, who was listed as "housewife" in the school's publication of the Trustees names.
- ¹¹⁴ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 8-9
- ¹¹⁵ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 11
- ¹¹⁶ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 89
- ¹¹⁷ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 10
- ¹¹⁸ The Record Plant was in fact three recording studios. The first had opened in New York City in 1968, followed by the second in Los Angeles in 1969. The Sausalito studio opened in the fall of 1972, the same season New College moved to this location. In addition to Santana, such artists as the Grateful Dead, The Tubes, Peter Frampton, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Pablo Cruise, Rory Gallagher, The Marshall Tucker Band, Jimmy Buffett, Bonnie Raitt, Link Wray, Linda Ronstadt and Fleetwood Mac recorded there, or played live on the studio's radio show "Live from the Plant" in the early 1970s.
- ¹¹⁹ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
- ¹²⁰ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 15
- ¹²¹ Raines. *In Good Faith*. 15
- ¹²² Raines. *In Good Faith*. 21
- ¹²³ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 90
- ¹²⁴ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
- ¹²⁵ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 92

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- ¹²⁶ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 92
- ¹²⁷ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
- ¹²⁸ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
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- ¹³² Opstedal, Kevin. "Dreaming as One: Poetry, Poets and Community in Bolinas, California 1967 – 1980." *Big Bridge* vol. 3, no. 4. Online. <http://www.bigbridge.org/bolinas.htm> Accessed 10-15-2020.
- ¹³³ Opstedal. "Dreaming as One."
- ¹³⁴ Opstedal. "Dreaming as One."
- ¹³⁵ Weishaus, Joel. *On the Mesa: An Anthology of Bolinas Writing*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1971. Print. Back cover
- ¹³⁶ Opstedal. "Dreaming as One."
- ¹³⁷ Allen, Donald, ed. *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. New York: Grove, 1960. Print. xiii
- ¹³⁸ Opstedal. "Dreaming as One."
- ¹³⁹ Duncan McNaughton papers (M1459). Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- ¹⁴⁰ McNaughton, Duncan. *Love Triumphant: Meditations on William Shakespeares "Sonnets"*. Dissertation: State University of New York, at Buffalo, 1972. Print. i
- ¹⁴¹ McNaughton, Duncan. Personal Interview. 01-30-2015
- ¹⁴² McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. xxxx
- ¹⁴³ McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. xxxviii
- ¹⁴⁴ McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. xxxix
- ¹⁴⁵ McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. viii-ix
- ¹⁴⁶ McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. x
- ¹⁴⁷ McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. xiv
- ¹⁴⁸ McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. xxxxi
- ¹⁴⁹ Eshleman, Clayton. *Companion Spider: Essays*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001. Print. 31
- ¹⁵⁰ Dunagan, Patrick James. "A Curriculum of the Soul." *Entropy*, June 5, 2017. <https://entropymag.org/a-curriculum-of-the-soul/>. Accessed 09-21-2020.
- ¹⁵¹ Kyger, Joanne. "The Community of THE CURRICULUM OF THE SOUL." *Poetry Foundation*, 08/28/2012. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/08/the-community-of-the-curriculum-of-the-soul>. Accessed 09/21/2020.
- ¹⁵² Dunagan. "A Curriculum of the Soul."
- ¹⁵³ Boughn, Michael. "Olson's Buffalo." In *The World in Time and Space: Towards a History of Innovative American Poetry, 1970-2000*. Edited by Joseph Donohue and Edward Foster. Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 2002. Cited here from pdf manuscript. 14
- ¹⁵⁴ Duncan's fascicle consisted of a draft of what would become *The Dante Études*, a sequence of poems vital to understanding Duncan's sense of poetic community, a sense that is reflected in the Poetics Program at New College, and to which we shall return.
- ¹⁵⁵ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016

¹⁵⁶ There were 13 issues of *Cayati* from 1975 to 1978. The cover of the 13th issue is adorned with a tarot card, the 13th of the Major Arcana: Death. The magazine would be exhumed in the spring of 1988 by students in a completely reshuffled New College Poetics program, and a couple of issues would appear before *Prosodia* took its place as the house organ in the spring of 1990.

¹⁵⁷ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016

¹⁵⁸ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 97

¹⁵⁹ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016

¹⁶⁰ Of these courses in basic grammar and composition McNaughton would write in an institutional self-study: "For the past two terms I have offered classes which I believed were needed at NCOC—not classes which I should have personally preferred to have done. It appears now that the decision to do so was a unwise—i.e. that to provide courses based on student *needs* seems beside the point."

¹⁶¹ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 96

¹⁶² Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 91

¹⁶³ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 97

¹⁶⁴ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 93

¹⁶⁵ McNaughton, Duncan. Personal Interview. 01-30-2015

¹⁶⁶ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 94

¹⁶⁷ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016

¹⁶⁸ Van Hollebeke. *Jebbie*. 102

¹⁶⁹ McNaughton, Duncan. Personal Interview. 01-30-2015

¹⁷⁰ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016

¹⁷¹ Dorn, Edward. [Introduction to a reading by Amiri Baraka at New College of California, March 2, 1980.] Audiotape. American Poetry Archives at the San Francisco State Poetry Center.

¹⁷² Baraka, Amiri. *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1979. Print. 236-240

¹⁷³ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016

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¹⁷⁵ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016

¹⁷⁶ *Poetry Flash*. November 1979.

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¹⁷⁸ Diggory, Terrence. *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets*. New York: Facts on File, 2009. Print. 334

¹⁷⁹ Ensign, Allen. Email to the author. May 19, 2015

¹⁸⁰ Clark, Tom and Gregory Corso. *The Ballgame's Over: The Dialogues of Gregory Corso & Tom Clark on The Great Naropa Poetry Wars*. Edited by Allen Ensign. San Francisco: New College of California, 1981. Typescript. 4

¹⁸¹ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 5

¹⁸² Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 4

¹⁸³ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 10

¹⁸⁴ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 15

¹⁸⁵ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 26

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- ¹⁸⁶ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 28
- ¹⁸⁷ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 21
- ¹⁸⁸ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 3
- ¹⁸⁹ Clark and Corso. *The Ballgame's Over*. 17
- ¹⁹⁰ Taking all nine Bay Area counties into account (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma) the 1980 census counted 5,179,784 people, with 678,974 of those living in San Francisco, proper.
- ¹⁹¹ McNaughton, Duncan and Louis Patler. "A Proposal for a Master of Arts in Poetics." August 1979. Duncan McNaughton papers (M1459). Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.
- ¹⁹² Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
- ¹⁹³ McNaughton, Duncan. Personal Interview. 01-30-2015
- ¹⁹⁴ Myers. *The Elephants Teach*. 167
- ¹⁹⁵ Myers. *The Elephants Teach*. 167
- ¹⁹⁶ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
- ¹⁹⁷ Poetics Program Catalog, 1980-1981.
- ¹⁹⁸ Myers. *The Elephants Teach*. 161
- ¹⁹⁹ Myers. *The Elephants Teach*. 162-163
- ²⁰⁰ McGurl. *The Program Era*. 5
- ²⁰¹ McNaughton and Patler. "A Proposal for a Master of Arts in Poetics."
- ²⁰² McNaughton, Duncan. *Sumeriana*. Bolinas, Ca.: Tombouctou, 1977. Print.
- ²⁰³ Corbin, Henry. *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969. Print. 110
- ²⁰⁴ McNaughton. *Love Triumphant*. 20
- ²⁰⁵ McNaughton, Duncan. Personal Interview. 01-30-2015
- ²⁰⁶ Poetics Program Catalogue, 1980-1981.
- ²⁰⁷ Poetics Program Catalogue, 1980-1981.
- ²⁰⁸ McNaughton and Patler. "A Proposal for a Master of Arts in Poetics."
- ²⁰⁹ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
- ²¹⁰ Patler, Louis. Personal Interview. 08-11-2016
- ²¹¹ McNaughton and Patler. "A Proposal for a Master of Arts in Poetics."
- ²¹² McNaughton and Patler. "A Proposal for a Master of Arts in Poetics."
- ²¹³ McNaughton, Duncan. Personal Interview. 01-30-2015
- ²¹⁴ Poetics Program Catalogue, 1980-1981.
- ²¹⁵ The couple had been close friends with poet John Wieners in Boston, having studied together at Boston College, before they all went to Black Mountain, where Wieners and Joe Dunn were both students, though Carolyn was never enrolled. They all wound back up in Boston afterward, where they became close with the likes of Stephen Jonas, Robin Blaser, and Jack Spicer, who enticed them to return to San Francisco with him in late 1956.
- ²¹⁶ Meltzer, David. *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2001. Print. 204
- ²¹⁷ Ellingham, Lewis and Kevin Killian. *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*. Wesleyan UP, 1998. Print. 108
- ²¹⁸ Ellingham and Killian. *Poet Be Like God*. 111
- ²¹⁹ Ellingham and Killian. *Poet Be Like God*. 112

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- ²²⁰ Ellingham and Killian. *Poet Be Like God*. 112
- ²²¹ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 192
- ²²² Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 194-5
- ²²³ Duncan, Robert. *Collected Essays and Other Prose*. Edited by James Maynard. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2014. Print. 347
- ²²⁴ Duncan. *Collected Essays*. 349
- ²²⁵ McClure, Michael. "On Semina." In *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art/Amsterdam, 1992. Print. 60
- ²²⁶ Duncan. *Collected Essays*. 350
- ²²⁷ Duncan. *Collected Essays*. 351
- ²²⁸ Meltzer, David. "The Secret Text Lost in the Processor," in *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution*. 56
- ²²⁹ Hadbawnik, David. "Interview with David Meltzer, March 2010." *Big Bridge* 2010 Supplement. https://bigbridge.org/BB14/2010_diprima/DiPrima_Meltzer_Interview.HTM Accessed 09-25-2020.
- ²³⁰ Di Prima, Diane. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print. 267
- ²³¹ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 266
- ²³² Di Prima. *R.D.'s H.D.* 15
- ²³³ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 17
- ²³⁴ Meltzer, David. Personal Interview. 01-23-2015
- ²³⁵ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 195
- ²³⁶ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 196-7
- ²³⁷ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 198-9
- ²³⁸ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 204
- ²³⁹ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 3
- ²⁴⁰ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 96
- ²⁴¹ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 5
- ²⁴² Grace, Nancy M. and Ronna C. Johnson. *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. Print. 92
- ²⁴³ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 109
- ²⁴⁴ Meltzer, David, ed. *Birth*. New York: Ballantine, 1973. 331
- ²⁴⁵ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 205.
- ²⁴⁶ Meltzer, David. "Afterword." In *About Time: An Anthology of California Prison Writing*. Santa Cruz, CA: Vacaville Prison Literary Workshop Program, c/o William James Association, 1980. Print.
- ²⁴⁷ Meltzer, David. Personal Interview. 01-23-2015
- ²⁴⁸ Di Prima, Diane. *Pieces of a Song*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1990. Print. 199
- ²⁴⁹ Calonne, David Stephen. *Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 148
- ²⁵⁰ Ellis, Jackson. "Interview: Diane di Prima." *Verbicide*. July 29, 2010. <https://www.verbicidemagazine.com/2010/07/29/interview-diane-di-prima/> Accessed 09-20-2020.
- ²⁵¹ Ellis. "Interview: Diane di Prima."
- ²⁵² Duncan. *A Poet's Mind*. 366-367

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- ²⁵³ Jarnot. *Ambassador from Venus*. 48-49
- ²⁵⁴ Duncan, Robert. "Ten Prose Pieces." Edited by Robert J. Bertholf and James Maynard. *Jacket* 28, October 2005. <http://jacketmagazine.com/28/dunc-bert-10prose.html#x7> Accessed 09-20-2020
- ²⁵⁵ Jarnot. *Ambassador from Venus*. 109
- ²⁵⁶ University of California History Digital Archives. "The Loyalty Oath Controversy, University of California, 1949-1951." http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/uchistory/archives_exhibits/loyaltyoath/ Accessed 09-20-2020
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- ²⁵⁹ Duncan. *A Poets Mind*. 78
- ²⁶⁰ [Poetics Program Planning Session 1, March 1980.] Audiotape. American Poetry Archives at the San Francisco State Poetry Center.
- ²⁶¹ Di Prima, Diane. "H.D.'s Angel Magic." Quoted in Calonne, *Diane di Prima*. 195
- ²⁶² Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 6-7
- ²⁶³ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 7
- ²⁶⁴ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 80
- ²⁶⁵ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 83-84
- ²⁶⁶ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 258
- ²⁶⁷ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 260
- ²⁶⁸ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 389
- ²⁶⁹ Di Prima. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. 389
- ²⁷⁰ Poetics Program Catalogue, 1980-1981.
- ²⁷¹ Poetics Program Catalogue, 1980-1981.
- ²⁷² Poetics Program Catalogue, 1980-1981.
- ²⁷³ Poetics Program Catalogue, 1980-1981.
- ²⁷⁴ Calonne. *Diane di Prima*. 230-231
- ²⁷⁵ Calonne. *Diane di Prima*. 231
- ²⁷⁶ Di Prima. "H.D.'s Angel Magic." Quoted in Calonne. 194-195
- ²⁷⁷ Di Prima. *R.D.'s H.D.* 2-3
- ²⁷⁸ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 17-18
- ²⁷⁹ Meltzer. *San Francisco Beat*. 18
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- ⁶⁰⁴ Vincent, Stephen. "Poetry Readings/Reading Poetry in the San Francisco Bay Area." In *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language & Performance*. Edited by Stephen Vincent & Ellen Zweig. San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981. Posted to *Found SF*. Online. https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Poetry_Readings/Reading_Poetry_in_the_San_Francisco_Bay_Area Accessed 09-28-2020.
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- ⁶⁰⁸ This was what much of the scene throughout the city was like at the time, according to Sarah Menefee: "Poetry readings then used to always serve cheap wine, and people would have their bottles: Howard Hart with his brandy, me with my brandy, Gregory Corso with his vodka, bottles passing around, chairs being knocked over, heckling. It was fun, you know. People would give each other shit at readings." Menefee, Sarah. Personal Interview. 08-20-2016
- ⁶⁰⁹ Quoted in Jarnot. *Ambassador from Venus*. 403
- ⁶¹⁰ The following quotes are all from the audiotapes of the cited events in the American Poetry Archives at the San Francisco State Poetry Center.
- ⁶¹¹ In rereading Duberman's *Black Mountain* book recently, I came across this anecdote from a student who recalled "a 'non-credit' seminar on cybernetics" Natasha Goldowski taught "from the galley proofs of Norbert Wiener's first book.... Olson...was particularly fascinated by the fact that Wiener had worked with a team of specialists from a variety of fields. According to the student," Duberman writes, "Olson 'blathered on at some length' about how 'beautiful' that kind of team effort was; there was only one thing wrong with it—they should have had a poet." The remark made me recall a conversation I had with Meltzer once, shortly after I'd read his book-length poem *Beat Thing*, which so impressed me by its synthetic facility, drawing together personal, political, poetical, musical, and artistic history in such a way as to convince me that far more poets ought to *teach* history. With characteristically humble nonchalance, Meltzer merely acknowledged that poets weren't held to the same professional standards as historians.
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- ⁶¹⁹ *Poetry Flash*. June 1984
- ⁶²⁰ *Poetry Flash*. November 1984
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- ⁶²² Duncan. *A Poet's Mind*. 261
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- ⁶³² Cole, Norma. Personal Interview. 07-24-2018
- ⁶³³ Poetics Program Catalog, 1982-1983.
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- ⁶³⁵ Meltzer, David. Personal Interview. 08-27-2016
- ⁶³⁶ Haug, Matt. Personal Interview. 08-05-2018
- ⁶³⁷ Poetics Program Catalog, 1983-1984
- ⁶³⁸ Duncan, Robert. Letter to Duncan McNaughton, October 11, 1982. Louis Patler private papers.
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- ⁶⁴⁰ Jarnot. *Ambassador from Venus*. 409
- ⁶⁴¹ Palmer, Michael. Personal Interview. 08-16-18
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