

# BEYOND POETRY

*ROBERT DUNCAN*

# the museum

Grand architecture that the Muses command! my heart and breathing lungs mount the ascending tones in which your pillars swell, sound, and soar, above the struggling mind. In the treasure room enclosed in sound, Muse upon Muse turns to gaze into the radiant space in building.

In certain designs they are most present, and in their presence I come, I realize, into their design. What I see now is a shadowed space, a shell in time, a silent alcove in thunder, in which the stony everlasting gaze loses itself in my coming into its plan. It is an horizon coming in from what we cannot see to sound in sight that is female. Moving toward an orizon of the visible. From this carving out in thought of an arrival, the figure of a womanly grace invades the sound of the heart that beats for her, and, in number, repeats in a run of alcoves—shadowed radiance upon shadowed radiance—beyond the body of this Woman, the body of these women. In the Museum—as in the labyrinth at Knossos, the Minotaur; as in the head of the Great God, the hawk Horus returning—a Woman that is a Company of Women moves.

She will not devour the heart but holds it high in her command. The shadow she stands in is the shadowing of the heart's ease. Yet now in an exaltation of this chamber my mind comes upon the Bestial Muse, the devouring *Impératrice* at the heart of the Museum. In the inner chambers of the heart of the building, the fountains of blood are all there is. And the laboring pumps that she hides there. And the locks and releases hidden there.

I am entirely hers in that confessional. Entirely shadowd. Entirely gazing. A route of seeing carved in stone. A stream of utter weeping in that stone suspended. And if I were a woman out of the man I am, a Poetess would burst into her lament and memorial for the man destroyed in her.

O Muses, ancient and overwhelming sisters we have so long playd  
in whose  
orders, you stand between us and our Father;  
you lead us on into this vale between slopes flowery and sweet  
where all  
our grievances and memories of love run into song;  
you come to meet us at the well you command in the midst of our  
thirst;

you hold us in the suspension of your regard;  
and the smile of an appreciation we cannot fathom breaks away  
under us.

In the halls of the Museum all that we meant to remember—our passionate resolve, our crying out and our murmurous sigh—falls into that fame that silences what we were. Was it fame then that we cried out for? Was it fame that we protested? O Muses, awful and brilliant in your drawing us toward that grace in which the spine is curved into life to sound the depths of its death in fame, your fame catches my tears in its resounding cistern. And every mammal weeping I hear, drip upon drip, as if alone, resounding there. And birds and reptiles weeping. Cell upon cell, in each, this shadow; in each, this Muse of a Commanding Art; in each, this falling into time, drop by drop; in each, this eternal gaze; in each, this ultimate Woman; in each, this guile without guile—the artful suggestion glancing; the terrible amusement; the call to grace that is drawn to dance upon Hurt once more.

Now, deep, deep down in the underground of restraint, the bass intoning of a Man begins, wonderous in its progression Male, its thunderous resolve of a commanding sorrow. It is the Man that men and women have dreamt deep in themselves to be their species—for I came from the body of Woman into the thought of Man—and, all of darkness, that Man in the light of Being groans and turns upon Himself. A challenging tone that begins and passes into the arrest of challenge. O mighty Worm that in the Cocoon of What Is slumbers! As you turn and intone your turning, the Great Women in the Hall of the Muses appear to be statues groaning. The poets whimper in their sheltering shadows, and, from their altars, poetesses advance to sing once more as Sappho sang from the lyric strain that Love that breaks us from what we are

*irresistable force, bitter, sweet, that even now  
strikes us down, you have awakend what we feard we were, and,  
men and women, we are lost in you.*

*Pain  
enters Being  
drop  
by drop*

The Earth in its deep foundations shakes  
and tears the bindings of ancient structures loose.

The Muses appear to be now  
deserted cisterns in a row.

Was there in the beginning  
some vow I made  
that has come due? I know  
no more of Art than this—

a kind of play that when I was a child  
was fearful in its promise and yet  
led from fear into a radiance, a brother's  
turning for a sister's kiss.

The Muses fade into dim images.  
The images fade as if I made them up  
and came out of making into a loss of confidence.

And now . . . *Now . . . Now . . . Now . . .*  
the poem sounds its refrain in time:

*There cometh now as if it were an ancient return to rime,  
behind and beneath the man I am, the sounding of another Man*  
*I am. Man*

*in me. Alone. His ultimate aloneness  
invading me. Invading my own utter aloneness in my time.  
His promise, the promise of what Man is in me,  
reaches up and takes  
into itself as a persisting need  
that dimness of the other side.*

*And Him the gathering of shadowy Muses shakes.*

It is the architecture then of arts inspired by confidences of an earthquake yet to come. The Muses are of stone to be riven from stone. And they gaze—it is the vision of this very art in which out of no confidence their confidential song comes into me—into the abyss they gaze into which the Museum falls.

*Robert Duncan*

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In my commitment, there was a Reality behind the reality I knew in making it up, a Reality to which everything I knew referred. The world was a text, the code of many languages, yet to be broken.

Robert Duncan

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