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A Place of First Permission: Robert Duncan's Atlantis Dream

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Dan Featherston (bio)

Modern science . . . would come upon secrets of Nature, as science had come before in Atlantis upon such secrets, and, spiritually arrogant and ignorant, intoxicated by knowledge, destroy America—the New Atlantis—in a series of holocausts, an end of Time in my lifetime that would come in fire-blast, as the end of Atlantean Time had come in earthquake and flood.

—Robert Duncan, "The Truth and Life of Myth"

According to Plato, "the gods divided the whole earth into lots. . . . Poseidon, then, thus receiving as his lot the isle of Atlantis, settled his sons."¹ So begins the rise and fall of Atlantis. Or call it a vision of primal unity and subsequent dispersal: the body of Tiamat, Osiris, Kronos; the polis of Eden, Wagadu, utopia's no place. Found in nearly every culture, the flood myth goes back behind Plato's Atlantis and the Judeo-Christian flood to at least the beginnings of the city (Sumer) and ancient Mesopotamian culture.

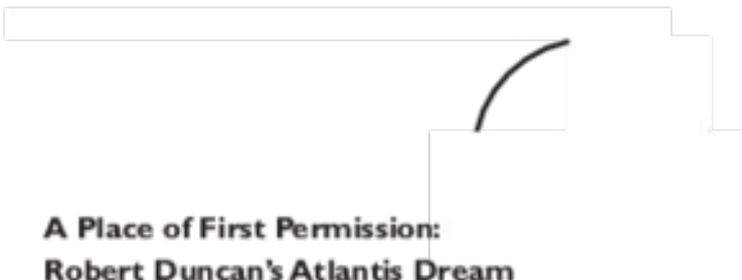
If there is such a primal vision of creation and destruction in the writings of San Francisco Renaissance poet Robert Duncan (1919–1988), it is based in the recurring dream he had throughout his life, what the poet called the Atlantis dream. The dream surfaces throughout his poetry and prose. Although no two versions of the dream are the same, each narrative begins in a meadow, where the subject is led forth to a ring of children, then to a cavern under the meadow that is ultimately destroyed by flood. In Duncan's magnum opus, *The H. D. Book*, the dream is and is not biological destiny: "My first mother had died in childbirth, and in some violent memory of that initiation into life, **[End Page 665]** she may be the mother-country that had been lost in legend. But for me, the figures of the dream remain as if they were not symbolic but primal figures themselves of what was being expressed or shown."²

From a biographical perspective, the dream stems from the Pacific tides to which Duncan listened as a child of the Depression, "letting the crash of the surf take over and grow enormous in my mind which dwelt at

times like this upon the last days of Atlantis, imagining again the falling of towers, the ruins of cities, the outcry of a populace swept under by the raging elements" (*HD*, 86). After the death of his mother in childbirth, Duncan was adopted by theosophists, who exposed him to various world myths, including the legend of Atlantis. Prior to adopting Robert Duncan, his parents consulted the astrological charts of the Oakland Hermetic Brotherhood. "One thing predicted," biographer Ekbert Faas notes, "was that their future child had not been reincarnated since Atlantis and would embody the decadence of a civilization to be destroyed during his lifetime."³

From a psychological perspective, the Atlantis dream enacts a symbolic death and rebirth. It is a rite of participation, permission for the singular life to participate in the larger orders of mythopoeia. "Born in 1919 at the close of the War," Duncan relates, "I belonged, I had been told, to an Atlantean generation that would see once more last things and the destruction of a world" (*HD*, 87). The first vision, then, is a vision of last things: earliest dreams and memories conflate the death of the mother, the mother country, and the end or edge of a continent.

Robert Duncan was born into an age of paradox: a time of modernity on the one hand and war and depression on the other. "The Depression years," Duncan writes, "ended all thought of the 'modern,' and still to come the Permanent War Economy in which the euphoria of the 1920s and the mystique of being 'modern' was swept away in the Age of Anxiety and the Beginning of Rage."⁴ The poet enters into a world in which modernity is belatedness, "nostalgia for a world long gone" ("Self," 219). On a more personal level, the poet enters life as host to memories of personal and transpersonal birth trauma: the death of his mother in childbirth and...



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