

The following is a sample of editing work I did on a graduate student's English essay. My job was to provide extensive edits of the introduction and thesis.

In this case, the student asked me to point out any words or phrases that were vague because she wanted to go back to the drawing board and come up with replacement phrases on her own, without my help (as a way to train and improve her writing). In other cases, I provide suggestions on the spot.

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Viral Angels and the Poetry of Pathogen in Robert Duncan's *Ground Work II*

There is something feverish about the poetry of Robert Duncan and its invocations ~~to~~ a spiritual order. ~~Steeped in a range of influences—from the *Analects* of Confucius to Greek mythology, from theosophy to Jungian psychoanalysis,~~ Duncan's poetry strives towards divine meaning in an earnest and compelling way. ~~It is not a stretch to say is no far stretch to say,~~ then, that Duncan's writing is beyond ~~fascinating~~; it is infectious as well. Peter O'Leary calls Duncan's poetic writing a "gnostic contagion" ~~because that~~ Duncan "conceived of himself and his writing" in terms of a "language of illness." As a result, this language constituted "a religious perception of poetry and the cosmos" (20). It goes without saying, then, that Duncan constructed an ~~illness of poetry~~ that was inextricably linked to spiritual and intuitive meanings as well. This is the reason why, O'Leary believes, Duncan's contagious poetry is also "gnostic" ~~in the sense of~~ "insight" or as an "intuitive process of knowing oneself" (Pagels qtd. By Leary 20). ¹While the spiritual insight that Duncan elucidates is ~~pertinent~~, ~~my paper will focus instead on the process of infection that unfolds from,~~ and constructs ~~,~~ Duncan's poetry of illness. Some questions I will ask are: How is Duncan's text *unhealthy* as opposed to healthy? What are some of the metaphors or vehicles of pollution here? How does the poem contaminate, and ~~become contaminated in return?~~ You may want to add some textual examples of Duncan's poetry in this section to improve your point.

Commented [1]: The writing here is clunky and needs to be streamlined. "Range" usually implies you are saying two different things that exemplify the breadth of a subject.

Commented [2]: Word choice. "Fascinating" is vague.

Commented [3]: Vague

Commented [4]: It is not a good idea to use other quoted terms to explain your original quoted term.

Commented [5]: Pertinent to what?

Commented [JA6]: A little vague.

The goal of my paper is to build off of O'Leary's concept of "gnostic contagion" and to situate Duncan's poetic illness in the discourse of modern science and medicine. To do so, I will borrow from medical terminology and conceive of Duncan's poetry as "pathogenic," as a symbolic bacterium, virus, or microorganism that carries disease (Oxford Online Dictionaries).² The reason I have chosen this metaphor is because of the life-like qualities that Duncan assigns ~~to~~ his writing. In "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," Duncan writes, "I came to be concerned not with poems in themselves but with the life of poems as part of the evolving and continuing work of poetry" (113). The pathogen, then, becomes a way for us to think about poems that live, evolve, and propagate. In other words, it is a way to figure texts that have a

¹ O'Leary, *Gnostic Contagion*, 226: O'Leary distinguishes lowercase *gnostic* from the capital *Gnostic*. While the latter refers explicitly to Christian Gnosticism, O'Leary uses the former (lowercase-*gnostic*) to describe an intuitive, self-revealed spirituality that Duncan adopted. This spirituality had links to religious Gnosticism, but was not the religion itself. O'Leary writes: "...whenever I use the word 'gnostic'-either noun or adjective-in the lower case, I am hoping to distinguish it from 'Gnostic'-noun or adjective - by which I mean the historical movement of Gnosticism in the late antique world (circa 100 BCE to 200 CE). By 'gnostic' I mean phenomena that are more generic, though certainly related to the historical movement..." good footnote! Very specific and informative.

² *Oxford Dictionaries*. "Pathogenic" (adj.): Of a bacterium, virus, or other microorganism causing disease.

“life” of their own. The metaphor is also helpful when we consider the larger-than-life qualities that pathogens sometimes have: in their ability to grow quickly, infect victims efficiently, and baffle even the most knowledgeable of scientists.³ The pathogen quickly becomes myth in the sense that it defies rational expectations. After all, myth is a crucial part of Duncan’s poetic project.

Commented [JA7]: Be specific. You’re dealing with complicated ideas so it is best to restate the metaphor in different words.

Commented [8]: Improper use of semi-colon.

Even then, “pathogen” is a broad word that can symbolize nearly any kind of invasion or destructive growth in Duncan’s poetry. For this reason, I will focus on a specific kind of pathogen, namely, the angels that appear and germinate in Duncan’s later poetry. Unlike the more benign or good-natured angels of the Christian tradition, Duncan’s angels are often terrifying, donning such titles as ~~with names like~~ “Angel Syphilis” or “Angel of the Polluting radiance.” In “In Blood’s Domaine,” for example, Angel Syphilis descends onto the text and unleashes its “hosts” onto the otherwise healthy “brain” (SW 160). Like a disease-carrier, the angel descends onto its victim and contaminates it with creative illness. We encounter another kind of pathogen in “After Passage”: the Angelic In-Formation moves in groups and instigates a sort of biological warfare on the “concordances of the DNA helix” (69). Across both poems, we read about angels that swarm, invade, and tamper with an existing structure—whether that is the brain or the DNA helix. At the same time, it is this angelic invasion that creates a new order altogether: the order of poetry. These angels are, after all, “attendants of lives raging within life” (162) and for Duncan, poetry is very much a form of life.

Commented [JA9]: I’d say “In his poem ‘In Blood’s Domaine,’ for example, ...” in order to give some distance between your frequent use of the word “in.” I realize I myself have used “in” too much in this comment... Please ignore this double standard!

Commented [JA10]: This, to me, is not a good use of the colon to describe “After passage.” It’s a little awkward as it is now, placed beside the title of the poem. And your follow up comment about “the Angelic In-Formation...” comes across as rigid to the reader. You’ll have to write a more seamless transition between stating the poem and explaining it. This might be as simple as “We encounter another kind of pathogen in ‘After Passage’ when...”

Commented [JA11]: Good paragraph. You lead with the term pathogen, (symbolizing invasiveness and destruction) and you subvert reader expectations with a concluding sentence that posits that there is “life” in these pathogens. This is the kind of writing that will hook your reader into the next paragraph.

Commented [12]: I don’t think it’s enough to use the term “thus” here. You need to concisely summarize the conclusion of your previous paragraph.

Thus, Duncan conceives a metaphoric illness that is productive and creative. In “Man’s Fulfilment in Order and Strife,” Duncan describes the “creative strife” that necessitates poetic production. The concept of “divine” or “creative strife” is foundational to his work and my own argument about productive illness, and so I would like to bring it back in to talk about a productive illness. In his writings on Heraclitus, Duncan posits that creative strife breaks the process of poetic production “away from what you knew how to do into something you didn’t know” (113). “This is the creative strife that Heraclitus writes, breaking up, away from what you knew how to do into something you didn’t know,” Duncan observes (113). In Duncan’s poems, “creative strife” is best exemplified by For this reason the contagion that his angels usher in and the violence that they instigate. The angels are an unexpected means of creation and production. If health and purity make up “the orders [we] belong to,” then the process of poetic contamination brings us to “orders” we do not yet know. Furthermore, Duncan’s “viral” angels bridge the divide between the body and the divine that is so crucial to his writing; this is why the

Commented [JA13]: From what I’ve read here, Duncan’s own quotation is awkwardly worded. I have tried my best to incorporate half of his quote and a paraphrase. However, you understand his writing and his ideas best, so be sure to confirm that my suggestion makes sense to you before going ahead with this change. If all else fails, let’s discuss this section in more detail.

Commented [JA14]: Try “bring forth.” It’s best to avoid using “in” at the end of a clause.

³ Of course, modern science does not always consider viruses to be a form of life because they lack the cell structure that makes up other life forms. At the same time, viruses are incredibly life-like in their ability to reproduce, move, replicate, and destroy. Many scientists call it an “organism at the edge of life.” (See: Rybicki, EP. The classification of organisms at the edge of life, or problems with virus systematics. *S Afr J Sci.* 1990;86:182–186.) For this reason, when I use pathogens to signify the “life” of Duncan’s poems, I also include viruses. I will also use the adjective form, “viral,” interchangeably with “pathogenic” to describe the efficiency and magnitude at which pathogens operate. I’m digging your science references and your precise use of language. Bringing scientific facts into a humanities paper is always a great way to solidify your argument.

creative strife is a divine ~~one~~ as well. For the rest of my paper, I'll unpack Duncan's viral angels ~~as~~ ~~as~~ ~~a~~ instigators of creative strife by analyzing two poems from *Ground Work II*: "After Passage" and "In Blood's Domaine." I have chosen a small number to deliver a more concise and thoughtful analysis.

Commented [15]: It's not quite fully clear what you are referring to here.

Commented [JA16]: ?

Commented [JA17]: This requires a little more explanation. Is picking a small number of poems a choice based on your experience reading Duncan's complex poetry? Or does your decision here apply to all poetry? I think you should let your reader know.