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# Sillages critiques

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Robert Duncan's Legacies: a Centennial Celebration

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## Introduction

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### *Texte intégral*

- 1 For this occasion celebrating the centenary of Robert Duncan's birth, we pose an Emersonian question: where do we find ourselves in the field of Duncan studies? By the term "studies" here we mean both the corpus of works authored by Robert Duncan as well as the broad range of critical responses to them. In what follows, we consider briefly the past and present of Duncan studies before focusing primarily on its future, with a particular emphasis on those archival projects that would be generative for future scholarship. These observations and suggestions, far from being designed as prescriptive, focus in large part on the Robert Duncan Collection in the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo which is the primary collection of Duncan's papers. It is impossible to understand the full history of Duncan studies – and especially its past 30+ years, a period of time not without certain conflicts and controversies – without considering the consequential roles played by first Robert Bertholf and then Christopher Wagstaff and Margaret Sloan as executors of his literary estate and administrators of his copyright. We honor here their considerable efforts and contributions and likewise acknowledge the significant roles played by a great number of the participants at the "Passages" conference in the ongoing efforts to promote Duncan and his writing through research, scholarship, teaching, editing, and publishing.<sup>1</sup>

## Overview of the History of Duncan Studies

- 2 One of the first reviews of one of Duncan's books appeared in April 1948, when Muriel Rukeyser published a review of Duncan's *Heavenly City, Earthly City* titled "Myth and Torment" in *Poetry* magazine. While most of Duncan's book-length publications were reviewed in some form or fashion, these increased dramatically in



both mainstream as well as small press publications after the publication of Donald Allen's influential anthology *The New American Poetry* in 1960 and the publication that decade of Duncan's trilogy of poetry collections *The Opening of the Field* (1960), *Roots and Branches* (1964), and *Bending the Bow* (1968). And the circumstances in which Duncan publicly declared that he would not publish another collection for fifteen years made *Ground Work* a noteworthy book for poets and critics to review once it finally appeared in 1984.

3 Although a few came before, it was also in the 1960s when essays mentioning Duncan regularly began appearing in journals and newspapers. By the 1970s, articles focusing exclusively on Duncan's writing became more frequent, and the same is generally true for his appearance in book-length works of criticism. One sees a similar trend with academic work on Duncan by graduate students. According to the listings in the Proquest Dissertations & Theses Global database, the first thesis to include a substantial section on Duncan (M. Eileen Fitzgerald's "The Beat Generation and the San Francisco Renaissance") was submitted in April 1963, and the first dissertation (Maxine Solow Gauthier Combs's "A Study of the Black Mountain Poets") in August of 1967. As per the same source, there were then an approximate total of 4 Duncan-related theses and/or dissertations in the 1960s, 14 in the 1970s, 14 in the 1980s, 16 in the 1990s, 26 in the 2000s, and (as of June 2019) 16 so far in the 2010s.

4 The 1970s and 80s began another series of firsts. Edited by Robert Bertholf and Ian Reid, *Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous* (the first collection of essays on his work) appeared in 1979, followed in 1983 by the first book-length biography, Ekbert Faas's *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society*. Bertholf's *Robert Duncan: A Descriptive Bibliography* was published in 1986 and the first monograph on Duncan – Mark Johnson's book simply titled *Robert Duncan* – followed two years later. Following Duncan's death in 1988, the late 80s, 90s, and 2000s featured a number of significant Duncan essays, chapters, and books and increasingly scholarly work using Duncan's papers in Buffalo as well as other collections of material coming out of other archives and manuscript collections like the publications of his correspondence with figures such as H.D. (1992), Denise Levertov (2001), and Eric Mottram (2007).<sup>2</sup> Those same decades also began a series of Duncan-related conferences (for instance, Buffalo in 1996 and 2006; Stanford in 2003; and Chicago in 2010) and exhibitions including *Robert Duncan: Drawings and Decorated Books* (UC Berkeley, 1992) and *A Symposium of the Imagination: Robert Duncan in Word and Image* (The Poetry Collection, 1993).<sup>3</sup>

5 Moving closer to the present, the last nine years have seen a growing number of important Duncan titles. After the publication in 2011 of Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman's edition of *The H.D. Book*, the first volume in the long awaited Collected Writings of Robert Duncan series from the University of California Press, the following year gave us a proliferation of material including the collection of essays *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, edited by Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons; Lisa Jarnot's biography *Robert Duncan, The Ambassador from Venus*; Christopher Wagstaff's edition of *A Poet's Mind: Collected Interviews with Robert Duncan, 1960-1985*; and Peter Quartermain's *Robert Duncan: The Collected Early Poems and Plays*, also part of the University of California Press's Collected Writings series. Since then, Duncan studies has continued to benefit with the publication of the exhibition catalog *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle* (2013); *Robert Duncan: The Collected Later Poems and Plays* and *Collected Essays and Other Prose* (2014); *An Open Map: The Correspondence of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson* and *Imagining Persons: Robert Duncan's Lectures on Charles Olson* (2017); and *The Householders: Robert Duncan and Jess* (2019). For a more specific and comprehensive list, see below the selected bibliography of recent Duncan-related publications 2000–2020.



# The Future of Duncan Studies

6 All of which leads to the question of what next? Admittedly, we are biased towards archival projects with the belief that access to such material is essential for expanding the range and types of scholarly approaches possible to the work of any given writer. In short, we would argue that there are two material prerequisites that enable scholarship on a particular poet to flourish: 1. readily accessible and reliable editions of a poet's published works; and 2. widespread access to archival material. The latter includes accurate biographical accounts and bibliographical documentation as well as unpublished materials of all kinds and formats. These are the two factors that together sustain new research projects, masters' theses, doctoral dissertations, essays, book chapters, monographs, conferences, exhibitions, and more.

7 To begin with the first of these two material conditions: at this point in time the University of California Press's Collected Writings of Robert Duncan series has provided reliable editions of Duncan's *H.D. Book*, his published early and late poetry and plays, and some of his essays. And, since October 2019, these volumes have been even more accessible with the release of less expensive paperback editions of the poems and essays to go along with the paperback edition of *The H.D. Book* which has been available since 2012. Having more access today to Duncan's complete published writings than ever before, certain gaps notwithstanding, we believe that we should now continue focusing our attention on a multitude of archival projects.<sup>4</sup> Drawing largely upon the Poetry Collection's Robert Duncan Collection in Buffalo, and in conjunction with the smaller collections of Duncan materials that can be found in other institutions, we recommend, in no particular order, the following ten publishing projects and/or sites of investigation as potentially significant for the future of the field of Duncan studies:<sup>5</sup>


1. Editions of Duncan's notebooks, facsimile or otherwise. With their wide range of both content and purpose, Duncan's notebooks provide a fascinating insight into his patterns of thinking and many of his lifelong preoccupations as a writer. Part composition book as well as the preferred space of Duncan's eclectic reading notes and more, they also contain a wealth of contextual information for his writing.
2. Projects utilizing Duncan and Jess's personal library. The collection of books shared by Duncan and Jess is astonishingly large and eclectic. In it one finds all the various subjects and genres associated with the poet and artist and their work, and there are over 8,600 records in the University at Buffalo Libraries catalog for items from their personal library plus thousands of uncatalogued titles. Given the different kinds of contextual information made possible by a study of Duncan's books, paired with the significant use he made of them as a self-avowed "derivative" poet, one could convincingly argue that his library is one of if not the most important parts of his archive and offers researchers a significant constellation of resources for understanding the sources of his poetics, origins and textual sources of certain poems, and literary communities.
3. Correspondence projects: In addition to the published correspondence already mentioned, there is a larger published collection of Duncan's letters to and from the Portuguese poet Alberto de Lacerdo (2014) as well as smaller collections of selected correspondence to and/or from Jack Spicer, William Everson, Chris Edwards, Pauline Kael, Robin Blaser, Robert Creeley, Helen Adam, and Amiri Baraka. One could imagine an edition of Duncan's selected letters, but even if that comes to pass, for a letter writer as prolific as Duncan, there's a great deal of correspondence to and from him scattered across both institutional and personal collections and consequently the need for any



selected volume to be complemented with publications small and large of his letters with individual correspondents. Possibilities include collections of his correspondence with his modernist precursors (e.g., Louis Zukofsky), his contemporaries (e.g., Robert Creeley), and also those writers whom he influenced in some way (e.g., Susan Howe).

4. An edition of unpublished poems. While most of Duncan's uncollected poems were included in Peter Quartermain's two volumes of the *Collected Poems and Plays*, there are dozens of unpublished poems from throughout every period of Duncan's writing life to which readers might want to have access. These vary widely and include poems once included in book manuscripts but dropped before publication (e.g., "In Passage"); typed manuscripts for books that were never published (e.g., "Homage to Coleridge"); poems written by hand in notebooks and on loose sheets of paper, sometimes revised in typescript; what Duncan in a letter to Denise Levertov calls "gift poems" (poems given to people like Jess and James Broughton that were not initially intended for publication); poems included as part of or along with correspondence to others (e.g., Robin Blaser, Louis Zukofsky); poems written in the pages of other books and documents, etc.
5. An edition of unpublished prose. Likewise, there are noteworthy essays and other prose writings in the Robert Duncan Collection in varying stages of completion that were never published.
6. Projects working with Duncan's recordings. These might include transcribing his lectures, classes, interviews, poetry readings, and other recorded events. While the majority of the Robert Duncan Collection audio is still in need of digitization, there are a few dozen recordings that have been digitized in addition to what is available through other institutions and projects like PennSound, Naropa, and the San Francisco State University Poetry Center.
7. Other biographical and autobiographical accounts of Duncan as writer, teacher, mentor, etc. Recording and transcribing interviews with people who possess the kinds of firsthand and personal information that can be fascinating and essential and yet always in danger of disappearing if not captured.
8. Updating and extending Robert Bertholf's *Robert Duncan: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1986). This book is indispensable for anyone in need of bibliographic information for Duncan's prolific publications. However, since it only extends through the early 1980s, there is a need to document nearly forty years of subsequent Duncan publications including those that appeared during the last few years of the poet's life.
9. Collections of Duncan's artwork. Aside from what examples appear in a few exhibition catalogs, there are no readily accessible and comprehensive collections of his drawings, paintings, and handmade books.
10. Photographic projects. The Robert Duncan Collection contains hundreds of photographs documenting not just the lives of Duncan and Jess but also their larger circles of writers and artists, and these could effectively supplement if not form the basis of a number of visual projects.

## Duncan's Legacies at 100

<sup>8</sup>  The question of where the content of Duncan studies might go from here is answered in part by the eighteen writings collected in this issue, which does not only look back at Duncan's work at a hundred but looks at Duncan now and forward into

the 21st century. After a detailed introduction that provides a documented history of the scholarship on Duncan and maps out the directions it has recently taken, five key perspectives unfold. To assess the *Modernist Legacies* at play in the poet's oeuvre, Lara Vetter, Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas and Daniel Katz each study the significant roles played by H.D., Louis Zukofsky and Gertrude Stein respectively as major precursors for Duncan. Focusing closely on the shape of Duncan's poetry, the essays gathered under the heading *Legacies of Form* then offer a rich discussion on several ongoing debates in Duncan studies: Rachel Blau DuPlessis on the status of the long poem, Edward Alexander on the nature of the theatricality of poetic speech, and Michael Heller on the adamant heterodoxy of the poet. Thirdly, *Legacies of Poetics* opens the field to the more controversial and stimulating issues in poetics which Duncan was instrumental in raising: Norman Finkelstein studies Duncan's occultism in his relationship to the Kabbalah, Miriam Nichols questions the all-encompassing scope of his poetic ambitions, J. Peter Moore balances Duncan's taste for vernacular English against his idealization of preliteracy. Most significantly, Michael Palmer proposes a generous evocation of Duncan's work toward open-form poetics in illuminating terms. Bringing Duncan back into his own social and historical context, *Legacies of Community* explores the politics and cultural conflicts out of which Duncan's poetry arose: Stephan Delbos investigates homophobic persecutions in the Cold War years, Nicholas James Whittington documents Duncan's role in the Poetics Program at New College of California, and Stephen Collis contributes a precious and committed ecological reading of Duncan's work. In conclusion, we give voice to the numerous *Queer Legacies* among Duncan's readers and successors. Eric Keenaghan travels through Duncan's politics of sex and poetry, Eric Sneathen and Robin Tremblay McGaw explain the utopian kinship of Duncan and queer studies, namely New Narrative, while Rob Halpern presents a direct and vibrant account of Duncan's importance in the growth of a contemporary poet. With its combination of leading scholars, acclaimed poets and emergent voices, this collection of essays testifies to the engrossing, demanding and yet relentless engagement in Robert Duncan's writing.

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## Notes

1 For reviews of the conference see Bérengère Riou, "Passages': The Robert Duncan Centennial Conference in Paris," *Transatlantica* 1 (2018): <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/11518> and Eric Sneathen, "The Centennials of Robert Duncan," Field Notes, *Open Space*: <https://openspace.sfnoma.org/2019/09/the-centennials-of-robert-duncan/>. Also note that another eight conference-related essays are due to appear together in the online magazine *Blazing Stadium*.

2 Additional manuscript collections on Robert Duncan can be found at University of California, Berkeley; Kent State University; University of California, Santa Cruz; and Washington University in St. Louis, among others.

3 The conferences were *The Opening of the Field: A Conference on Robert Duncan*, April 18-20, 1996, The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo; *Poetry and Politics, Black Mountain & Others: A Celebration of the Poetry of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, November 7-8, 2003, Stanford University; *(Re:)Working the Ground: A Conference on the Late Writings of Robert Duncan*, April 20-22, 2006, The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo; *The Truth and Life of Myth: A Robert Duncan Symposium*, April 22-24, 2010, Chicago Poetry Project with the Writing Program of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Poetry Center of Chicago.

4 There are, however, some lacunae in the University of California series, such as the examples of Duncan's published essays and other prose that were not included in the *Collected Essays and Other Prose*. Additionally, one could also argue that, because the volume of *Collected Early Poems and Plays* contains only standardized versions of certain books like *A Book of Resemblances* and *Names of People* that were originally editions reproduced in Duncan's autograph and/or illustrated by Jess, there is still a need for someone to publish these titles as they were originally intended.



5 Comprised of over 100 linear feet of manuscript material, correspondence, artwork, ephemera, audio visual material, and printed material related to Duncan's life and work,



including a significant amount of material related to his partner, Jess (1923-2004), the Poetry Collection's Robert Duncan Collection is arranged in nine series: I. Manuscripts, 1936-1987; II. Correspondence, 1939-1987; III. Manuscripts by others, 1928-1986; IV. Professional work, 1928-1987; V. Personal records and memorabilia, 1928-1996; VI. Photographs, circa 1900-1996; VII. Artwork, 1938-1991; VIII. Audio recordings, 1950-1996; IX. Accruals, [1940s]-1994. A finding aid is available at <https://library.buffalo.edu/robertduncan> (accessed 20/10/2020).

## Pour citer cet article

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## Auteurs

### Stephen Collis

Stephen Collis is the author of a dozen books of poetry and prose, including *The Commons* (Talonbooks, 2008), the BC Book Prize winning *On the Material* (Talonbooks, 2010), *Once in Blockadia* (Talonbooks, 2016) and *Almost Islands: Phyllis Webb and the Pursuit of the Unwritten* (Talonbooks, 2018). In 2019 he was awarded the Latner Writers' Trust of Canada Poetry Prize in recognition of his body of work. In 2021 Talonbooks will publish *A History of the Theories of Rain*. He lives near Vancouver, on unceded Coast Salish Territory, and teaches poetry and poetics at Simon Fraser University.

### Articles du même auteur

**Coda: Pages from an R.D. Book: Time and the Anthropocene** [Texte intégral]

Coda : Pages d'un livre sur R.D. : le temps et l'anthropocène

Paru dans *Sillages critiques*, 29 | 2020

### Xavier Kalck

Xavier Kalck is Associate Professor at Sorbonne University. He is the author of several books on twentieth-century poetry in English (*Muted Strings: Louis MacNeice's The Burning Perch*, 2015; *George Oppen's Poetics of the Commonplace*, 2017) and in French ("We said Objectivists": *Lire les poètes Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky*, 2019; *La poésie américaine entre chant et parole : l'héritage objectiviste*, 2020), as well as many articles on poetics.

### Articles du même auteur

**Vers l'image aveugle : George Oppen et l'usage de la lumière** [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Sillages critiques*, 17 | 2014

**Mimesis de la douleur chez George Oppen et J. H. Prynne** [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Sillages critiques*, 14 | 2012

### James Maynard

James Maynard is Curator of the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. He has published widely on and edited or co-edited a number of collections relating to Robert Duncan including *Ground Work: Before the War/In the Dark* (New Directions, 2006), *(Re:)Working the Ground: Essays on the Late Writings of Robert Duncan* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *Such Conjunctions: Robert Duncan, Jess, and Alberto de Lacerda* (BlazeVOX Books, 2014), and *Robert Duncan and the Pragmatist Sublime* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018). His edition of *Robert Duncan: Collected Essays and Other Prose* (University of California Press, 2014) received the Poetry Foundation's Pegasus Award for Poetry Criticism and his edited collection *No Hierarchy of the Lovely: Ten Uncollected Essays and Other Prose 1939-1981* by Duncan was recently published in 2020 by Three Count Pour.

### Articles du même auteur

**Selected Bibliography of Recent Duncan-Related Publications 2000-2020** [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Sillages critiques*, 29 | 2020

### Clément Oudart

Clément Oudart is Associate Professor at Sorbonne University. He is the author of *Les Métamorphoses du modernisme de H.D. à Robert Duncan: vers une poétique de la relation* (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010), and, with Nicholas Manning, of *Signs of Eternity: H.D.'s Trilogy* (2013). He has edited several volumes, including "Modernist Revolutions:



American Poetry and the Paradigm of the New” (Transatlantica, 2016) and, with Xavier Kalck, “Critical Dimensions: Sizing the American Long Poem” (Revue Française d’Etudes Américaines, 2016). He has published articles on John Ashbery, H.D., Robert Duncan and William Carlos Williams.

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