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## Typewriting as War Machine: Robert Duncan between Self- and Anti-Publishing

*La machine à écrire comme machine de guerre : Robert Duncan, l'auto- et l'anti-  
publication*

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# Typewriting as War Machine: Robert Duncan between Self- and Anti-Publishing

*La machine à écrire comme machine de guerre : Robert Duncan, l'auto- et l'anti-publication*

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Clément Oudart

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## Introduction

- 1 Although publishing with a prestigious house such as Grove Press, Scribner's or James Laughlin's New Directions may largely be seen as the ultimate accolade in the avant-garde poetry world, underground alternatives to such institutionalized publishers seem to have retained their zesty, magic appeal for maverick spirits and obstinately (self-) marginalized figures such as Robert Duncan. A quick glance at the Californian poet's bibliography is revealing of the shifts in publishing policy underlying his writing life. Before and between his major New Direction volumes, the poet developed a pattern of issuing a whole series of small, decidedly marginalized chapbooks. These pamphlets, booklets and small print runs do not just testify to his long-standing commitment to the small press scene. They stand out symbolically when set against the uniform packaging that is the ND trademark and convey a forceful point about the writer's autonomy from the empire of publishing. Hence Duncan's use of the typewriter may be read as partaking of a Deleuzo-Guattarian anti-establishment "war machine," i.e. the writer's nomadic tool warranting his fierce editorial independence, typographic freedom, general welfare and writing autonomy. "The war machine is the invention of the nomads (insofar as it is exterior to the State apparatus and distinct from the military institution)" (1987:380). In

Duncan's case, the emancipatory force of the small press underground network and ultimately of the process of self-editing and self-publishing is undeniable.

- 2 As noted by Robert J. Bertholf in *Robert Duncan: A Descriptive Bibliography* (which incidentally came out of Black Sparrow Press in 1986), Duncan's first collection, *Heavenly City Earthly City*, was a collaboration with his Berkeley connection and artist friend, Mary Fabilli, which was published in Berkeley by Bern Porter in 1947. *Medieval Scenes*, the collection of improvisations which registered the dual advent of serial poetry and of the San Francisco Renaissance, was released by Centaur Press in 1950. His broadside with Cy T wombly *The Song of the Border-Guard* came out of the Black Mountain Graphics Workshop in 1952. *Caesar's Gate*, with paste-ups by Jess, was produced by Robert Creeley's Divers Press in Palma de Mallorca in 1955. Another example and certainly the high point from that period of intensive writing, *Letters: Poems 1956-1958*, with drawings in the author's hand, was published by Jonathan Williams as number 14 of his Jargon Society series in 1958. The following year Duncan's *Selected Poems* came out of City Lights Books in the Pocket Poets Series. And the list goes on, with countless other small press publications punctuating the 60s between the major New Directions releases, *The Opening of the Field* with Grove Press in 1960, *Roots and Branches* first put out by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1964 and republished by New Directions and Jonathan Cape's Fulcrum Press in London, and thirdly *Bending the Bow* in 1968. During that decade, which would turn out to be the years of the elusive *H.D. Book*, Duncan published collaborations with his partner the painter Jess, with Henry Wenning's press, repeatedly with Oyez in Berkeley, with White Rabbit Press in San Francisco, Black Sparrow Press in L.A. and many others.
- 3 Followed the legendary 16-year hiatus between 1968 (*Bending the Bow*) and 1984 (*Groundwork: Before the War*, both New Directions books), when Duncan decided that he would not publish a single book of poetry for 15 years. This self-imposed retreat from the mainstream and the well-established publishers of the poetic avant-garde did not mean the author would stop all forms of publication altogether, let alone stop writing. On the contrary, he worked on numerous "minor" projects in the interim, as he was evolving a career between non- and self-publication. What could induce a poet, one might ask, to steer away from the publishing world, from this "business," as aptly described by Jerome Rothenberg? How did it affect Duncan's writing and aesthetics? What role did the typewriter play in the development of an increasingly self-sustained publishing practice? The purpose of this paper is to sketch out the stakes of the idiosyncratic and often counter-productive strategies in the publishing process of Duncan's works, which are, as a consequence, rooted in a form of radical, self-destructive- and awe-inspiring- integrity.

## Publish and Perish: Writing v. Publishing

- 4 An important clue about the relation of the poet to the world of publishing is to be found in the etymological connection between publishing and "making public," in other words between the politics of public space and the economics of circulation, as opposed to the private sphere of writing. In the latter, one finds not just the poetic works but also the private correspondence, which thrives along a line of resistance to the *polis*, as it enables interaction with other writers while remaining behind the scenes of the poetry world. Insights into the conditions of production of such a major poetic nexus as *The New American Poetry* are provided by the letters exchanged between the poets and the editor.

In the years since the war American poetry has entered upon a singularly rich period. It is a period that has seen published many of the finest achievements of the older generation: [...] A wide variety of poets of the second generation [...] have achieved their maturity in this period: [...] And we can now see that a strong third generation, long awaited but only slowly recognized, has at last emerged. (Allen D., 1960: xi)

- 5 “They are our avant-garde,” Donald Allen continues proudly in the preface to his seminal anthology, “the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry” (Allen D., 1960: xi). In the building process of his epoch-making poetic gathering, Allen had heavily relied on the input and the feedback from the poets themselves, some of who took part in the shaping of *The New American Poetry* itself. Allen had asked the poets to send him texts and biographical material for his region-based selection of US poetry. Most of the negotiations took place through private correspondence, as was the case with Duncan, who had just returned from a year in Mallorca and a semester on faculty at Black Mountain College, to settle back in the Bay Area. There he was to start teaching a poetry workshop at San Francisco State University and serve as Assistant Director of the Poetry Center in the Fall of 1956. On Dec 15, 1956, Duncan wrote Don Allen:

I have been remiss in answering your letters – but in part it is because I mistrust opportunity where my use of it is not clear. As late as 1950 I would have leapt to and participated whole-heartedly in a regional anthology; but in the last four years certainly my associations have not been regional at all: Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Paul Blackburn, Gael Turnbull have been my closest correspondents<sup>1</sup>.

- 6 On the following day, Duncan put pen to paper again:

Selection was determined by the factors @ that none of these have or will have place in one of my works. I have always conceived of a book as a problem in composition, not in display. So very good poems indeed have not, over years, found book-part. @ they have not appeared in print before: I have always attempted not to re-duplicate publications...<sup>2</sup>

- 7 During the early fifties, Duncan had changed his conception of a book from a simple collection of poems, as in *Heavenly City Earthly City*, to that of a “book of poems” written as a block of interconnected poems surrounding common themes. This strategy informs *Letters* and his next book, *The Opening of the Field* (1960), and all the volumes after it. By the time he had finished *Letters* in December 1955, Duncan possessed the poetic vision that generated and sustained the rest of his writing life.
- 8 Thrown into the heart of the politics not of poetry but of the poetry world, as he was curating the reading series at the Poetry Center, Duncan did not put up with it more than a few months. In a letter that unambiguously shows the intertwining of the social space and the act of writing, the poet confides to Don Allen in April 1957:

The enclosed will explain in part why I am not participating in the record Kenneth Rexroth is doing for Evergreen. But there is a larger consideration. I find I lose “tone” – well, all or a great deal of the charm that poetry gives to living, the writing of poetry and hearing friends read poems: the intensity remains but the charm goes – in the context of the promotion and exploitation that follows after. From my own point of view, all my sallies out into the fields of reputation as a poet, being printed, reading in public; all the very present world in which poetry is a commodity or a qualification for status sickens me in myself. It’s just not for me. Poetry is not my stock in trade, it is my life. [...] Hence my resigning from the Poetry Center – it ruins poetry for me<sup>3</sup>.

- 9 For a poet who was at the center of the Bay Area poetry scene at the time, stepping down from such a strategic position was an open form of public and political suicide. The pressure from the mainstream, which involved ego management and backroom deals with various circles and coteries, and more generally the overall race to fame, truly ruined poetry for him and entailed his withdrawal from this poetry chair.

## A Portrait of the Poet as a Typist

- 10 In a 1980 interview, Duncan quipped: “It was clear even in high school that I wouldn’t have a second profession, and that I would be just a poet”<sup>4</sup>. And yet, just as his elder Mallarmé, whose irksome occupation as a teacher of English and author of textbooks in linguistics was nothing but a “chore” tantamount to a “potboiler”<sup>5</sup>, it turns out Duncan also had to make ends meet by performing menial tasks that would nonetheless shape his knowledge of language and his writing experience. In his case, typing; or, rather, “type-writing,” i.e. conjunction of both the techniques underpinning the compositional process.
- 11 Despite his impaired vision, Duncan was indeed a capable typist. He supported himself as a typist at various times by working in offices at the University of California at Berkeley and by typing theses and dissertations. He brought home the sheets with errors on them and then used the versos for typing his own poems. He also tore off parts of pages and then saved the rest for his own work. Duncan wrote in the poem “Working Too Long At It”:
- Eight hours a day, I mean to say,  
I have carried this typewriter  
up this hill of my living  
toward what other side, what  
lovely vacation land of the mountains?
- 12 Consequently, some of the manuscripts are on odd-sized sheets of different kinds, like legal sheets with the left and right margins set by red lines. It was Duncan’s habit to write in notebooks or on single sheets of paper in pencil or ink. The poems for *Medieval Scenes*, for example, were written on single sheets, while the poems for *Writing Writing* were written in notebooks. He often rewrote the poems by copying them out and revising sections that did not fit his sense of the poem. Instead of crossing out and revising lines or stanzas, Duncan copied out the whole poem in the act he described as “re-visioning.” After he arrived at a final version of the poem, he then made a typescript. During the act of typing Duncan again “re-visioned” the poem. Hence changes from the holograph version occurred in the typed version.
- 13 As a typist, Duncan had exacting views about how his poems should appear on the page. *Writing Writing*, *Faust Foutu*, *Caesar’s Gate* (1972) and *Ground Work: Before the War* (1984) were all reproduced from his typescripts. He had great difficulty throughout his career with printers who wanted to shift all lines to begin at the left margin, and who would not introduce spaces after internal punctuation. The internal margins also indicate a shift in the voice speaking inside the poem, best seen in the poems in *Letters*. Spaces between words and between lines and stanzas are all notations of a rhythmic structure that shapes the words and meaning of the poem.
- 14 Great care went into the production of the first edition of *Letters*. Jonathan Williams, the publisher of the Jargon Society books, turned the production of the book over to the

printer Claude Fredericks. Two years were consumed in setting type, correcting proofs, and discussing the configuration of the poem on the page. The edition of *Tribunals: Passages 31-35* from 1970 was not to his liking, so he pressed John Martin of Black Sparrow Press to reproduce in facsimile pages from his notebooks so that readers could have a sense of the spacing of the manuscripts. For the note accompanying the facsimile, Duncan wrote:

I have come more and more to feel my original writing of the poem in my notebook as a sketch, often completely realized there it is true, but also often a preliminary version subject to new developments when I come to work with the typewriter and its own special spacings and relationships on the page <sup>6</sup>.

- 15 As a result of the conflicts over *Tribunals*, Duncan relied more and more on his typewritten version as a medium of publication. “I will not undertake any publication of poetry, certainly, unless the publisher... is also the printer,” he announced in 1974<sup>7</sup>. And, one might add, unless he is also the writer, i.e. himself. The next volume he published was *Ground Work: Before the War* (1984), which was photo-offset from his own typescript and produced a rather poor visual result. By the spring of 1986, Duncan had established the contents of the companion volume *Ground Work: In The Dark*, but was not physically strong enough to see the manuscript through a final typing to publication. He consented to have the volume set in type.
- 16 The poet had begun publishing poetry in 1939 when he was just out of his teens. Yet during the last 25 years of his life— not to mention the 30 years since his death— the primary poetry that people were permitted to see was largely restricted to writing that began in the late 1950s with *The Opening of the Field*. That book, *Roots and Branches* and *Bending the Bow* were the trio of volumes that were widely available during most of the last period of his life as he abstained from publishing a book of new poetry for 15 years after *Bending the Bow*.
- 17 Tellingly, Duncan did not permit Lawrence Ferlinghetti to keep his 1959 *Selected Poems*, published as the tenth volume of the City Lights Pocket Poets series, in print at a time when Ferlinghetti was very diligently doing just that. Duncan, who was notoriously fussy and not always wise about his volumes— his insistence on a typewriter font for *Ground Work: Before the War* prevented that book from being anywhere nearly as influential as the three volumes of the 1960s— is almost certainly to blame for the City Lights *Selected* going out of print. That volume had incorporated his poetry— or at least those portions he felt best about— written between 1942 and 1950. In 1966, when the *Selected* was already impossible to find, Duncan permitted Oyez, Graham Mackintosh’s press in Berkeley, to issue *The Years As Catches*, a more complete gathering of his earliest work, from 1939 through 1946. Framed very much as juvenilia— the subtitle is *First Poems (1936-1946)*— *Catches* was reprinted in 1977.
- 18 It seems obvious that Duncan saw *The Opening of the Field* as representing the true beginning of his mature writing. How Duncan arrived at this writing, what influences permeated, and in which order, is another matter. The care with which *The Opening* was not only composed, but prepared for public acceptance, as well as Duncan’s own downplaying of his earlier works, suggest the considerable importance that Duncan assigned to this project. Indeed, there was much back and forth over whether to self-publish the book or to place it with a press such as Macmillan— which would ensure a broader readership and force more of a response from the 1960s mainstream poets. In the end, the book came out from Barney Rosset’s Grove Press, a press that had one foot in the

New York trade scene, while the other published the likes of Charles Olson, Paul Blackburn, Henry Miller and William Burroughs.

## ***The H.D. Book: Story of a (Non-)Publication***

- 19 In 1961 Duncan wrote Cid Corman, the editor of *Origin*, about the possibility of publishing some of “The H.D. Book” in a future issue. Duncan made a selection from the chapters of Part II which he completed in a typescript of 174 pages for Corman’s reading by the end of December 1962. Corman then made his own selection from Duncan’s medley. As he typed out his chosen texts, he made revisions. After Cid Corman made his selections, Duncan made still another round of revisions and indicated in a head note that the recent revisions, which appeared in *Origin* 10 (July 1963), were part of his writing process:

NOTE: Brackets [ ] represent overlays, redevelopments and expansion of the original text, where the author wishes to indicate these strata as part of the structure as process.

- 20 Scribner declined to publish it; the whole manuscript remained a private typescript until John Martin of Black Sparrow Press contracted with Duncan to publish it beginning in 1971. Duncan set about retyping and also revising Part I for a photo-offset version of the text from his own typewriter. It was to be called “The Author’s Typescript Edition.” He would be in control of the layout and responsible for the accuracy of the text.
- 21 In 1970, Duncan had disputes with John Martin about the typesetting of the poem for the book *Tribunals: Passages 31-35*, which resulted in a pamphlet with a facsimile of the holograph and final typescript of “The Feast Passages 34” being inserted into a pocket attached to the rear inside cover of each book. This was one of many disputes Duncan had with printers and publishers in his lifetime and may have contributed to his anxiety about publishing that stopped work on the typescript edition in the middle of chapter five. He had added about 10,000 words to the comparable point of typing in the earlier typescript. This version is the last in the series of incomplete versions of the text of “The H.D. Book.” During his life, Duncan alternately called his book-long critical project both “The H.D. Book” and “The Day Book.” Individual chapters appeared in various journals such as *Caterpillar*, but the volume as a whole was only released posthumously— in 2012. Before that time, the copy most people had read came from a pirate typesetting that was never released in hard copy. In this sense, the unauthorized pdf publication is not unlike the Frontier Press edition of *Spring & All* that Harvey Brown produced in order to provoke New Directions into republishing that great lost work of Williams.
- 22 2012, therefore, saw the much-awaited publication of *The H.D. Book*, which would eventually make up the first of four volumes of University of California Press’s “The Collected Writings of Robert Duncan” series. This editorial spate of Duncan material— to which Lisa Jarnot’s literary biography entitled *Robert Duncan, The Ambassador from Venus* should be added (UCP, 2012)— was delayed gratification for all parties involved and indeed a towering postmortem achievement of Duncan’s, whose works— somehow very fittingly— became canonized some twenty-five years after his death.

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## NOTES

1. Donald Allen papers, UCSD, MSS 3,bx3,bx 63.
2. Donald Allen papers, UCSD, MSS 3,bx3,bx 63.
3. 23 April 1957, Donald Allen papers, UCSD, MSS 3,bx3,bx 63.
4. Jack R. Cohn and Thomas J. O'Donnell, "An Interview with Robert Duncan," *Contemporary Literature* 21.4 (1980), 520.
5. Mallarmé, *OC II*, 947sq.
6. "[Note, Accompanying Facsimile]," *Tribunals: Passages 31-35*, [1].
7. "Preface prepared for MAPS #6," *Maps 6* (1974), 2.

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## RÉSUMÉS

Même si l'opportunité de publier ses œuvres chez l'éditeur new-yorkais James Laughlin (New Directions) est toujours perçue comme une forme de consécration dans le milieu de la poésie expérimentale américaine, il s'avère que pour le poète californien Robert Duncan (1919-1988), les petites publications souterraines et les alternatives au circuit institutionnel de l'édition furent encore plus séduisantes. La bibliographie détaillée de l'auteur révèle les changements radicaux opérés par l'auteur dans sa politique en matière d'édition. Avant de publier chez ND, puis entre chacun des volumes publiés chez eux, le poète opta pour la publication de maints fascicules et opuscules à très faible tirage. Ce choix des petites publications ne reflète pas seulement son goût pour les petites maisons d'édition. Il démontre également la quête viscérale d'autonomie de l'auteur par rapport à l'empire de l'édition.

Even if publishing one's poetic works with New Directions, James Laughlin's New-York-based publishing house, is still seen by many in the experimental poetry world as the ultimate accolade, underground alternatives turn out to have been even more appealing to a marginal figure like the Bay Area poet Robert Duncan (1919-1988). A quick glance at the author's bibliography unravels striking shifts in his publishing policy. Before and between his major New Direction volumes, the poet produced a whole series of small, hardly circulated chapbooks. These small publications not only reflect his commitment to the small press scene, but also convey a forceful point about the writer's autonomy from the empire of publishing.

Aun cuando la oportunidad de publicar sus obras en la editorial neoyorquina de James Laughlin (New Directions) siempre se perciba como una forma de consagración en el medio de la poesía experimental americana, resulta que para el poeta californiano Robert Duncan (1919-1988), las

pequeñas publicaciones subterráneas y las alternativas al circuito editorial institucional fueron aún más seductoras. La bibliografía pormenorizada del autor revela los cambios radicales operados por el autor en su política editorial. Antes de publicar en ND, luego entre cada uno de los volúmenes publicados en ella, el poeta optó por publicaciones de numerosos fascículos y opúsculos de poca tirada. Esta elección de pequeñas publicaciones no solo refleja su preferencia por pequeñas casas editoriales. También demuestra la búsqueda visceral de autonomía del autor con respecto al imperio de la edición.

## INDEX

**Palabras claves :** Robert Duncan, edición, dactilografía, máquina de escribir, autopublicación

**Mots-clés :** Robert Duncan, édition, dactylographie, machine à écrire, auto-publication

**Keywords :** Robert Duncan, editing, typewriting, typesetting, self-publishing

## AUTEUR

### CLÉMENT OUDART

Clément Oudart is an Associate Professor of American Literature at Paris-Sorbonne University. He is the author of *Les Métamorphoses du modernisme de H.D. à Robert Duncan* (PSN, 2010) and co-author, with Nicholas Manning, of *Signs of Eternity: H.D.'s Trilogy* (Fahrenheit, 2013). In 2014, he was the coeditor of two volumes on H.D.'s works (Editions Rue d'Ulm, PUPO) and the editor of "Tailor-Made Traditions: The Poetics of US Experimental Verse from H.D. to Michael Heller" (*Caliban*). In 2016 he coedited, with Xavier Kalck, "Critical Dimensions: Sizing the American Long Poem" (*RFEA*) and edited "Modernist Revolutions: American Poetry and the Paradigm of the New" for the online journal *Transatlantica*.