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Sorbonne Université, Paris, June 12-14, 2019

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"Passages": The Robert Duncan Centennial Conference in Paris

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Berengere Riou

- 1 Last June the Sorbonne hosted the Robert Duncan Centennial Conference to celebrate the birth of the poet and take stock of his ever-growing influence both in the field of English studies and in contemporary poetics. The idea for the conference came from the exchanges between the participants of the 2006 "(Re:)Working the Ground" Conference at Buffalo. Among those, **Clément Oudart** (Sorbonne), **Stephen Collis** (Simon Fraser University), and **James Maynard** (University at Buffalo) organized the June 2019 "Passages" Conference together with **Hélène Aji** (Université Paris Nanterre) and **Xavier Kalck** (Sorbonne). It lasted three days and featured an impressive cast of international speakers, including renowned and emerging scholars as well as poets, many of whom had been lucky enough to know and work with Robert Duncan. The present report is in no way exhaustive, as there were many simultaneous, equally enticing workshops, not to mention a series of exciting poetry readings in the evenings, but it will present some of the new finding and directions in Duncan studies. It must be added that the number of speakers and attendants, their diversity and shared passion for poetic research, provided a vivid representation of the dynamism of the field.
- 2 As the title of the conference – "Passages" – implies, the various panels emphasized, first and foremost, the importance of transmission – between Duncan and his masters, between Duncan and his circle, and among those reading Duncan today. Accordingly, the first day started by paying tribute to the H.D.-Duncan connection, with a panel titled "Reading Robert Duncan Reading H.D.," chaired by **Cynthia Hogue** and featuring **Lara Vetter**, **Jeanne Heuving** and **Brian Caraher**. The three panelists illuminated not only how H.D.'s poetry had created an "opening" for Duncan (the poem "Heat" "rending open" the poetic ground for him, as is well known), but also how Duncan's writings, in turn, opened up new doors of interpretation for H.D.'s texts. **Lara Vetter** gave an illustration of that shared textuality between the two writers, by showing how Duncan's "The Venice Poem" (written 1948) weaves us back into the "Venus-Venice"

transmutation of H.D.'s "Tribute to the Angels" (1945). **Brian Caraher** reminded us that the "place of first permission" for Duncan is, in fact, a "return" ("Often I am permitted to return to a meadow," *CLPP* 3), and that, similarly, readers of Duncan find themselves taken within a loop of circular reading that brings them back to H.D. with new sets of poetic associations. For that reason, the reader, **Jeanne Heuving** argued, must "associate" with the intricate webbing of Duncan's writing in the *H.D. Book*, engage with a form of reading that "supplements rather than corrects," while transgressing chronological and gender orders.

- 3 Most interesting throughout the conference were the personal anecdotes of those who had encountered Duncan and shared gems of his witticism, such as **Brian Caraher** recalling Duncan's passing comment about Henry James at Buffalo in 1979: "he chewed off more than he bit off." Beyond mere anecdotes, the panelists' personal memories offered younger scholars a bridge into Duncan's poetic concerns and methods. In particular, they shed new light on Duncan's involvement with foreign poetry and poets. Thus, in a workshop titled "Duncan in Paris," **Norma Cole**, a student at New College of California in the '80s and a close associate of Robert Duncan's, noted, that in the late '70s-early '80s, Duncan was never *not* in conversation with Baudelaire. She went on to examine how his exchanges with French-speaking poets during his stays in France and Belgium – more specifically Jean Daive (whom Cole translated) and Claude Royet-Journoud – informed his inquiry into the power of language(s) and the role of the poet. Vancouver poet and translator **Ted Byrne** further brought to the audience's attention Duncan's theory "*du traduire*" by restaging his virulent attack on Robin Blaser's 1965 translation of *Les Chimères*, which he deemed "unfaithful" to the Hermetic tradition. Byrne showed that Duncan's anger, followed by the publication of his own "corrective" translations of Nerval, signaled a deeper pondering of the poet's rights over poetry. Indeed, both poetry and translation are understood by Duncan in terms of "research" and "devotion," of attentiveness to a pre-existing poetry rather than *ex nihilo* authority. It is worth noting, as all the speakers did, that Duncan didn't master French and was well aware of his linguistic limitations. This, however, did not seem to impede his translating enterprise. In fact, his attempts at learning French (as his letters and the exercises in his notebooks testify) seemed, in the words of **Clément Oudart**, more akin to a form of "brain gymnastics." Moreover, Oudart argued, Duncan's seriousness on matters of translation should not lead us to forget his more derivative, Gertrude Stein-inspired play with phonemes across languages, and his delight in mistakes, as exemplified in his "Letters for Denise Levertov: An A Muse Ment" (meant as an homage but misunderstood by Levertov as mockery).
- 4 This latter dimension of Duncan, which may seem at odds with the large-scale mythopoetic project defined in *Fictive Certainties*, was studied in more details during the second day of the conference, in a workshop titled "Duncan and some Others," where Duncan was considered within the tradition of a "poetics of derivation," in line with the 2012 collection of essays *Reading Duncan Reading* (Stephen Collis ed.). From such a perspective, **Daniel Katz** analyzed the poet's engagement with the more deconstructive elements of modernism in his "Stein Imitations"; sound and visual poet **Steve McCaffery** offered his "reading of Duncan reading Stein"; **Jeff Twitchell-Waas** examined Duncan's ambiguous relationship to Zukofsky and later Objectivists; and **Xavier Kalck** discussed the "mathematics" of Robert Duncan in parallel with John Taggart's "Pythagoreanism." Those papers all challenged what Steve McCaffery called "Duncan's dream of a holism," by highlighting the many counter-currents at work in

his poetics and illustrating the impossibility to ever make him "fit" fully in a single poetic tradition.

- 5 In the first keynote, **Miriam Nichols**, who is currently working on a biography of Robin Blaser, addressed precisely that "dream of a holism" so characteristic of Duncan. In a talk titled "Poetry and Polis: Robert Duncan's Symposium of the Whole," she tackled the poet's cosmological ambitions, which she interpreted as his response to "the squalor and stupidity of the American mercantile, industrial and capitalist world" (*HDB* 28). Duncan proposed poetic "measure" as an alternative to "squalor," Nichols argued, and the constant syncretism at work in his writing is designed as an attempt to recreate a space of shared "belongingness," more inclusive than localized cultural memory. In the wake of her critical approach in *Radical Affections*, Nichols also invited the audience to read Duncan's poems as "dramas in an ongoing world play" (*Radical Affections* 138) rather than political or ethical allegories, and she shared such a reading of his "Passages."
- 6 The second day of the conference was dedicated to the topics of Duncan and the esoteric and Duncan and philosophy, with enquiries into his relationship with an irreducible multiplicity of intellectual, religious and poetic traditions. In the morning plenary panel, **Norman Finkelstein** opened up with a discussion of Duncan and Jewish mysticism, in light of what Eric Jacobson calls "the clandestine affinity" between Kabbalah and modernity (*Kabbalah and Modernity* 48). As Finkelstein pointed out, Duncan's recurrent evocations of the Zohar in the *H.D. Book*, especially in "Rites of Participation," are mediated both by Yeats and by Scholem, and intrinsically related to his deep belief in the magic of language. It is not only the Kabbalistic idea that all things in the universe are interconnected that appealed to Duncan, but also the belief that writing is itself a magical act, and that poems can work as spells. Moreover, the religious anarchism of the Kabbalah suited Duncan's own "Mystical Anarchism" (Robert Bertholf, *The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry* 226), as exemplified in "What Do I Know of the Old Lore" (*CLPP* 101-2). Lastly, when juxtaposed to the panel "Duncan in Paris," Finkelstein's conclusion on Duncan's affection for Jabès (expressed in his last essay, "The Delirium of Meaning," 1985) paved the way toward a deeper understanding of Duncan's very Benjaminian philosophy of poetic language, as both coming before and being echoed in any given human language. **Joe Donahue** pursued the excursion into the maze of Duncan's influences with a textual analysis of the poem "Circulations of the Song," subtitled "After Jalal al-Din Rumi" (*CLPP* 611), in which Duncan gives a version of Sufi ecstasy infused with the tradition of Western love and his own erotic desire for the classicist Norman Austin. Meanwhile, in a paper titled "Duncan's Esotericism: A Modern Test," **Peter O'Leary** insisted on the function of surrounding voices in Duncan's poetics, starting with those he overheard when his family was conducting seances: "these first powers... speaking in hushed or deepened voices, or speaking in voices that were not their own..." (*CE* 146). Those voices, both human and natural, are transmuted into poetry via the alchemic power of imagination, and O'Leary suggested a link between the opaque rustle of sound and the "darkness" praised by Duncan, akin to Victor Hugo's "*bouche d'ombre*" from which poetry emerges.
- 7 In the following workshop, "Duncan Remembered," **Devin Johnston** took up O'Leary's perspective on the dynamic of "contagion" and insisted on the role of "mimicry" as one of the modes of influence dear to Duncan. Johnston placed his talk in an Australian context, evoking Duncan's experience of the country (notably his delight the "unique

set of vowel-phones... Australians have"), as well as and his growing ecological focus, reflected in "An Alternate Life" (written 1976-79), and his important friendship with Australian poet Robert Adamson. In that same workshop, **Robert Adamson** himself charted his history and friendship with Duncan, tracing his admiration back to when he first read him in Donald Allen's 1960 *The New American Poetry*. Doing so, Adamson stressed the impact of the anthology – and more specifically of the exemplary Romantic figure of Duncan – on future generations of Australian poets. Another fascinating, biographical and autobiographical, perspective was given by **Alice Fahs** and **Mimi Chubb**, the daughter and granddaughter of Ned Fahs, who was Duncan's first lover, as they only discovered in 2007 through Lisa Jarrot. They gave an account of their research journey to understand this secret family history, and underlined the various ways in which Duncan had absorbed, and defined himself against, the influence of Ned Fahs, a scholar of French and medieval Romance philology who chose to remain closeted his entire life.

- 8 In a simultaneous workshop, centered on Duncan and philosophy, **Elisabeth Joyce** illustrated how Duncan's poetry incorporates Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, arguing that Duncan endeavors to "represent the emotional essence" (Merleau-Ponty) of his subjects. **Robert Kaufman**, on the other hand, highlighted Duncan's often-forgotten indebtedness to the Frankfurt School. He started by reminding the audience of the "Cafeteria Communism" tradition that was blooming at the time Duncan moved to New York City in the late 1930s. Then, using James Maynard's findings in *Robert Duncan and the Pragmatist Sublime* (2018) as well as his own archival research, he stressed the prominent role played by two contemporary journals with noted cafeteria-communism roots – *Partisan Review* and *Politics* – in shaping Duncan's political education and guiding his reflection on the meaning of art in society. Those New York years also informed his later, extended dialogues with Celan, Adorno, Benjamin, and other artists and critics within or around the Frankfurt School.
- 9 Later that day, the discussion moved on to Duncan's life as a teacher, writer, and colleague, but also canon-maker. Indeed, as **Stephan Delbos** underlined through a critical scrutiny of the correspondence between Duncan and Donald Allen, the former had a major influence in shaping *The New American Poetry* (1960). However, Delbos noted, it is important to keep in mind the key tension between academism and counterculture, academism and activism, running through Duncan's life and work. Most noticeably, the communalist and homoerotic overtones that pervade his letters with Allen – Delbos pinpointed the phrase "community of love" – were highly subversive during the Cold War "Lavender Scare." **Jennifer Moxley** focused on the same decade, with an analysis of Duncan's work while at Black Mountain College. Looking at his two poems "The Dance" and "The Law I Love is Major Mover," and at his play *Medea at Kolchis*, she emphasized how much their aesthetics was indebted to the college's history of interdisciplinarity, and in particular to the influence of Josef Albers and Bauhaus. **Nicholas James Wittington** turned to another instance of "Duncan at school," later in life, when he became a faculty member in the experimental graduate program in Poetics at New College of California and a mentor for younger generations of poets-teachers. Among those, Wittington singled out David Meltzer and Diane di Prima, who carried on Duncan's passion for the Kabbalah and Western Hermeticism. In that same workshop, **Edward Alexander** also considered the porosity between artistic media and genres during the Black Mountain period and focused more specifically on how it affected the different variants of the post-Black Mountain

vanguard. He thus argued that movements like Fluxus and Happenings were heirs both to the event-based artistic philosophy of John Cage *and* to Duncan's serial open-form composition, as paradoxical as it may seem at first, given Duncan's belief in authorship and in the physical existence of the poem on page.

- 10 In the second keynote, **Stephen Fredman** explored that latter issue in more depth, with an address dedicated to the dissimilarities and similarities between Duncan and David Antin. Fredman used his current work on John Dewey (part of his project "Craving Experience – Poetry and Performance Art in the Wake of John Dewey") to bridge the apparent opposition between Duncan and Antin via their shared dedication to experience. Fredman drew from his personal knowledge of the two poets to emphasize that although their modes of delivery were very much in contrast with one another – with Antin favoring improvised talk poems while Duncan was obsessed with form and collage – they were both, first and foremost, raconteurs, who viewed the act of poetry-making as itself experiential.
- 11 The third and last day of the conference started with a panel titled "Duncan Now," featuring three of the most essential figures in Robert Duncan scholarship: **Rachel Blau DuPlessis**, **Michael Boughn**, and **James Maynard**. **Rachel Blau DuPlessis** began by examining the strange absence of a Robert Duncan long poem, noting that when Peter Quartermain once suggested to Duncan that "Passages" or "The Structure of Rime" be published as such a work, he was met with a categorical refusal. Yet, she remarked that one can trace in Duncan what Peter Middleton calls "the longing of the long poem." In particular, Duncan's use of the serial form in "Passages" and "The Structure of Rime" has consequences that escape the author's will. Even though those poems do not seek integrity (Duncan explicitly stated that "Passages" *are*, not *is*), they create a repetitiveness vibrating toward fullness. Moreover, the *H.D. Book* does fulfill many of the implicit definitions of a contemporary long poem, and DuPlessis further suggested that Modernism's long poems paradoxically might have been "too small" for Duncan's poetic of boundlessness. Then **Michael Boughn** offered the audience a glimpse into the "poetry wars" of the 1960s and '70s, emphasizing how vivid those arguments on the essence of poetry were and how they can inspire us today – he mentioned, for instance, the issue of "*fun*" versus "*tedium*" that opposed Duncan and Zukofsky in 1978, the former criticizing the latter's use of mathematical "structuring devices" as lacking in "*fun*." Last but not least, **James Maynard**, one of the inspiring forces behind and throughout the conference, gave an update on the current state of Duncan scholarship. Among upcoming books, he mentioned the release of his paperback edition of Duncan's *Collected Essays* (October 2019) and of an art history project titled *The Householders – Robert Duncan and Jess* by Tara McDowell (September 2019). He also made suggestions as to the types of books to imagine now, in light of the vast amount of poetic and prose material yet to be published, and generously offered his archival support for future projects.
- 12 That panel was followed by two workshops that brought the audience back to the H.D.-Duncan nexus. The first was dedicated to the *H.D. Book*, with **Stephen Collis** hypothesizing an "R.D. Book," while **Jeff Fallis** questioned the contemporary relevance of the *H.D. Book*. In the second one, **Jane Augustine** provided an enlightening examination of Duncan's "first hearings of poetry," as recalled in *The Truth & Life of Myth*, and which took place *before* the Miss Keough/H.D. epiphany. She took as a point of departure Duncan's superimposed memories of his mother reading to him while he

looked at pictures from a children's book, which Augustine identified to be one from the twelve-volume collection called "My Book House," published in Chicago in the 1920s and '30s and edited by Olive Beaupré Miller. She cited examples of the book's imagery, both visual and textual, that revealed its influence in awakening Duncan's poetic sensibility and appetite for myths. **Charles Lock** then focused on what Duncan called in a letter to Levertov "that need from the sublime," very much derived from his readings of English eccentric Allen Upward. At the same time Lock commented on the publication history – or rather lack thereof – of both H.D. and Duncan in a British publishing context long stifled by the domineering presence of T.S. Eliot.

- 13 In the afternoon, the discussion on poetic form continued, with an emphasis on Duncan as poet of difference and multiplicity, constantly defying poetic status quo. **Graça Capinha** argued that Duncan's embrace of incompleteness and fracture in his "grand collage" opened "passages" for the renovation of language and society. **Michael Heller** elaborated on Duncan's assertion that in relation to Zukofsky and Olson "[he] was to be heretical... working toward a proliferation of meanings... working from interpretations of the text" (*A Selected Prose*, 138). Through a reading of *Tribunals: Passages 31-35*, Heller linked that profession of heresy to Duncan's warlike understanding of poetry ("I make poetry as other men make war," *CE* 43), thus reminding us again of the central *eris/eros* dialectic guiding Duncan's work. **Peter Middleton** analyzed some of those conflicts between the poet's younger and older selves, by sketching a genealogy of Duncan's interest in code. He observed that Duncan's initial belief that the "world was a text, the code of many languages, yet to be broken" paradoxically grew more nuanced in the 1960s, at a cultural moment when the world was increasingly explained in terms of codes. Yet, Middleton made clear that, unlike the more skeptical Ashbery who in his 1970 collection, *The Double Dream of Spring*, feared the disillusion that may follow the decipherment, Duncan did not dismiss the idea that the world was a code but rather complicated it. For instance, in *Groundwork: Before the War*, he merges in his usual syncretic fashion the discovery of genetics with his initial Theosophical and Kabbalistic understanding of the world as hidden alphabet ("their [the Golden Ones'] alphabet is hidden in the evolution of chemical codes," *CLPP* 469).
- 14 Finally, **Michael Palmer** delivered a closing keynote symbolically titled "Duncan and the Open," where he articulated the impossibility to ever conclude on Duncan, due to the eternal play of presence and absence, speech and silence, in poems that are infinitely opened to further interpretations and further inner developments. In that sense, he echoed **Rachel Blau DuPlessis's** suggestion that Duncan is very much the heir of the Mallarméan idea that "a book neither begins nor ends: at most, it pretends to" (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres* 612).
- 15 Link to conference programme: <http://lettres.sorbonne-universite.fr/IMG/pdf/programmecolloqueduncan-170419.pdf>

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