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DUNCAN, ROBERT EDWARD (1919-1988)

American poet. He was born Edward Howard Duncan, January 7, 1919, in Oakland, California. His natural mother died after childbirth and the boy was adopted by Edwin and Minnehaha Symmes, whose family name he used until 1942. The Symmes maintained a prosperous middle-class household in Bakersfield, California. As members of the Hermetic Brotherhood [itself an offshoot from Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's Theosophical Society], they received a prediction that their adopted boy would embody the decadence of a civilization to be destroyed during his lifetime.

Between 1936 and 1938, Robert was a student at the University of California at Berkeley, where he became active in

radical politics, explored sex with men, and published his first poems in campus papers. When his lover Ned Fahs graduated and took a job in Maryland, Duncan left school and moved to the East Coast; the two separated in 1940, but Robert lived around with both men and women as he pursued his interest in literature. Duncan circulated within the Manhattan gay circles in the 1940s and met Pavel Tchelitchew, Lou Harrison, Parker Tyler, Sanders Russell, Charles Henri Ford, James Baldwin, Paul Goodman, W. H. Auden, and others. Duncan published his pathbreaking essay in the anarchist magazine *Politics* (August, 1944): "The Homosexual in Society." The essay argued that, like blacks and Jews, homosexuals were an oppressed minority in a hostile society. Duncan's making a political issue of homosexuality disturbed many famous New York homosexuals. W. H. Auden later wrote begging Duncan not to publish an essay discussing Auden's sexuality: "I earn a good part of my livelihood by teaching and in that profession one is particularly vulnerable."

In 1945 Duncan returned to California and in 1946 (at the urging of a boyfriend and German exile, Werner Vordtriede) he began study under Ernst Kantorowicz, another exile and a member of the Stefan George Circle. *Heavenly City Earthly City* (1947), *Poems, 1948-49*, and *Medieval Scenes* (1949) attempted to link the world both of politics and of sexual intercourse (particularly that between men) with hermetic spiritual truths. In 1946 at an anarchist meeting Duncan met Jack Spicer; the two became close friends (although not lovers). They collaborated (and occasionally quarreled) on many political and poetry projects central to the San Francisco Renaissance.

From his earliest to his latest works, Duncan incorporated gay and lesbian themes; in one early poem, he exclaims: "I am not afraid to be a queen." Being woman-identified, he wrote a series of poems after those of Gertrude Stein and took as his lifelong work an extended

commentary on H.D. His 1947 "Venice Poem," weaves the themes of love and loss with the architectural beauties of St. Mark's Square; like the Venetian empire his love was transitory, first he won the young man, Gery Ackerman, who then ran off with Paul Goodman.

Duncan's love life may be divided (like his poetry) between an earlier period of promiscuity and a later period of domesticity. One New Year's Day, 1951, he and Jess Collins, a painter, set up house together and were only separated by the poet's death on February 3, 1988. Among the domestic volumes are *Caesar's Gate* (1955), *The Opening of the Field* (1960), *Roots and Branches* (1964), *Bending the Bow* (1968), *Ground Work Before the War* (1984), and *Ground Work II, In the Dark* (1987).

In *Ground Work Before the War*, the battle is "that War which rages throughout the world today, as enormous in its crimes and madness" as the ancient wars of religion, a war including gay liberation. In 1973, Duncan wrote John Wieners about the gay liberation fronts, "With the way words have of drawing us into their depths, that term 'liberation' that is so much the jargon of the day (so that while the bosses of the U.S. . . . move in on Asia burning and exterminating as they go it is called 'liberating') does draw us deeper into searching out for ourselves true liberations." And he predicted that the word/world "gay" would "be searcht out until it rings painfully true to us."

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DYKE

This word is a slang term in American English designating a female homosexual, which elements of the

American lesbian community have adopted as a self-designation. It was originally a term of abuse, and only in the 1970s, with the reversal of values that accompanied the radical upsurge following the Vietnam War, did it obtain a positive, political value.

The term may stem from an earlier compound expression *bulldike*, which is recorded from the black American slang of the 1920s in the forms *bull-diker* (with the variant *bull-dagger*) and *bull-diking woman* in the sense of "mannish lesbian."

Several theories are current concerning the etymology of *dyke* or *dike* (both spellings are found). There are a number that do not bear serious examination: the suggestion that *dyke* stems from the Greek word *dike*, fancifully identified with Athena, the "man-woman" who is the principle of total order; or from *hermaphrodite*, with only the last syllable retained and then mispronounced as *dyke*; or from Boadicca, the queen of the ancient Britons who fought against the Roman occupation of her country. The last is impossible on both historical and philological grounds.

More plausible is the derivation from the verb *to dike*, "to attire oneself faultlessly for social purposes," or *to be diked out*, which is recorded as American student slang as early as 1851. Somewhat later *dike* is attested in the meaning of a man so attired, or merely the set of male clothing. Since the original usage of *bulldiker* is a form denoting the agent of a verb, the meaning would thus be "a lesbian wearing male, particularly formal male attire."

However, this still fails to explain fully the compound *bulldiker*, which is all the more noteworthy as *bull* is an English word that is quite prolific in compounds in the literary language and even more in the dialects. Two of these are *bull-dog*, known from the beginning of the Modern English period (with counterparts in Dutch *bulhond* and German *Bulldogge*), and *bull-bitch* "female bull-dog," first