

Poet Robert Duncan to do readings as part of a series of events in conjunction with the inauguration of Richard C. Atkinson

October 6, 1981

A major poetry event is scheduled to take place Wednesday, October 21, at the University of California, San Diego with the publication of "The Five Songs" by Robert Duncan, one of America's most eminent poets, and a reading by Duncan of his work.

The reading, which is free and open to the public, is set for 4 p.m. in the Mandeville Center Auditorium. It is part of a series of events set to take place on the UC San Diego campus in conjunction with the inauguration of Chancellor Richard C. Atkinson on Thursday, October 22.

"The Five Songs" was commissioned by The Friends of the UCSD Library and the Archive for New Poetry on the San Diego campus as the Friends' eighth Keepsake for its members. An edition of 2,126 handsewn copies is being printed on letterpress from the author's holograph by Patrick Reagh in Glendale, Calif. Two thousand copies are reserved for members of the Friends, 100 copies will be signed by Duncan and numbered I to 100 and placed on sale and 26 copies, lettered A to Z, will be reserved for the publishers.

Duncan, who has published numerous books over the past 35 years, has served as a major voice in postwar American poetry and in the literary avant-garde. He was a member of the Black Mountain Group of poets and a vital force in San Francisco's literary renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s.

Duncan continues the tradition of such writers as Whitman, Pound and Williams which views writing as a process and enactment of physiological and psychological intensities. He is broadly mythopoeic, creating a poetics of "first things" out of those stories and legends which deal with man's origins.

While he is a profoundly innovative poet, Duncan still considers himself a traditionalist in the sense that he explores all traditions, ancient and modern, for their projections of what poetry is.

"The Five Songs" is just such a projection. It is a series taken from the work of the 13th-century Persian poet Jalal-Ud-Din Rumi. Duncan's poems are "circulations of the song," extending Rumi's poems beyond their source into what Duncan calls "the external texts of Poetry itself." Among the materials used to form these poems is the lore of Persian Sufism, a sect of Islamic mysticism, of which Rumi was a master. Duncan finds the Sufi teachings sympathetic to his own ideas of poetry based on ideas of breath, dance and music.

Born in Oakland, Calif., in 1919, Duncan attended the University of California during the late Thirties and again from 1948 through 1950. During the Second World War he lived in New York where he edited and wrote for "Experimental Review." He was heavily involved with the San Francisco poetry scene, but in 1948 with the publication of "The Venice Poems" he came to believe "a new poetics was necessary." He saw the ground for them in William Carlos Williams' "Paterson" and in Ezra Pound's "The Pisan Cantos." They began to emerge in his work published in "Origin," edited by Cid Corman, and in "The Black Review," edited by Robert Creeley, and most particularly in "Letters," published in 1953.

Duncan's early books, all published by Oyez Press, were "As Testimony," "The Cat and the Blackbird," "Medea at Kolchis," and "Of the War: Passages." His more recent books are "Roots and Branches," "Bending the Bow," and "The Opening of the Field."

His work has been widely anthologized and published. He is represented in "The Faber Book of Modern American Verse," (1956) "New American Poetry," (1960) "Contemporary American Poetry," (1962) and "New Modern Poetry," (1976). He has also published and directed his own plays, "Faust Foutu" and "Medea at Kolchis."

In 1956 he taught at the Black Mountain School in North Carolina and later served as the assistant director of the poetry center and taught a poetry workshop at San Francisco State College. He has also served as a lecturer at the creative writing workshop at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Duncan has received several awards from "Poetry," an award from the Union League Civic and Arts Foundation and the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize in 1961. He won the Levinson Prize in 1964 and was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1963-64.

A display of Duncan's work, including "The Five Songs" with printer's proofs, metal printing plates and author's notes, is currently on display in the Mandeville Department of Special Collections on the eighth floor of the Central University Library. The Special Collections Department is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays.

For more information contact: Paul West, 452-3120

(October 6, 1981)