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## Alan Dugan, 80, Barbed Poet Of Daily Life's Profundities

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Alan Dugan, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet whose ironic and unsentimental verse pondered the challenge of finding freedom and purpose in moments of ordinary life, died on Wednesday in Hyannis, Mass. He was 80, and lived in Truro, Mass.

The cause was pneumonia, which followed many health problems in recent years, said Judith Shahn, his wife.

Mr. Dugan's first book of poetry, in 1962, won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. The last of his nine books of poems, in 2001, won another National Book Award. Other honors included a Rome Prize, Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellowships and, in January, the Lannan Foundation Award, which carried a \$125,000 honorarium.

In a review of Mr. Dugan's "Poems Seven" (Seven Stories Press, 2001) in The New York Times Book Review, Robert Pinsky said Mr. Dugan could "set a glittering barb into every phrase."

His language included invective, vulgar slang and scatological terms. Even his titles were provocative: "The Aesthetics of Circumcision" and "Funeral Oration for a Mouse" were titles in "Poems Seven."

Another work in that book referred to an earlier collection of his, saying, "You'll find in my Collected Poems, the palliative answer! to your stupid questions."

Mr. Dugan's tone was compared to that of the local bartender, though a particularly eloquent one. His themes range from the onerous need to make money to bad jobs to masturbation to the problem of how much to drink. Larger metaphysical issues swim through his verses like sharks, and death is seldom far away.

"His poems usually communicate small perceptions appropriate to the lives of small people, so that we listen not because of any glittering eye but because we feel we should," said Contemporary Poets, a standard reference work.

In Mr. Dugan's second book, "Poems Two" (Yale, 1963), the work "Elegy" shows how a few words can seem to suggest a huge, sad story:

I know but will not tell

you, Aunt Irene, why there  
 are soapsuds in the whiskey:  
 Uncle Robert had to have  
 A drink while shaving.

Alan Dugan, an only child, was born on Feb. 12, 1923, in Brooklyn. His father sold nuts and bolts, and when sales were good the family lived in Queens. In poorer times they were in Brooklyn, Mr. Dugan told *The Boston Globe* in 2001.

In Queens he worked on the student newspaper at Jamaica High School, from which he graduated. He wrote poetry surreptitiously because he thought it was for "sissies," his wife said.

But he could not ignore "the unconscious voice dictating the poems," he told National Public Radio in 2001. He said that he always heard the same voice that he heard when he was 16, and he always thought that he was 16 when he heard it.

After enrolling in Queens College in 1941 he published his first poems in the college literary magazine. He won the Queens College Poetry Prize in 1943.

He was drafted into the Army during World War II and served in the Pacific as a B-29 engine mechanic, and he found time to write poetry at a makeshift desk. He began to reject his earlier models, T. S. Eliot and E. E. Cummings, and became fascinated with William Carlos Williams, a poet to whom critics often likened Mr. Dugan.

He went to Olivet College in Michigan on the G.I. Bill and met Ms. Shahn, an artist whose father was the painter Ben Shahn. Ms. Shahn said she and Mr. Dugan left Olivet after a student strike over the firing of a leftist professor whom they supported. They went to what was then Mexico City College, from which Mr. Dugan graduated.

Later they moved to Manhattan, where they married to avoid eviction, despite marriage being against their socialist principles. Ms. Shahn is Mr. Dugan's only immediate survivor.

He worked in a staple factory and an advertising firm, and for a while the couple owned a greeting-card business. When Mr. Dugan won his first National Book Award, Ms. Shahn said that he was in his third year working in a factory where he made plastic vaginas used to demonstrate diaphragm insertion.

In 1960 Mr. Dugan won a Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, which led to Yale University Press printing his book "Poems," for which he won the Pulitzer.

In that book's introduction, Dudley Fitts, the poet and author, wrote: "I am moved chiefly by the plainness of Mr. Dugan's themes and by his nuances of imagery, phrasing, run and rhythm. The cast of mind is hard, yet the detail is often wonderfully ingenuous and tender."

Mr. Dugan's technical virtuosity in that first book included one poem, "On the Elk, Unwitnessed," in which the iambic pentameter of Greek tragedy was articulated into contemporary speech rhythms.

Mr. Dugan held numerous teaching positions, including ones at Sarah Lawrence, Connecticut College and the University of Colorado. He and his wife used his fellowships to live and work in Rome, Paris, Mexico and South America.

At home on Cape Cod, he taught poetry workshops at the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill, and was a founder of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

Some critics complained that Mr. Dugan's habitual returning to the same prosaic themes in the same style grew tiresome. Even all of his seven principal books had the same title, "Poems." Each "Poems" was followed by a number, in the order that the books were done. Sometimes the number was spelled out, and sometimes it was a numeral.

But many readers relished Mr. Dugan's ability to slice to the bone. In "Poems Seven," his last book, "Love Song: I and Thou" illustrates this incisiveness:

I can nail my left palm  
to the left-hand crosspiece but  
I can't do everything myself.  
I need a hand to nail the right,  
A help, a love, a you, a wife.

Photo: Alan Dugan (Photo by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times, 2001)