

unimagined connections

By Belle Crenner Gironda

Lucky for us all, while Ezra Pound informed a young James Laughlin that he couldn't write, William Carlos Williams recognized his talent and encouraged him as a poet. Laughlin gives Williams credit for helping him develop his idiosyncratic form which consists of couplets in which no second line is more than two typewriter spaces longer than the preceding one. Williams' own compositions show such an interest in space on the page as do Pound's. While by description Laughlin's formula sounds queer, it looks quite nice on paper and also reads beautifully as a St. Andrews audience had the pleasure of discovering on Halloween afternoon in the Belk Main Lounge.

Laughlin read from his new book, *Selected Poems, 1935-1985*, published this year by City Lights. The poet joked that no one else had ever attempted to use his form except one writer who tried it, failed miserably and then went on to write very well as Phillip Larkin! Laughlin is adamant that his work be referred to as light verse. This is an apt description of many of the poems but some seem to transcend that category. At any rate, the tone and language of Laughlin's writing invites you to come to it in a playful mood.

"Catullus is my master and I mix / a little acid and a bit of honey/ in his bowl love / is my subject & the lack of love/ " Laughlin writes in his poem "Technical Notes," one of the first in the section of the book called "Some Natural Things." That Catullus has influenced Laughlin is never in doubt. He quotes and refers to the Roman poet often in his work, when he is not borrowing from the Ancient Greeks or from Pound or bursting into "American schoolboy" French. All this borrowing and stealing ("Why shouldn't I?" Laughlin writes) is done bravely and openly in the best spirit of modernism. One entire section of *Selected Poems* is headed "Stolen Poems."

"The sources of the thefts will be found in the back of the book," the author reports. The effects of this pilfering on the reader include, a sudden feeling of being educated, a sudden feeling of being uneducated, and numerous sudden realizations of previously unimagined connections between popular culture and ancient culture:

Persephone Wears Bluejeans

now but she's the same sweet girl
It's spring again and up

from the underworld she comes

Laughlin knows just where to find these connections and how to bring them home, like in "Cultural Note":

O bella mia patria in Verona
there is a special box in the

post office to receive letters
addressed to Romeo & to Juliet

they come from all over the
world especially Japan...

Like some post-modern East Village collage a Laughlin poem can contain Ovid, Sappho, Jesse Jackson, and "that Hollywood cowboy," comfortably and sensibly in eighteen lines as "The *Non-World*" does.

One discovers in reading Laughlin that he not only identifies with Catullus because he "... knew a poem is like a blow ..." ("Technical Notes") but also because "... those girls made Catullus so miserable..." ("A Leavetaking"). Throughout *Selected Poems* we encounter the honey and acid of girls making poets miserable and vice-versa. Sometimes the love poems are funny and bittersweet:

Your Love

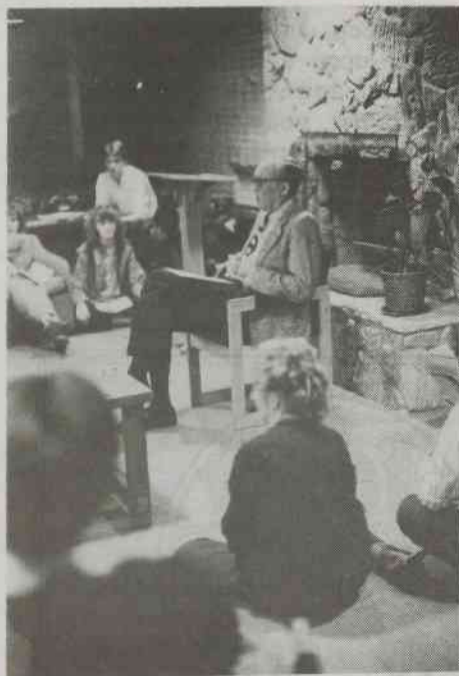
reminds me of the sense
of humor of one of those

funny plumbers who likes
to switch the handles on

the hot and cold faucets
of hotel wash basins.

Photos by Rooney L. Coffman

**James Laughlin,
poet/publisher/skier,
speaks to full house**



Others, like the eleven poems in "The Delia Sequence," belie deeper emotion and loss in clear simple images:

WE SIT BY THE LAKE

and though we are a
thousand miles apart

we are very close to-
gether we watch the

water and the forest
and there is no need

to say anything but
sometimes your gentle

fingers touch my hand.

By contrast, *Selected Poems* contains a section called "Funny-papers By Hiram Handspring" which recounts the adventures of a Quixotic alter-ego who goes jousting at "Girls As Windmills," makes love with his socks on, and has conversations with the "Anti-Poet" consisting entirely of questions like, "Who wants not to be anyone at all?" before walking off into the sunset "... to put on the feedbag."

Among my favorite Laughlin poems are the ones he has written for other writers, like this for Virginia Woolf which behaves as well universally as it does personally:

**Will We Ever Go To The
Lighthouse?**

We see it every day from
the shore and we talk of

sailing out on a happy ex-
pedition we will carry our

gifts to the lighthouse
keepers but the weather

is always poor or the wind
is wrong and year by year

the lighthouse appears to
become more distant from

us until we are no longer
certain it is really there.

Or the masterful weaving of lines from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* into "He Did It to Please His Mother," a sensitive sort of elegy for Delmore Schwartz, that somehow, by acknowledging the tragedy of his life, elevates it in these closing lines: But still I'm not really sure, was it your mother too, for certain drops of salt, oh world of slippery turns

Or was there some defect of judgment, one we couldn't see Which brought down the anger of the gods upon you, poor boy pursuing summer butterflies Yes, you are loved now that you are lacked, now you've become a kind of nothing Or is there a world elsewhere?

James Laughlin, the poet, feels at home with all kinds of people, in any country, in several different languages, in ancient and modern forms and cultures, in his poetry. After having spent an afternoon listening to him read and having travelled between the covers of his book, one finds oneself growing accustomed to what at first seemed uncharted territory. This is right. This is what should happen because, the poet tells us

... a poem
is finally just
a natural thing.

