

The Front Page

March 15-28, 1983 Vol. 4, No. 4

A Passion for Poetry and People. . .

by Michael McFee, *Spectator Magazine*

Once, while spelunking through the dim stacks of a university library, I again found myself in front of the poetry books — slim volumes, tightly stratified. I was surprised to discover, near the end of my alphabetical scan, several early works by Jonathan Williams, whose books are usually highly-prized collector's items; locked away by jealous curators in rare book rooms. I extracted one, opened to the title page, and found it inscribed in the author's flowing hand: "ODI ET AMO and that's all she wrote!"

I HATE AND I LOVE — Catullus the source, that Roman master of satire, epigram, and the lyric. Jonathan Williams — North Carolina native, unofficial ambassador for the Black Mountain College Alumni Association, and part-time resident in our western mountains — casts his short, sharp poems wholly in that passionate tradition, as well as his occasional fits of prose, newly collected as *The Magpie's Bagpipe: Selected Essays of Jonathan Williams* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 188 pages, \$12.50 paper). "A book like this is to be read at random, on whim," Williams writes in a prefatory note. "For JW, prose is to order. Poetry just happens, like dandruff and what some call inspiration."

As any reader of a Williams book will know, he is a connoisseur of the pithy quote, wielded as a weapon in his siege against vague mediocrity. Some recur across his texts like leitmotifs; others shore up on a page of epigraphs, as in *The Magpie's Bagpipe*:

'To ensure freshness, all foods are cooked from scratch, which is subject to run out.'

— Dip's Country Kitchen, West Rosemary, Chapel Hill, N.C.

'I sincerely believe that the best-kind of criticism is that which is amusing and poetic; not that cold and algebraic kind which, under the pretext of explaining everything, displays neither hate nor love.'

— Charles Baudelaire

'When I say boogie-woogie, you shake that thang!'

— Clarence 'Pine Top' Smith

Williams follows these leaders: as with his poetry, his prose knows how to cook and shake, "dance and sing," hate and love, entertain and edify. And his taste, while exacting ("I am easily satisfied by the very best"), is as eclectic as the gallery on his epigraph-graffiti page suggests. Among the subjects in the 39 pieces of *The Magpie's Bagpipe* are literary "Portraits" of Charles Olson, Buckminster Fuller, Edward Dahlberg, and Basil Bunting (in one of the best interviews on record, where the length of the questions far exceeds the delightfully terse answers); photographic "Attentions" paid to Aaron Siskind, Clarence John Laughlin, Doris Ullman, and other figures or affairs in the states of poetry and photography; and facts and opinions gathered from diverse tours in Great Britain and America, under the heading "Distances."

But to name a few of Williams' subjects hardly defines the matter or manner his "essays." They are more accurately called montages, or "responsive patchworks." His method is glancing and various, not sustained: he likes to ramble, digress, tell pungent anecdotes, pun, preach, bitch, praise. He surrounds himself with a cloud of witnesses, from Blake to Bruckner to Zukofsky — all artists beyond the pale of cultural fashion, which he scorns — in a spirit of fellowship, rather than pedantic scholarship. His aim is "to elate and record." Williams remembers an occasion with the huge 6'9" poet Olson "at the Isis Theater one Sunday night in West Asheville. We'd just seen that great flick, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. There were gasps when the lights went up and the great man rose with his traditional wool blanket over his shoulders." Commenting on the profession of photography, he says, "Ever since Mnemosyne and the Muses became a rock-group franchise and moved into a commune near Tabula Rasa, Arkansas, the profession includes multitudes of shysters." And describing a travel epiphany: "On US 60 west of Ellsinore I see one lone pine tree in the rain with as beautiful a silhouette as I



Poet and publisher Jonathan Williams at work in his study, in the far mountains of North Carolina.

have ever seen. Basho would have slammed on the brakes, got out the inkstone, had an amorous seizure, and written a poem. All I did was tip my cap and then thank the castrator-crew from the local telephone company."

That last crack gives a clue that Williams' taste is not naively democratic, as he admits:

Anyone who knows me knows that my diet is the isolated, cathetic, extraordinary, and hypertensive, and my America is not the venal and banal miasma owned by the Franchise People From Beyond Space. I like to scold and I believe in non-righteous indignation. The Pejorocracy I learned on Charles Olson's knee keeps me in vigorous gadfly-training. (No gadflies without a horse's-ass society.)

Williams has spent much of his life on the road "preaching the gospel of beauty," as the title of one essay puts it, making pilgrimages to "tenders of the Orphic fires," ministering to the reputations and needs of neglected genius, evangelizing for discrimination in art, writing, music, food, life. His mission, as he has described it elsewhere: "To keep afloat the Ark of Culture in these dark and

tacky times!" McDonalds, The Colonel, and other Franchise People are anathema, as are the attempts of "blue-haired academics" to institutionalize literature. Williams sees himself and a few friends as the Remnant, surrounded by an adversary society — barbarians, usurers, political and religious fanatics. "Laodiceans." Shades of Ezra Pound, or hard reality?

Some may find Williams' attitudes toward bourgeois society and "the muddled classes" somewhat overstated, even paranoid. For example, late in the book, after describing a Shaker chair, he asks: "But, of what use is that uncomfortable, austere, angelic chair to some gross dude of Middle America, laid back on a reclining, vibrating, plastic-covered La-Z-Boy Rocker — wolfing down the peanuts, working a six-pack, sweating out Super Bowl X in front of the box? Not much, baby." Truth has edged into caricature — funny, perhaps, but slightly hysterical, especially when Williams records his own viewing of Super Bowl XI less than forty pages away. That gross denizen of Mid-America, if he had read *The Magpie's Bagpipe* and other Williams, might ask, "But what use is the Super Bowl or World Series to a gentleman poet — savant in his

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