

Open Books: Poetry in Conversation, No. 1

I'd meant to write a blog post about the first in what promises to be a very interesting series of discussions about books of modern poetry at Seattle's all poetry bookstore, Open Books: A Poem Emporium in the Wallingford District, but fatherhood and impending travel conspired to foil that plan, foil I say! until AFTER the event. Sorry John & Christine.

A barista at Caffé Vita in Seward Park has asked me what I was doing yesterday and I told her that I was going to a discussion group on one of the quintessential acts of Modernist literature, ***Spring and All*** by William Carlos Williams. This was the kind of event I tried to create at SPLAB in Columbia City for three seasons. You can get some sense of what we did one of those years here when our website maintenance was a little better: <http://splab.org/living-room/2011-2012-living-room-season/>

I have a peculiar interest in this book and place Williams as one of my own literary ancestors because he's one of those poets who gets that you have to go outside of yourself to get to the real power. Or so deep inside that you reach that *sill*, Daphne Marlatt calls it, at the place which marks the demarcation between of the outer and inner worlds. (One could say *selves* as well.) He understands spontaneity is one method to tap this power, the power of the imagination, the collective unconscious, the Buddhafield, the [Noösphere](#), you name it. (I also believe it is a key to general health and well-being, but that's another post.)

& I tried to give a brief sense of the recent (last 100 years or so) history of writing in the moment here: <http://paulenelson.com/2013/07/12/writing-or-re-writing/> which illustrates it's not just the Beats and Black Mountain-influenced poets who understand this approach to writing. For those who think this is an easy way to write, or that the example of the Beats enabled generations of bad poets, you still don't get it and I hope you do someday, for your own sake.

& so Christine Deavel, co-owner of Open Books, began the evening by playing a few sound bites from Williams taken from the marvelous Penn Sound collection. One, in particular, sheds some light on our topic here. The reading was recorded at Harvard University, December 4, 1951. Williams says:

...sensual. Listen! Never mind, don't try to work it out. Listen to it! Let it come to you! Let it.. sit back, relax, let the thing spray in your

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face. Get the feeling of it. Get the tactile sense of something... something going on. It may be that you will then perceive, have a sensation that you may later find will clarify itself as you go along. So that I say, don't attempt to understand the modern poem, listen to it. And it should be HEARD. It's very difficult sometimes to get it off the page. But once you hear it, then you should be able to appraise it. In other words, if it ain't a pleasure, it ain't a poem...

http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Williams-WC/13_Harvard_12-04-51/Williams-WC_01_Commentary-1_Harvard_12-04-51.mp3

And a good portion of this evening at Open Books went on to ignore Williams' advice! In fact, the University of Pennsylvania, keepers of the vast Penn Sound archive, has a Massive Open Online Course on Modern and Contemporary American poetry taught by a professor who says: "You can't overthink a poem." ! They have taken the opposite of WCW's advice here and made it a cottage industry. And at \$61,800 annual tuition and fees at Penn, you can get quite the cottage.

So, part of the good doctor's prescription for our own writing consists of engaging reality in the moment with spontaneity. Another crucial part is engagement of the imagination. That second part is the theme of *Spring And All*. Williams hammers this point in over and over and even opens the book with the notion that if you follow his prescription, you're doomed to a life of marginalization. Yet this is where the power is! That opening quote:

If anything of the moment results - so much the better. And so much ore likely will it be that no one will want to see it (1).

Classic. So few will want to read your books, attend your readings and give you grants and other poetry "career" goodies, but ultimately you get sick if you don't follow this program of connecting to the larger forces at work. Forces available to the person who trains their selves to recognize them.

A great quote from *Spring and All* which gets into the potency of his program, the one-two punch of imagination and spontaneity is:

To perfect the ability to record at the moment when the consciousness is enlarged by the sympathies and the unity of understanding which the imagination gives, to practice skill in

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recording the force moving, then to know it, in the largeness of its proportions -- (48)

The alternative to engaging the imagination is a slippery slope that leads to, well, what we have now in the U.S. and the world - destruction. Diane diPrima's prophecy that "the only war that matters is the war against the imagination. All other wars are subsumed in it." And now we have the Teahadists who, with their enablers, have allowed the U.S. to waste TRILLIONS of dollars on militarism and have all but declared war on citizens who disagree with their policies. It is a massive failure of the imagination.

As individuals, if we do not engage it daily, we lose out on one of the imagination's key attributes, compassion. It's the same part of the brain activated by engaging the imagination. So, the non-violent resistance poets and other artists have been waging for millennia is about to reach a tipping point. When more people in the U.S. can imagine an end to the world rather than an end to capitalism, you know something sacred is also losing. Williams' program of perception combined with spontaneous activation of the imagination (articulated with more grace by subsequent poets like Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, Michael McClure, Robin Blaser, Eileen Myles, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt and other poets I mention all the time) is the key to the best poetry, the best art and a healthy self. Why is this not more broadly understood?

Thanks Doc.

1:35p - 10.23.13
Lucile, B