

Mark Hillringhouse

The Williams Center Centennial

I remember that Ginsberg arrived early on the day of the Williams Centennial. I had asked him and several other poets to give a reading of their favorite Williams poems. I can still see him up at the lectern in front of a packed audience reading "Good Night," one of Williams' lesser known poems, and explaining to the audience how this poem embodied all the principles of Williams' poetic experiments in a new American verse form.



Allen Ginsberg addressing the audience at the Williams Centennial

I'm looking at a postcard Denise Levertov sent to me in 1982 after I had introduced myself to her at a poetry reading she gave in Manhattan. I



Postcard from Denise Levertov

can still see her pretty face, her smile widening as I mentioned the newly created Williams Center. She was one of the poets who I was gathering for the big reading around the centennial of Williams' birth, September 17, 1983.

Turning the pages in my scrapbook, I come across a series of letters from James Laughlin, one dated May 25, 1983, replying to my invitation to him to come read for me, and another letter where he comments on my interview with Williams' son, William Eric. I met Laughlin later in person and he was then in his 80s. He mentioned to me that the hundreds of little poetry magazines and journals sprouting up around the country were doing more harm than good by publishing poetry that was second rate. This from the man who started the publishing house of New Directions and who published Williams and Pound and Rexroth and all of whom were all

part of the little magazine world in their own time before anyone else would look at their work.

Turning more pages, there's a letter from W. S. Merwin, then a letter from Philip Levine, and a letter from Paul Mariani, Williams' biographer. The Center opened in August, 1982. I was hired at first to write their PR, handle press releases, flyers, and announcements. I was in the middle of a series of poetry interviews with New York Poets John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Barbara Guest and I was working as a contributing editor to the *New York Arts Journal*, a bi-monthly arts tabloid started by Richard Burgin. It was mostly Columbia grad students. George Stade was on the masthead, Richard Kostelanetz. Fortunately for me, I worked my job description at the Center to include poetry coordinator and I was able to write for state and local arts grants to help fund the series I was developing.

I envisioned a sort of North Jersey "92nd Street Y" with large audiences, book signings, panel discussions, as well as readings by prominent poets from across the country. The Center had hoped in those early days of opening to become the home of the New Jersey State Ballet and Opera as well as the home of other organizations like the New Jersey State Symphony.

The main attraction of course was the 2,000-seat former Vaudeville Theater opened in 1922 then later converted to the Rivoli Movie Theater in the 1930s. Many of the Big Bands of the 1930s played concerts here including Harry James, the Dorsey Brothers and Glenn Miller. William Eric Williams told me he remembered going there to see "Gone with the Wind" with his mother and father when it opened at the Rivoli in 1939. He also said to me, "Imagine my father living next to a place with his name on it and a café called 'The Poets' Corner Café.' He would have sold the house and moved out of town."

The old Rivoli burned in 1977 and the town was going to raze the structure, but a local group of prominent citizens saw it as an opportunity to renovate the space and turn it into an arts center. The main visionary force behind this idea was a dean of students at the Rutherford campus of

Fairleigh Dickinson University. I came on board with his recommendation amid this fervor to build a home for the arts. I was only a couple of years out of college, inexperienced and naïve but energetic, enthusiastic and a believer, and I ran around like a nut. The county posted a three million dollar bond towards construction, an architect was hired, and soon the construction to shore up the structure and add a basement-level twin movie theater, a café, a lobby and a 200-seat recital hall was begun.

I am looking at a news clipping from the Bergen Record from 1982 where I am being quoted: “The Williams Center will support the arts with ticket sales from first and second-run movies and sales of popcorn,” as Mark Hillringhouse, the center’s poetry director explains.” There was speculation then that the arts center would, in conjunction with Fairleigh Dickinson, offer courses and credits and degree programs in different fine arts such as ballet.

The buzz in July of 1982 was heating up for the August opening and later for my September 1983 centennial poetry reading. It would turn out to be one of the largest poetry readings ever given in New Jersey, years before the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival would take over the reigns of poetry.

I never expected that on the day of the centennial over five hundred people would pay to hear poetry. In fact, three hundred had to be turned away. The executive director of the newly opened center was pissed off that it was a success. She had tried to thwart me, hoping that the poetry reading would fail. Why it didn’t fail was because there had been nothing like it before and there was wide press coverage including several TV spots on the local news and write-ups in the local papers including a big write-up in the *New York Times*.

I believed in the project of bringing arts to North Jersey and we all worked hard to get the funding to make it happen. The oversight was that there was no real place to park except on the street and the street had meters and the Rutherford police would ticket all the cars after the meters expired and many of the patrons would come out of the Williams Center only to find a parking ticket tucked under their windshield wiper.

The executive director felt overwhelmed by all the financial difficulties and there was no money to pay the staff. I had to find my own funding to run the centennial. I wrote for a grant from the state and got a few thousand dollars and this saved me. I was laid off from my paid position as PR director and I was working unpaid.

The executive director was looking to blame others for everything that went wrong and I caught some of that blame. Before the big “Poetry Reading,” a concert recital performed by a local musician had drawn a low turnout and she used that opportunity to cast blame in my direction. It turned out that she had no prior experience running an arts center and had very provincial taste. The Joffrey Ballet, seeking a summer residence for their Manhattan dance company, came knocking on our door one day and she turned them down not realizing who they were. She had never heard of the Joffrey Ballet! She hoped that my poetry celebration would bomb.

I can still see her gloating face the night before the reading saying to me tongue-in-cheek, “Break a leg!” and laughing as she turned to exit the center. I decided to keep working and tie up some loose ends. I ended up sleeping on the floor in my office. In the morning, I had to pick up Howard Moss from Manhattan and later I had to get the volunteers organized to handle the crowds.

Ginsberg showed up with his entourage of several East Village poets including his lover, Peter Orlovsky, and his longtime friend and Beat poet, Gregory Corso. I would later have to bounce a half-drunk Corso from the Center for banging too loud on the piano in the lobby outside while the reading was going on. Ginsberg even brought some of his family, including his step-mother who was still living in Paterson.

In college in Michigan, I always admired Williams and Ginsberg since they were from my home state. When I got to the Williams Center, I started to read everything I could find that was still in print. It impressed me the way Ginsberg read out of his beaten up and dog-eared volume of the “Collected Poems” published by New Directions. He carried it around with him like a preacher carries a bible.

Ginsberg was my first choice when I was thinking of who to invite

and I invited about twenty poets to read. I met him at The Saint Mark's Poetry Project on Second Avenue and Tenth Street in the East Village. When I told him about the centennial he wrote it down in his notebook and told me to call



Front row on right: Peter Orlovsky

Bob Rosenthal, his secretary, to confirm the dates. I didn't have much money to offer the poets I had invited, but Ginsberg was generous with his time and he wanted to read to honor his mentor.

Williams' two sons, Paul and William Eric, were also there to honor their father. I just completed an interview with one of the sons, William Eric, who took over his father's medical practice after his father had his first stroke, and he continued to live with his wife and family in his father's home at 9 Ridge Road. The Williams M.D. name hung on a shingle outside and mothers would drop by with their sick children. I walked over one day to introduce myself and he was cordial and showed me around. He invited the poets who read to come by to see the house.

I asked him a lot of questions about his father and I could tell that he was unhappy about growing up as a kid and not having a father available to him. He also partially blamed poetry for his daughter's mental illness and he was bitter over his daughter's obsession with poetry.

When I asked him if he had any particular memory of anybody who came over to the house to visit his dad he said:

I've seen them all at one time or another. My dad was constantly busy with people coming over the house. He was scarcely around for us.

Well, mom looked after everything. And for a kid like me or my brother, trying to get time with dad, well, poetry always came first. I wasn't impressed by the importance of my father as a literary figure, and I thought these poets who came over were all very peculiar, odd people.



Williams' sons, William Eric and Paul, seated left to right on either side of their father, circa 1920

I remember Marsden Hartley, Charles Sheeler; I remember Charles Olson and Theodore Roethke; I remember—who was that wacky guy who imitated a chicken flapping his arms—some poet my dad knew. He'd come out here from the city (Manhattan) and sneak into the office when mom

wasn't looking and borrow five dollars. So many of them were poor slobs. There was one whom my mother wouldn't let into the house because he'd leave fleas on the couch.

I would run into William Eric on his walks down Rutherford's "Main Street" to the public library where a museum to his father was set up. It was a strange sight to see the son who resembled the father staring into the window at his father's belongings, his father's desk and typewriter and some of his father's first editions of his poetry, even the Brueghel prints that used to hang on the walls. He told me that he remembered his father pulling up a special drawer in his desk and the typewriter would appear after a patient left and then he would bang out poems on this old machine—"tap, tap, tap—my God! It would go on all night." He mentioned that he was sorry that he gave away his father's desk. He looked introspective and sad during these moments.

One day, I took Gerald Stern over to see the Williams artifacts at the library, and Stern talked his way into the closed-to-the-public room and the librarian let us inside. Williams' straw hat was lying on the old desk near the typewriter. I wasn't paying attention after we left and walked outside. Halfway down the block, I noticed that Stern was wearing Williams' straw hat, the one that is famously pictured on many of the New Directions book covers of Williams' work. Gerald Stern got a big laugh out of this and went back to return the hat.

During my interview with William Eric, he gave me some photos of his father, including a head shot and a Polaroid of his father and mother



From left to right: Celia Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, "Flossie" Williams, and Louis Zukofsky

and Louis Zukovsky and his wife at the 9 Ridge Road homestead. He told me that he remembered Zukofsky very well since Zukofsky was always dressed up in a suit and tie, "Not like the other poetry bums." He added that they sat and talked for hours about poetry and this mystified the son, since he could not imagine his father or anyone talking that long about something like poetry.

When I asked him what Pound and Hemingway were like he said,

Jesus! He was a big bullshit artist. Dad couldn't stand Hemingway. One time, mother and Bill and Sally Bird [editor of *Three Mountain Press*] were at lunch at Café de la Paix in Paris when Hemingway appeared in the doorway; he was always trying to grub drinks and meals and money, and Mrs. Bird was trying to hide saying to my mother, "Here comes Hemingway, don't let him see us." They avoided him like poison. He wasn't thought much of in this household. And Pound was much too eccentric, overbearing, with an overpowering, big ego. You couldn't talk to him unless you were knowledgeable about his writing or if you were a particularly scholarly guy who could stay with him. He had nothing for a kid like me.



Williams homestead at 9 Ridge Road

And I found out that he wasn't crazy about Ginsberg either. He found him to be too much of a radical and a troublemaker. William Eric was a World War II veteran and a Navy doctor, but they seemed to embrace like old friends when I saw them greet each other at the centennial. Amiri Baraka was there and he and Ginsberg were exchanging notes on what poems of Williams they were going to read. I

was new to the world of poetry and poetry readings and so I was learning on the job and sweating from running around in my Brooks Brothers suit and I was panicked. Ginsberg helped

calm me down but he also said some strange things when he saw this other poet that he didn't like and asked me, "What is he doing here? Don't you know that he is up at Columbia and they teach Stevens up there!"

At the time, Columbia University had veered away from what it was



Amiri Baraka (left) talking to Allen Ginsberg (right) at the Williams Centennial

when Ginsberg was a student there in the 40s. Ginsberg was part of a downtown, East Village poetry scene that had nothing to do with the uptown worlds of the 92nd Street Y and places like Columbia where the academic poets reigned. And in my frustration to get the audience under control I sat Gins-

berg down and got up on stage and began my introduction.

I read from Williams' *Paterson* the letter the young Ginsberg of Paterson had written to Williams and which Williams had published as part of his five-book epic poem:

Dear Doctor:

In spite of the grey secrecy of time and my own self-shuttering doubts in these youthful rainy days, I would like to make my presence in Paterson known to you, and I hope you will welcome this from me, an unknown young poet, to you, an unknown old poet, who live in the same rusty country of the world. (*Paterson Book IV, Section II*)

It was my way of connecting the two in a very personal way. Ginsberg was moved by my introduction and he sat there smiling. Then he rose and stepped up to the podium and read a Williams poem with all his being, a poem about a man going to bed who takes a glass of water in the kitchen and who has a slightly lustful memory while standing at the sink looking at some sprigs of parsley in a glass. Ginsberg was imparting his long love and direct experience of this poem's miraculous poetic transformation to the audience. He explained how the poem's lack of artifice,

poetic diction, and its lack of meter, rhyme, or literary allusion, made it a poem that worked in the way the objects in the poem were situated and presented “fresh” to the reader in just the way the lines were structured and spaced out.

I can still hear him enunciate each word of this poem in his davening baritone (his voice always quavered with up and down emotion). He said that it was the way that Williams listed the objects as they appear to consciousness, that the poem revealed each object’s clarity. It was this isolating descriptive clarity, along with the downward push of the truncated syntax that moved the poem forward. And so Ginsberg in choosing this poem to read was indicating that Williams was writing poetry at the literal level. He was giving Williams an almost visionary, mystical quality in that the object of the water glass in the poem is presented as an emblem of itself. And so the “thing” that Williams describes is the ordinary object free from association. There are no “other” ideas about the thing, or any idea imposed on the object. For Ginsberg, this attention to the object gave the poem its freshness and meaning and the objects no longer remained ordinary.

This was Ginsberg’s way of teaching to the audience what Williams had meant by “no ideas but in things” for which Williams is so often quoted and misquoted and yet so often misunderstood. Ginsberg was Williams’ first poetry disciple in the 1940s and he sent the good doctor many of his juvenile poems and Williams sent them back with notes scribbled all over them, telling him to chop this and cut that, to cut a poem in half if it were necessary. Ginsberg mentioned how Williams wanted him to show him the places Ginsberg mentioned in his early poems. Williams was researching for his book-length poem, *Paterson*, and wanted the young Ginsberg to show him the secret pools behind factories where mill workers would take swims. Williams was intensely interested in the details of life and he wanted to get that into his poetry with accuracy.

Before the reading began, I had to drive into Manhattan to pick up Howard Moss who didn’t own a car and had no other way to get to Rutherford. After I picked him up and on the way back to the Williams Center, I wanted to show him where Williams was buried in Lyndhurst

which is one town over on the other side of Route 3. I had been to the gravesite before but this time could not locate Williams' headstone. We stood for a moment and while looking up at the names on some headstones in front of us, Howard noticed a stone with his name on it, and next to it, a stone with "Hillhouse" engraved on it. He said, "Let's get out of here." And we took off.

Howard Moss was the poetry editor for *The New Yorker*, and had been in that position for four decades and was intimate with the poetry of Williams, although he mentioned that *The New Yorker* never published a poem by Williams. Williams didn't write *The New Yorker* poetry. They didn't publish Ginsberg either. Moss read "Portrait of A Lady" as his favorite poem to the audience and he said that to him this poem was a "minor miracle" in terms of what it accomplished, in how it moves so gracefully from image to image to its final destination.

I can still see Howard up on the stage at the front of the standing-room only crowd in that sweltering auditorium (the air-conditioning wasn't working), softly reading the opening lines to that poem: "Your thighs are appletrees / whose blossoms touch the sky." The poem, he said, was an interior monologue between the speaker and the literary tensions between two poetic worlds, the modern and the romantic. Howard made the audience appreciate the poem's subtle yet rapid trajectory as it glided from image to speech, from thighs and blossoms to interrogative statements that serve to interrupt the speaker's quiet reverie to destroy the poem's romantic mood with persistent questioning—"Which sky?" and "Which shore?" But he said the genius of Williams was his ability to create this wonderful ironic and whimsical "self-portrait."

Besides the poetry reading, there was a panel discussion planned for later that evening and some Williams scholars were invited along with Ginsberg and Williams' two sons, and Paul Mariani, whose just-released Williams biography, *A New World Naked*, was gathering praise from book reviews across the country.

What Mariani never counted on when he got up to address the audience and talk about Williams was that there would be so many older people in the audience from Rutherford who actually knew Williams, and

either liked him or didn't like him, including Kathleen Hoagland (Kitty), who was in her nineties and who had been one of Williams' mistresses. I can still hear her talking out loud to herself as Mariani was praising the poetry of Williams, and muttering, "That son-of-a-bitch is going to get resurrected!"

Kitty, an Irish novelist and playwright who had been Williams' literary assistant and had helped him with *Paterson*, was sitting a row behind me. She had been active in Rutherford's "Little Theatre" in the 1930s as a playwright and as an actress. She must have been a gorgeous siren to a young Doctor Williams judging by her full head of long, red hair that still hung halfway down her back. She wasn't going to let Mariani get the last word on Williams without adding a few comments of her own.

William Eric did say to me that his father had "... a sexual overdrive ... He loved women. I know mother put up with it, but it still hurt." And he didn't want to go into details because William Eric took his mother's side in all of his father's extra-marital affairs. He told me, "Mom held it all together. Dad was not a family man, for God's sake!"

Peter and Sally Sammartino who were in their 80s were both there and they were big supporters of the arts and the Williams Center and they had lived a few blocks down from where Williams lived on Ridge Road. I had met them a few weeks prior to the centennial and showed them around the center. Peter Sammartino was the founder of Fairleigh Dickinson University, and was Fairleigh S. Dickinson's (founder of the Becton Dickinson Pharmaceutical Company) next door neighbor when Ridge Road was where the wealthy of Rutherford had their homes. Sadly, some months later, I would read that the Rutherford Police found the Sammartinos dead in their home of gun shot wounds to the head, a murder-suicide.

Gerald Stern read "Danse Russe" as his favorite Williams poem. He read the poem as if he himself had wished that he had written it because he said that we love those poems that we could have written ourselves, and he commented on the way the poem takes off gradually from its domestic interior to a totally private spinning world of the artist as a solitary creature who is awake and alone amid the sleeping isolation of the house and

whose own family could never even guess or understand the very strange nature of who this speaker is in the poem or what he does.

If I when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
“I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!”
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,—
Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?

After a few hours, the show was over, and I sat outside on a bench on the brick patio in front of the Williams Center. I sat there staring into the afternoon, exhausted. Gerald Stern came over and put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You did a great job.” That was the best thing that anyone could have said to me. I put everything I had into producing the centennial and now I was relieved that it was finally over and that so many came out to enjoy poetry and had heard so many fine poets read and profess their admiration and love for Williams.