

DR. WILLIAMS' HEIRESESSES A LECTURE

by Alice Notley

Poe was the first one, he mated with a goddess. His children were Emily Dickinson & Walt Whitman – out of wedlock with a goddess. Then Dickinson & Whitman mated – since they were half divine they could do anything they wanted – & they had 2 sons, William Carlos Williams & Ezra Pound, & a third son T. S. Eliot who went to a faraway country & never came back. From out of the West came Gertrude Stein, the daughter of the guy who wrote the 800-page novel & the girl who thought maybe rightly that she was Shakespeare. Gertrude Stein & William Carlos Williams got married: their 2 legitimate children, Frank O'Hara & Philip Whalen, often dressed & acted like their uncle Ezra Pound. However, earlier, before his marriage to Gertrude Stein, Williams had a child by the goddess Brooding. His affair with Brooding was long & passionate, & his child by her was oversized, Charles Olson. Before Charles Olson's birth the goddess had also been having an affair with Williams' brother Ezra Pound. No one was ever absolutely sure who the father of Olson was. Now O'Hara & Whalen were males that were male-female, as were many of the children of Williams by the various goddesses & of Gertrude Stein & some gods. Olson was too big to be as male-female as he would have liked; his female was always curling up inside his shoulder or wrist to take a nice dark nap. Anyway it was striking how there were no females in this generation; & the first children of the male-females & of Olson & their other brothers were all males, & there were very many of them because of their fathers' incredible promiscuity. But the male-females also produced a second wave of children of which many were females. These females could not understand how they came to be born – they saw no one among their parents & brothers who resembled them physically, for the goddesses their fathers mated with were evaporative non-parental types. As a matter of fact these females couldn't even believe that their fathers *were* their fathers. They came to indulge in a kind of ancestor worship – that is each fell in love with a not too distant ancestor. One of them, Bernadette Mayer, fell in love with Gertrude Stein. And

the one named Alice Notley fell in love with her grandfather, William Carlos Williams.

YOUTH AND BEAUTY

I bought a dimshmop –
having no daughter –
for they had twisted
fine ribbons of shining copper
about a white twine
and made a tousled head
of it, fastened it
upon a turned ash stick
slender at the neck
straight, tall –
when tied upright
on the brass wallbracket
to be a light for me
and naked
as a girl should seem
to her father.

- I can't remember anything about Williams & women writers 2 years ago. It was just a crackbrained theory so I could write some works back then.
- Why are you working up to writing some incredibly baroque lecture? You should be worrying about whether your panties are gonna fall down while you're giving it.
- Which pair should I wear in case they do?
- Your Philip Whalen black & white calligraphy panties with lower case letters stitched along the seams... Why don't you do something easy like

play some records of Williams reading?

– Ah, they've all heard those records.

– Are you kidding? Young poets haven't heard shit – they all turn up their noses at the Caedmon records because they got famous on the Dylan Thomas records. Which is why we liked them.

– Helena has the Williams record.

– She wouldn't have it if it weren't for me. I embarrassed her to death by making her read in class that poem about the girdle. English guys are great. They don't care what any poem looks like or where the lines break, they just start reading it like it was some more Tennyson & find themselves saying "I gotta / buy me a new / girdle." & "I GOTTA / wig / gle / for *this*."

– I remember these funny conversations you & I'd have in England, where I'd get all indignant about the way I imagined that Williams treated Flossie. Then you'd get very intense & say something about how when he was old he had to come crawling to her on his hands & knees in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower."

– That business still makes me uncomfortable.

– Our conversations?

– No, Williams & Flossie. Even when they got married she owed him a debt ...

– She did?

– I mean she owed him one, & then she kept on waiting & holding back about getting back at him. Meanwhile he would go out & be a bad boy some more.

– Do you remember anything about my theory about Williams offhand?

– What Williams did for you – he consolidated a lot of what you knew already but allowed you to be fast, perky, sassy, talky, all these different

ways that had to do with talking, in one poem. He helped you to be as fast as you are. And to consolidate these voices you were hearing in your head & in the house & on the street & put them in the same poem. Getting it off Williams was like getting it authentic & not a little thirties-movies-modern like Frank O'Hara... What *I* got off of him was a sharp clear use of direct address. He had this way of using the imperative tone.

– My theory had something to do with being for a while the female to his male. You could use him without sounding like another imitation William's poem. And how could you not use him, since he was the greatest one? But you could use him to sound entirely new if you were a woman. It was all about this woman business. I thought we didn't need to read women – so much as find the poems among whatever sex that made you feel free to say whatever you liked. Williams makes you feel that you can say anything, including your own anything.

– Well he made you feel like you could talk about your Tampax without feeling tragic about it or even daring, just getting the exact register of annoyance or non-annoyance or whatever.

– He also made it so I could write about the kids, or not always about, but just include the kids. It's because of Williams that you can include everything that's things – & maybe everything that's words, is that going too far? – if you are only up to noticing everything that your life does include. Which is hard. Too many people have already been telling you for years about what your life includes... Ha ha! I just remembered last week you said he was the rich man's Gertrude Stein. You're terrible!

– At least I don't have the hubris to address Williams directly in a poem. Like you. Holy Jesus!

– Well I was pregnant at the time, & he delivered babies. I had a crush on my obstetrician then too, remember him?

– That sonofabitch? He was the great guy who wrote me all those prescriptions for sleeping pills.

THE DISPUTANTS

Upon the table in their bowl!
in a violent disarray
of yellow sprays, green spikes
of leaves, red pointed petals
and curled heads of blue
and white among the litter
of the forks and crumbs and plates
the flowers remains composed.
Cooly their colloquy continues
above the coffee and loud talk
grown frail as vaudeville.

"It seems really the body itself is speaking, a very old, very certain... and absolutely unflustered body... It is the body speaking." "Begin then sisters of the sacred well." "A 'fine' man or woman, let us say, goes down. If this be not a necessary terminal act is it not then in itself a work of art; an evocation of the true procreative process which is at the back of genius & all worth?" And you like my poetry for my body, & I admire it in the mirror to write my poetry, though it is ageing, though it is ageing & that is admirable. As a poet I study my physiology, I don't discourse on the evils of alcohol & drugs. I would give you in my poetry all the delight that my body might give your eyes & hands or that any lively body might there are so many – as a poet I study physiology. This is Alice speaking now, it's not my consciousness I study but my physiology. My blood & my breathing, my vision, my walk, the chapping of my lips, the greying of my hair, my flowers becoming less sticky more silky, the birds in my nests, etc. dirty jokes, a tiny car drives down my neck & over my shoulder.

Williams would have the man classify bodies: "some a sort of hanging rind for the brain, some fit only to bear offspring, some absolutely not, some flowers, some this & some that, etc. And all requiring refertilisa-

tion, both male & female, one way or another at frequent intervals." But he would be at least in a poem any body he so classified – the bug under a waterfall of piss.

One time I had a dream that I was a flea & then in the dream I grew up to become the ballerina Maria Tallchief. Is that Williams – the first Native American ballerina? Someone, Edwin, didn't like her as much as Frank did. This is the body speaking – the physiology of my vision is also clouds & sky & grass & paintings. My kind makes words – fingertip & tongue. Let's touch tongues.