

Neil Baldwin

A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

IT WAS THE TURBULENT spring of 1970. My second semester as a graduate teaching fellow at SUNY/Buffalo was drawing to a close, and it was time to start thinking about the focus for my oral qualifying examination. Beyond that, an even more terrifying prospect loomed before me like a ghostly, 300-page shadow, what to choose as my Ph.D. dissertation topic?

I remember stopping timidly into the offices of various English Department *éminences grises*—Leslie Fiedler, Marcus Klein, Robert Creeley—and speaking with them about my newly kindled passion for modern poetry. In those heady days just after the untimely death of Charles Olson, Buffalo was the way station for the great American voices. An endless procession of poets, an embarrassment of riches, passed through, week after week, including Anne Sexton, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder, Edward Dorn, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Denise Levertov. At the end of each reading, I would float off into the night, thinking, “I want to learn more, I want to hear more, I want to *read* more!”

In the university library, during those years still on the Main Street campus, tucked away in a small office at the top of a back stairway one or two flights above the cramped poetry collection, I found the hideaway of Dr. Oscar Silverman, director emeritus. Or at least now over this long distance he seems to have been “emeritus” to me—silver-haired, bespectacled, soft-spoken, and engaging.

“So, it’s poetry you’re after?” Dr. Silverman said with a bemused smile, as he let me in on a deep, dark secret: The Lockwood Library Poetry Collection

at SUNY/Buffalo was the major repository for the manuscript papers of none other than William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), the doctor-poet. We sought out Karl Gay, curator of the collection, a wry little man with a slight middle-European accent and a pseudo-dour disposition, who led us down wood-paneled halls to a massive vault with a seemingly interminable combination lock.

Around the periphery of the dim, cramped space stood dozens of green filing cabinets crammed with manila folders and odd-sized envelopes. Mr. Gay randomly yanked open one drawer laden with handwritten labels that called out to me: *Paterson*, *White Mule*, *A Dream of Love*, *Kora in Hell*.

Twenty thousand manuscripts had rested here in benign confusion since the early 1950s, when Williams struck up an unlikely, but lasting, friendship with Charles Abbott, the pioneering director of Lockwood Library. It had been Abbott's curatorial inspiration to collect the manuscripts of *living* writers, as evidence for what he liked to call "a laboratory of the creative process." Abbott appealed to Williams, who responded with glee by "cleaning out [his] attic," dumping into cardboard boxes countless drafts of poems, essays, plays, and short stories, handwritten on prescription blanks, scrawled in blue ink onto scrap, typed on yellow foolscap. For the ensuing two decades, the library and the English department were responsible stewards for this raw material generated from the huge imagination of one of the giants of twentieth-century literature, patron saint of the Beat generation, tireless champion of organic verse.

Over the next three years, in fulfillment of the requirements for the Ph.D. (and on our fellowships of \$65 a week) fellow grad student Steven Meyers and I labored to develop and produce a "descriptive catalogue" of this vast repository. We arranged multiple drafts of poems into a coherent sequence, from the first inspiration on one prescription blank scribbled while the doctor on house calls, in his car, waited for a red light; sorted out the frustrating fits and starts of the poem *Paterson* into the first through third

books and fragments of the fourth; disaggregated drafts in “variable foot” structure for *The Descent* and other poems of the late 1940s; and divided up the mass of incoming correspondence from hundreds of friends and colleagues, including Ezra Pound, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Richard Aldington.

What’s so special about special collections? For the novice poet I was thirty years ago, trying to find my own voice, what greater thrill could there be than to pore over the drafts of a master? I was able to see at first glance and to feel at first touch the hard, punchy imprint of typewriter key onto resistant paper, so forceful that when I held the sheet up to the light, I could see right through the a’s and o’s like stars. I was able to trace the realignment of sounds, as Williams put it, “like paint onto canvas,” as he constructed a poem from the ground up, moving the words around like pieces of a puzzle until the line break was to his satisfaction—and even then went back one more time, after the sheet was signed, to make yet another change in the configuration of the manuscript with blue-black fountain pen, dark against the crisp white of the letterhead—William Carlos Williams, M.D., 9 Ridge Road, Rutherford, New Jersey, Hours by Appointment

I went on to publish the descriptive catalogue of Williams’s papers at Buffalo and Yale, with a preface by my mentor, Robert Creeley (G. K. Hall and Company, 1978), and then to write a biography of the doctor-poet, *To All Gentleness* (Athenaeum, 1984).

And most important in this cyber age known as the turn of the century, I still carry within me that indelible scent of aging foolscap and that inimitable texture of the handmade poem.