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From The Times

May 6, 2008

## Jonathan Williams

Poet and publisher who found inspiration in Mahler's music

Poet, essayist, publisher, Jonathan Williams was the founder of the Jargon Society, an independent press for experimental poetry, fiction and photography. The American, born in the "mediocre desolation" of Asheville, North Carolina, in 1929, was a master of found or composite poetry, of which he published several volumes.

His father, Thomas, was an office systems designer for government contracts of English ancestry. The family lived in Washington, where Williams attended the prestigious St Alban's prep school. Encouraged by his parents in diverse interests, he studied art history at Princeton, painting in Washington and etching in New York, and attended Chicago's Institute of Design before returning in 1951 to North Carolina, where he joined the progressive Black Mountain College, which became an incubator for the avant-garde. It was here, under the tutelage of Charles Olson, that Williams began to write poetry.

In 1951 Williams founded the Jargon Society. This small poetry press's beautiful, collectible productions, with drawings and photographs, continued all his life, and included some of his own work as well as an array of artists. He was also published by small presses in America and England (sometimes attached to art galleries). "He himself taught in various universities but was not an academic by nature. As he said of Edward Dahlberg, his was "a tutelary muse. His books seed the mind with desire for other instructive books".

Williams's poetry was variously collected — including An Ear in Bartram's Tree (1969) and Jubilant Thicket (2005) — but is perhaps best enjoyed in its original, slim forms. A prolific writer of clerihews and limericks, he also span a variant on a June 1972 report in The Times about an outraged woman at Customs screaming, "keep your hands off my kippers, young man!"

Music fascinated Williams: Eugene Ormandy's performance of Mahler's First Symphony at Carnegie Hall in 1949 made Williams "more responsive to his music than any other". He said of himself that he was "as laconic as a pebble or Anton Webern and garrulous as the montane lengths in Bruckner". His Mahler volume was first published in 1967 with silkscreen prints by R. B. Kitaj. The adagio from the Fifth prompts this: "One feels/ one clematis petal/ fell/ its circle/ is all/ glimmer on this pale/ river."

His erudite and eclectic humour often made him friends in strange situations. One anecdote relates that he was in a Welsh pub when a stranger said that the weather reminded him of an early Magritte. Williams replied, "If you can tell early Magritte from late Magritte in weather like this, I'd better buy you a drink". As fascinated by jigsaws as he was by cemeteries, he said of words that "you use everything and hope to come up with something viable". His engaging critical collections The Magpie's Bagpipe (1982) and Blackbird Dust (2000) make any reader long for a collection of letters by this demotic, educated wit who did not shy from reading Stephen King's The Shining — twice.

He is survived by his companion of four decades, the poet Thomas Meyer.

**Jonathan Williams, poet, essayist and publisher, was born on March 8, 1929. He died on March 16, 2008, aged 79**

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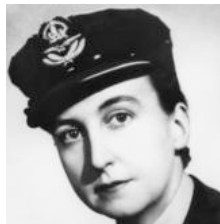
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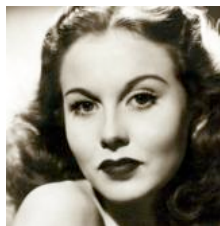
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