

A Short History of Jargon: Dropping Seeds into the Ground.

by Jeffery Beam

For 45 years and in over 100 books, the Jargon Society has rescued or preserved the reputations of writers such as Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, Bob Brown, Walter Lowenfels, and Mina Loy, and defined origins of the Modernist, San Francisco, and Black Mountain schools of poetry and visual arts in the work of Siskind, Dahlberg, Anderson, Rexroth, and Patchen. Jargon's challenge to American culture becomes clear when its list of publications is surveyed: (1) first books by Gilbert Sorrentino, Ronald Johnson, Peyton Houston, John Menapace, Thomas Meyer, Art Sinsabaugh, and Lyle Bongé; (2) first poetry books by Buckminster Fuller and Guy Davenport; (3) first American books by Denise Levertov, Irving Layton, and Mina Loy; (4) early works by Robert Creeley, Joel Oppenheimer, Russell Edson, and Michael McClure; (5) major works by neglected writers such as Zukofsky, Patchen, and Paul Metcalf; (6) important works by neglected British poets Simon Cutts, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and Thomas A. Clark; (7) provocative works of visionary power by or about St. EOM, James Broughton, Bill Anthony, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, and David Spear; (8) affirming and canon – producing works by or about Basil Bunting, Doris Ulmann, Charles Olson, and Lorine Niedecker; and (9) preeminent examples of consummately imaginative bookmaking – Anderson's *Six Mid-American Chants*, Patchen's *Fables*, Zukofsky's *Some-Time, Fourteen Poets*, *One Artist* (poems by Dahlberg, Ginsberg, Goodman and others), Clark's *A Still Life*, Meyer's *The Umbrella of Aesculapius* and *Sappho's Raft*, and Cutt's *Pianostool Footnotes and Seepages*. The list goes on, but it disregards works by Williams himself under the Jargon imprint, including the fascinating series of postcards, "billboards," and broadsides.

Jargon has been instrumental in saving the life's work of the visionary

artist Annie Hooper, financially assisting artists such as potter Georgia Blizzard and the late sculptor Vernon Burwell, and influencing the founding of a visionary art museum at North Carolina State University.

Future projects for Jargon include cataloging and printing the hundreds of negatives of photographs taken by Williams that fill drawers at Skywinding. These images, mostly from the Black Mountain College days, will undoubtedly prove to be of major importance to historians and scholars once Jargon finds a patron to sponsor the project. The 1950-91 Jargon archives – over 35,000 manuscripts, photographs, documents, and correspondence – were purchased by the Poetry / Rare Books Collection, SUNY at Buffalo, which also holds major manuscript collections of James Joyce and Dylan Thomas. In 1991, the archives were officially opened with a celebration of Jargon's fortieth anniversary. Recently, an agreement was made to take the next group of archives. Since 1983, close to 100 books have been published using the collection.

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Several people have been vital to Jargon over the years: "Our executive board is distinguished; our ancient record is extraordinary," says Williams, "We are not so nice as Nice People and not so good as Good People . . . We are on our own, near the Trail of Lonesome Pine, and that is a very long way from the Groves of Acanemia" (*Jargon Society Confronts* 3). Poet Ronald Johnson was associated with the press from 1958-68, and Thomas Meyer from 1968 to the present. Meyer has designed books, written catalogs and introductions, organized events, and served in nearly every possible capacity in the life of the press. F. Whitney Jones, a literary enthusiast and fund-raising expert, has been president of the board of trustees for many years. Thorns Craven, a lawyer

with Legal Aid in Forsyth County, serves as treasurer. J. M. Edelstein, former librarian with the National Gallery and the Getty Museum, is Jargon's bibliographer.

Jargon would have been impossible without the use of the patron Donald Anderson's cottage in England, or Skywinding Farm thanks to the generosity of Williams's parents. Williams also gives thanks to David Wilk's Inland Books, the best distributor Jargon has ever had. And since 1950, Heritage Printers in Charlotte – when Jargon became practically its first customer – has continued to produce products of a quality admired throughout the book publishing industry. Many publishers, including Knopf and the Book-of-the-Month Club, use Heritage now.

Jargon has always attempted to keep the price of its books low and the quality exceptional, thus remaining dependent on patronage and, as a non-profit organization, an occasional grant. Williams explains, "I do always try to figure out some way to get the book paid for before I publish it. . . . But after it is paid for and published I don't much concern myself with what happens to it. I feel that if the public wants badly enough . . . the books . . . they ought to be willing to make the effort to find them. The way I see it, it is much like 'dropping seeds into the ground.' Something is going to happen, I think, and it usually does" (qtd. in Rooke 6).

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Works Cited

- Rooke, Leon. "Poet at the Breakfast Table." *North Carolina Anvil*. 4 November 1967. NC Clipping File Through 1975, #394-95. UNC-CH.
- Williams, Jonathan. *The Jargon Society Confronts the New-Age Amiability of Dummyland*. Highlands: Jargon, 1994.