



Oscar Williams
1899 - 1964



Gene Derwood
1909 - 1954

Memorialized by the
Oscar Williams and Gene Derwood
Fund in

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"We were found by the wayside by poetry," they said, in explanation of their origins, "and we never looked back." Oscar Williams, poet-anthologist, and Gene Derwood, poet-painter, were so absorbed by their art that they risked poverty in their everyday lives for it. Poetry propelled them forward, and their dedication to their art kept them going even in the midst of great physical and psychological hardships.

There were two versions of the time and place of Oscar Williams's birth: Oscar himself always preferred to say that he was born in Brooklyn on December 29, 1900. However, his close friends and family said he was born near Odessa, Russia, of a family named Kaplan, on December 29, 1899. At any rate, Oscar's father came to the United States in 1905 and worked in a factory by day and peddled clothes on the street at night. Two years later, when he had saved enough money, he returned to Russia and, seeing that the persecution against Jews was still extreme, brought his whole family to America. When Oscar arrived in Brooklyn at the age of eight, he was fluent in Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew.

Oscar's mother died in strange circumstances when he was fourteen. Soon afterward, unhappy with his life in his family, the young man left home to determine his own destiny. From that time on, tormented by memories of a painful childhood, Oscar Williams turned his back on his past and rarely spoke of his early years. For a time he lived with his older sister, but this period was interrupted by certain interludes such as one back-breaking summer spent as a farmhand or another time when he was a protege of Sherwood

Anderson in New Orleans.

Poetry became central for Oscar when he was a student at Boy's High School, and for five years he wrote steadily. At age sixteen, he sent out a number of poems to various magazines and newspapers under the name of Oscar Kaplan. They were all returned marked "rejected". Then, at his sister's urging, he resubmitted the same poems using the name of a well-known movie personality, Williams. Half of these poems were accepted for publication and thus at age sixteen the career of Oscar Williams had begun.

That success released a virtual torrent of poetry, and Oscar's poems began to appear regularly in such "little" magazines of the day as *Poet Lore*, *Munsey's*, *Poetry*, *A Magazine of Verse*, *The Nation*, *The Smart Set*, *The Midland*, *Contemporary Verse*, *Everybody's Magazine*, *The Freeman*, *London Chapbook*, *Pearson's*, *Grinnell Review*, *Double Dealer*, *The Bookman*, *Current Opinion*, *The Bellman*, and *The Overland Review*. Then, in 1921, a book of sixty-two poems, *The Golden Darkness*, was published by The Yale Series of Younger Poets. Soon afterward, a second collection, *Gossamer Days*, made its appearance.

The talent of Oscar Williams had been recognized, and he was offered a scholarship to Yale University. But as Oscar himself told friends, he was "too arrogant to accept." Besides, he felt attracted to making money. A pamphlet extolling the financial possibilities of the growing advertising business caught his attention and held it. Oscar had no experience in advertising, but he managed to talk his way into an executive position by proposing a unique and ultimately successful merchandising scheme. He was so successful in one of his business ventures that Congress passed a law against it for being unfair competitively. Oscar was also advertising manager for the Democratic Party of Florida in 1936. Later he would explain, "I was seduced by what is called the real world."

For many years Oscar gave his loyalty to that world. Although he later said that during those years he

neither read nor wrote so much as a line of poetry, those who knew him find it unlikely that his abstinence was total. For it was during this period that he met Gene Derwood, and her influence on him was considerable.

A shy, cultured and intense woman, Gene Derwood was talented both as painter and poet. Born in Illinois in 1909 of pre-Revolutionary English lineage, Gene had spent her early years in the Midwest and the South. While still in her teens she moved to New York to study and to paint and write poetry. There poet Elinor Wylie, shortly before her death in 1928, introduced the handsome young girl with blue eyes to the thin, tousle-haired young poet. Oscar and Gene fell deeply in love, and within a short time they were married. Soon thereafter followed the years of financial success, and during this period their only son, Strephon, was born on April 2, 1934.

One day in 1937, while Oscar and Gene were on a vacation trip to Florida, Oscar Williams was stricken by a mysterious ailment. Doctors could find nothing wrong with him but Oscar was at last able to diagnose his own illness: "The inner man" was compelling him to begin writing in earnest. This realization came, as he later told W. H. Auden and others, when suffering one evening alone in his room he "smelled an angel" and he knew that from then on he was "doomed" to write. He yielded to the compulsion and wrote a poem. With the "inner man" thus released and fulfilled, the illness vanished.

Oscar sent his poem to a number of newspapers, but only a few printed it. "I realized then how good I wasn't," he remarked years later.

Although his low finances were a continuous problem, the late 1930's was a period of great ferment and activity for Oscar. In 1938, *Hibernalia*, a small collection of his poems, was published. Two years later, the Oxford University Press published *The Man Coming Toward You*.

Oscar was also developing an interest in the work of

other poets. "I had a great deal of catching up to do," he once told an interviewer. "There had been a tremendous outflow of fine new talent. I looked for them in anthologies and wasn't satisfied with what I found; so I started working on my own anthology." The result was a series of anthologies completed and published during the second World War called the *New Poems* series and culminating in the *War Poets* anthology in 1945. Following this, Oscar undertook for Charles Scribner's Sons his most famous anthologies, the *Little Treasury* series, which were ultimately to win for him recognition from some critics as the best poetry anthologist in America.

Oscar Williams edited more than thirty anthologies for a number of publishers — so many, in fact, that an acquaintance once rhymed, "I saw Oscar Williams standing there/With a nest of publishers in his hair." Combined sales of his books totalled more than two million copies at the time of his death. Although Oscar's share of royalties would have enabled him to live in greater comfort during the last few years of his life, he stayed on in his former apartment and clung to his unextravagant ways.

As an anthologist, Williams soon earned a reputation as a man with a special genius for recognizing the genius of others. Once, when asked how he selected poems for his anthologies, he replied, "How do you pick one girl to marry? In poetry it's divine polygamy. Generally when a poem stays with me for a long time, that poem delivers the goods."

Oscar wielded considerable power in the small, brilliant world of poets and poetry, and he used this power gracefully and even-handedly. He was a practical man with an unerring sense of what the poetry-reading public wanted and with the sensitivity to bring to that public the best poetry of the time. Ambitious poets of all ages flocked to him, and although he enjoyed their company and their adulation, he remained fair-minded and honest in being able to separate his feelings about a poem from his feelings about the poet.

Among the many whose work he encouraged and anthologized were John Berryman, Richard Eberhart, R.P. Blackmur, Robert Lowell, Muriel Rukeyser, Dylan Thomas, Stephen Spender, and Karl Shapiro.

Oscar Williams was also a perfectionist. In addition to the difficult and demanding work of selecting the poems for the anthologies, he also insisted on taking upon himself many of the details of production of the books. It was Oscar who determined the layout of each page, so that the lines would fall just where he wanted them. It was Oscar who pasted the dummy pages in place. And it was Oscar who once telephoned a publisher in the middle of the night, unable to sleep because the slipcase did not fit the book as perfectly as he desired.

Meanwhile, Oscar wrote poetry of his own, and Gene wrote and painted. They did not share the same approach to poetry. Gene's poems came to her in intense creative bursts. She rarely made revisions in her writing. She did not believe that poetry or painting were subjects one should study or be tutored in, and she let her talent follow its own bent. Oscar, on the other hand, believed that poetry was an exceedingly difficult craft, and he worked hard at it. In a general way Gene Derwood's poetry is regarded as the more lyrical as well as the more traditional. But there are many who consider Oscar Williams's poetry more original, with its emphasis on fantastical imagery in which the landscape of modern city life presents a vivid if somewhat depressing view of twentieth century man. Oscar himself believed that Gene Derwood was "touched by the diamond." He regarded her as the foremost woman poet of her time, and he cherished and protected her so that her genius could flourish.

Although much of the literary world made the climb to the Williams's Water Street "cold-water penthouse" as he often called it, few were allowed to become intimates. One who was admitted was Dylan Thomas, the young Welsh poet whose great talent and problems with alcohol were equally legendary. When Thomas

visited the United States to give readings of his poetry, Oscar and Gene were among his personal friends, and Oscar served as Dylan Thomas's poetry agent in America. Thomas was one of Gene's favorite subjects of her canvas. Of the more than 150 paintings that she produced, some twenty were portraits of Dylan.

Gene Derwood had always been an intense, cerebral woman whose health was delicate. In 1954, she was operated on for cancer of the stomach. One week later she died at the age of 44. The death of the woman he loved and the artist he idolized catapulted Oscar Williams into profound grief. He was desolate, but he struggled painfully to take up the threads of his life without her. He worked on his anthologies as he had before, with great attention to the smallest details. Even though there was no longer any financial pressure for him to do so, he continued to travel about on speaking engagements. And he never ceased to worship the memory of Gene Derwood.

Writers and artists who lived in New York still flocked to his interesting little apartment with its walls and walls of books, where he entertained them with anecdotes of his youth. One of his favorite stories was about his meeting with novelist Sherwood Anderson in New Orleans. Oscar had hitchhiked all the way there from New York to receive a poetry prize. Anderson, being quite taken with the skinny young man, invited him to stay at the estate where he himself was a weekend guest. Before the formal dinner that evening, the beautiful young lady of the house suggested that her guests go horseback riding. Oscar, who had ridden one long hitch on his journey from New York in a truck that had no floorboards, now found himself on his first horseback ride. Undaunted, he contented himself with a gentle nag that moved at a harmless pace while his new friends dashed off ahead of him. The relish with which the city poet described himself on horseback never failed to reduce his listeners to helpless laughter.

In 1964, Oscar became ill. Friends and fellow writers

were shocked when they learned that he was in the hospital. Cancer of the throat was the diagnosis. The end came a few weeks after the illness struck, and on October 10, 1964, Oscar Williams died, two months short of his sixty-fifth birthday.

It is not surprising that Oscar Williams should have expressed a wish to perpetuate the art of poetry after his death, and his will granted his executor the power to carry out his wish. To this end, the executor transferred the residuary estate to Community Funds, Inc., a corporate affiliate of the New York Community Trust, where the Oscar Williams and Gene Derwood Fund was set up "to help needy or worthy artists or poets."

"That poetry is actually *the* life is a faith I have," Williams wrote in his introduction to *New Poems: 1940* "Poetry is the play eternally rehearsed; we are the actors." One of the play's fine actors is dead, but through his vast efforts the work of many others — including that of his beloved wife, Gene Derwood — found life and perhaps a touch of immortality.



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