

## Richard Rubenstein's Correspondence with William Carlos Williams

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Richard Rubenstein, who died suddenly in 1958, was a poet of some skill, and while he associated with many of the Beat Poets of San Francisco, his own poetry is not particularly informed by that movement. Instead, his verse admits that he is a romanticist, a mood poet. Yet his greatest importance is that he helped found and edit a number of small poetry journals in the late 40s and early 50s, which explains his correspondence with William Carlos Williams in 1950.

Rubenstein began his literary career in high school, when he won a poetry contest. In 1947 he married Anne Williams. In the same year he helped found and became contributing editor of a poetry journal titled *Neurotica*, published as a quarterly out of St. Louis, Missouri. The first number indicates publication as Spring, 1948.

In 1948 the Rubensteins moved to San Francisco, an important place for poetry of the 1950s. They knew many poets in the San Francisco area, and moved in many of the same circles as the Beat Poets of that age. Rubenstein edited and published a small poetry journal of twenty pages, titled *Inferno* (which I estimate as appearing in late 1949 or possibly early 1950), which was followed by the more professionally successful *Gryphon*, the first issue of which appeared in the spring of 1950, edited solely by Rubenstein. In *Gryphon* appeared the early work of poets who went on to be very well-known: Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov, as well as older poets like Henry Treece, D. L. Emblen, and Cid Corman. In early 1950 Rubenstein must have corresponded with William Carlos Williams. The second number of *Gryphon* (Fall, 1950), featured a portion of the letter by William Carlos Williams reproduced here. The letter was typed on both the front and back, making the existence of a carbon copy unlikely. The Spring, 1950 *Gryphon* contained only the first side of the letter by Williams written to Richard Rubenstein. The other portion is reproduced for the first time here.

Rubenstein published at least one more number of *Gryphon* (Spring 1951). In May, 1955, he and Anne purchased a home forty miles north of San Francisco, in West Marin County, in the small town of Point Reyes Station. Rubenstein continued to write poetry, self-publishing his first (44 page) chapbook, *Beer and Angels* early in 1958 under the imprint of The Cypress Press. His correspondents included not only William Carlos Williams, but playwright William Inge, Babette Deutsch, and Marie Roethke. Though the correspondence is not included among Rubenstein's papers, he must have been in contact with e. e. cummings, who has a poem (titled "Poem") in the Fall, 1950 issue of *Gryphon*.

(Copies of this publication, as well as other publications Rubenstein was associated with, including his manuscripts, correspondence (the original of the Williams letter is there), and other materials, are now housed in the Mandeville Department of Special Collections at the University of California, San Diego, the gift of Anne Dick (Anne Williams Rubenstein remarried after Richard's death; she married noted science fiction author Philip K. Dick in April, 1959).

A man always brooding and depressed, reports Anne, Rubenstein was committed to the Yale Psychiatric Institute in mid-July, 1958. He continued to write poetry (of great despondency) there. He was never to leave the Institute. Anne reports that he was "fatally allergic to the heavy tranquilizers given him, drugs so new that all their side effects weren't yet known," and he died, unexpectedly, on Yom Kippur Day, 1958. My personal observation—and I must emphasize this—is that Rubenstein was being treated with some kind of phenothiazine, perhaps Thorazine, which, in 1958, had only been patented for four years (little was known about the effects of these drugs then).

We have him to thank for motivating Williams to write this terse, angry letter, of which only the first half has been read by that select number who read Rubenstein's *Gryphon* back in the Fall of 1950. The letter is dated April 29; the year is 1950. At this time we know that Williams was being harassed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and hounded by a government agent named Vernon Clapp; this accounts for his remarks about "the grotesqueries taking place in the Senate of the United States," and "the organized degenerates who govern us." Curiously, Rubenstein didn't print Williams' laudatory remarks about *Gryphon*. The "two Lorca pieces" translated by Lysander Kemp Williams refers to ("De Profundis" and "Nocturne of the Window") appeared in the Spring 1950 issue of *Gryphon*. Williams writes: "The whole issue shows a strong advance over what could have been found to put into such a magazine even a year ago."

Such is the small but important legacy of Richard Rubenstein.

DATE: April 29, 1950

TO: RICHARD RUBENSTEIN

Dear Rubenstein:

We must believe and force it to be true that the poem IS stronger than stupidity. We're doing all right generally speaking with the poem around here recently, it's encouraging—such work as you print in your *Gryphon*. But we've got to do it better, and harder and there must be more of it and it has to be more insistent. That it IS the answer to "the stupidities," that it will actually eat out the heart of the political dogma and build a world to supplant.

We don't believe that basic principle hard enough. The poet is the

practical maker. He is shat on, spit on for one only reason: they are afraid of him. The cravens know that he alone has the answer to their cowardices. He has them nailed as a snake nails a bird. They're afraid of him. And so they do everything in their power not only to defeat him but, worse than that, to defeat him in his own mind.

The stupid poet calls himself an "esthete." That means he has withdrawn, withdrawn in other words. Just that. He ain't playing for keeps any more. He's beyond that. I'll say he is! But he's got to stay in, right up to the hilt and give it his whole back and thighs if he's going to be effective. I'm speaking in images, plainly, but only because I've been reduced to that by circumstances.

The poem to be able to survive in the face of the enemy has to reduce itself to "seeds" to stay with him, to keep on his flesh, like a louse if it comes to that. But never to cease the attack. The real attack, the practical attack which has as its object destruction, the [sic] destroy those who try to make the poem seem ineffective.

I want to insist again that the poem is not ineffective. It is working pretty well in our schools. The effects of the poem can be seen in the newspaper accounts of the grotesqueries taking place in the Senate of the United States. A mind accustomed to the poem as it is gradually being understood can never be quite as deceived by the testimony of the scurrilous liars who beset us as they could have been had we not had the poem to test them against.

I want to rub it in. This is a practical fight taking place largely in the circumambient atmosphere of our lives. We are at a disadvantage before the organized degenerates who govern us. They try to defame us by decrying our strengths. The poem is a dangerous and subtle instrument which is one of our very best methods of attack. Keep hammering.

Yrs.

[signed] Williams

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Do you want letters to print? I have one or perhaps two wonderful letters from a young Hindu engineer getting his training in this country.

I was greatly impressed by Lysander Kemp's excellent translations of the two Lorca pieces. Encourage him to do more.

The whole issue shows a strong advance over what could have been found to put into such a magazine even a year ago. I think the present gang of kids and their slightly elder fellows are coming along rapidly. I hope you'll advise everyone who can do so to get hold of and read THE HUDSON REVIEW, Vol. III, N.I. Spring, 1950. It's an anchor and we'd better watch our bases now that we have begun to advance rapidly for it would be a pity and a loss (we can't afford losses) if we get led astray into some futile sidechannel. We've got to keep on the major line of attack. It's an attack. Drill it into them: It's an attack.

Don't forget the lessons to be learned, still to be learned from the methods of Gen. Patton during the last war.

We've got something. Don't let it lapse and don't get trappled off balance into pockets of discouragement or "aesthetics" or such as "aesthetics."

Read Kung. Read the Hudson Review. Learn and keep driving at the objective which if you don't know I can't define it for you.