

A DISCERNING ESSAYIST

Review of

James Laughlin

RANDOM ESSAYS: RECOLLECTIONS OF A PUBLISHER

With an Introduction by Robert Giroux

Mt. Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell, 1989

xiv, 272 pages / \$30.00 hardcover

Reviewed by **Wade Hall**

Gertrude Stein once asked James Laughlin sternly, "Have you had a bath in the last three days?" The Harvard undergraduate was living with her and Alice B. Toklas and their two dogs, Basket and Pepe, in a French village during the summer of 1934. He was writing press releases for Stein's upcoming American lecture tour that fall. The Stein country house had running water but Laughlin was terrified of the gas jet that had to be lighted to heat water for bathing. "You're worse than a child," Stein lectured. "Everyone in this house must bathe every day." So Toklas heated Laughlin's bath water and thereafter the novice writer took a bath every day.

Such is the anecdotal material crammed into James Laughlin's *Random Essays*, a selection that chronicles the life and career of one of America's most innovative and daring publishers. Probably no other American publisher has been so intimately involved with his writers as Laughlin of New Directions. These essays vivify his intimacy with writers, ranging from James Joyce and Romain Gary to Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Laughlin's reminiscences are punctuated with brilliant critical insights that reveal a man equally at home with Catullus and Ovid as well as Henry James and Henry Miller. Whether recalling Sylvia Beach of Shakespeare and Company or William Carlos Williams, "one of the most lovable and admirable human beings I have ever encountered," Laughlin re-creates an era of literary history when giants walked the earth and were accessible — at least to an ambitious young man of means and connections.

Furthermore, in these essays Laughlin probes the lesser known corners and quirks of American writing and writers — such as scholar-archivist Wayne Andrews and Samuel Bernard Greenberg, "the Unkown Poet Who Influenced Hart Crane." Written over a span of some fifty



WADE HALL

□ **Wade Hall** is Professor of English at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky. He is editor of *the kentucky poetry review* and moderator of *Wade Hall's Kentucky Desk*, a local television talk show. He has selected and arranged a television script, *Thomas Merton: Monk in Our Time*, and is a frequent reviewer of books by both Thomas Merton and James Laughlin. Laughlin has served as a Trustee of the Merton Legacy Trust since Merton's death in 1968.

years, the essays also display a remarkable range of interest and knowledge, from the origins of Western literature in classical Greece down to the most experimental writers of our time. They are the product of an urbane, fully civilized man whose mind is endowed with style and grace.

Of special interest to Merton readers is “Thomas Merton and His Poetry,” a warm-hearted but frank memoir of the monk whose poetry he first published in his Poet of the Year series in 1944. Laughlin remembers his visits to the Abbey of Gethsemani, where he found that “Trappists who can write publishable books don’t have to be as silent as the others, and the abbot was a graduate of the Harvard Business School.” Laughlin speaks of the benign deceptions of Merton during those visits, when the monk would shed his clerical garb outside the monastery walls and don blue jeans and a leather jacket for their outings to Lexington or Shakertown or Louisville. Merton, he says, loved good food and drink. “Tom appeared impervious to spirits,” Laughlin comments. “I never knew anyone who could imbibe so generously but show no sign of it.” And recalls Laughlin, “He usually got what he wanted,” including his own private room after he became “a champion snorer” in the large dormitory he initially shared with the other monks.

Not only does Laughlin provide fascinating glimpses of Merton the man but he also makes incisive exegeses of a number of Merton’s poems, including the several he wrote to the Louisville student nurse with whom the monk “fell deeply in love.” In these poems, Laughlin concludes, however, “the emotion is stronger than the technique.” There is also a brief lament that, because Laughlin was in Europe skiing when the manuscript arrived, *New Directions* missed the opportunity to become the publisher of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

But Laughlin’s most vivid memories are of Ezra Pound, the poet who became “a second father to me” and with whom he studied at Pound’s “Eziversity” in Rapello, Italy, in the spring of 1935. While Laughlin was trying to become a writer (but was instead learning to write poor imitations of Pound), the elder poet took him aside and said, in his typically distorted English, “I want you to go back to Amurrica and do something useful.” After discarding his first suggestion that he “might assassinate Henry Seidel Canby,” Pound’s nemesis and the editor of *The Saturday Review*, Pound continued: “Go back and be a publisher. Go back to Haavud to finish up your studies. If you’re a good boy, your parents will give you some money and you can bring out books. I’ll write to my friends and get them to provide you with manuscripts.” With oversimplified directness, Pound thus set Laughlin’s professional course. Although “Ezra made me a publisher,” Laughlin confesses that “Pound hated all the books I published, except those of Bill Williams and his own.”

“With all its sins of commission, omission, ignorance, arrogance, and general muddle-headedness in the ensuing years,” *New Directions* was thus founded and started on its way to becoming a significant literary force. Indeed, many of the most winning episodes in the essays depict the sophomoric false starts and comic misadventures of life at *New Directions*. Once Laughlin, for example, asked the critic Edmund Wilson to assess a manuscript. Wilson didn’t much like his assignment and returned it with this comment: “I skipped large sections of the latter part of the book, so you need pay me only \$40.” There are also amusing vignettes of the young publisher trying to market his books in the American hinterland. In addition, there are episodes from his own adventures, including the time he was on a tour with the Queen of Holland and fell down and split his pants and Queen Juliana sewed up his tear “with the greatest of motherly care.” Indeed, Laughlin was no average James. He was born to privilege, but he has been no prodigal playboy. He has used his advantages to enhance the literature of our time.

We already know James Laughlin as a superb editor, discriminating publisher and original poet. Now in this collection we have revealed another literary dimension — James Laughlin as discerning essayist.