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THE IMPACT OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

WILLIAM Carlos Williams was born in 1883. He went to medical school at the University of Pennsylvania and practiced all his life as an obstetrician and pediatrician. Except for literature, he led an ordinary life—marriage, long days doctoring, extramarital affairs, two sons, a shady suburban home, a cat, roses, and rhododendrons.

He remained where he had been born, in Rutherford, in his time a moderately pleasant, suburban town. Around it stretched the drab, doleful landscape of northern, industrial New Jersey. Here by the filthy Passaic Williams found not the waste land but spring. In weeds, melon flowers at the garbage dump, "Hot Jock" in red paint on a fence, his patients—"Doc,"

> I got
> a woman outside I want to marry, will
> you give her a blood test?

—he celebrated the tough, always renewing vitality of the world, and in a way that put him, he thought, at opposite poles from Eliot. As Marianne Moore once remarked, Williams' imagination was like the boll weevil he noticed in Carl Sandburg's song. In successive verses the cotton pickers threaten to put the weevil in

sand, in hot ashes, in the river, and the weevil always replies, "That'll be ma HOME! That'll be ma HOOME!"

Williams began writing at Horace Mann High School, and, ever prolific, by graduation he had heaped up twenty-three notebooks full of "Whitmanesque thoughts." Having decided to become both a writer and a doctor, he pored over Keats's *Endymion* in medical school and composed a long poem in Keats's style. At the University of Pennsylvania he made friends with Pound, Hilda Doolittle, and the painter Charles Demuth. His first book, *Poems* (1909), was published at his own expense in Rutherford. Acknowledging his copy, Pound told Williams that he was "out of touch"—not up to the standards of London, the literary center. Williams' career could be interpreted as a long, stubborn protest against this judgment—against Pound, London, and even, with ambivalences, against standards.

But this was later. Meanwhile he imitated Pound and hoped for London's approval. *The Tempers* (1913) was published in London, Pound having pursuaded Elkin Matthews to bring it out. These poems were influenced, Williams later said, "by my meeting with Pound, but even more by *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*." The impact of Pound showed itself in Renaissance and Browningesque lyrics, but soon Williams was impressed by the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, which contained Pound's famous brief statement of the principles of Imagism. At about this time Williams struck up friendships with other young writers and painters, and started publishing in little magazines. In 1915 he acquired some measure of editorial control over one of these, *Others*. He now felt himself to be a member of the avant garde. To him this implied that his attitudes, sympathies, way of life, and form of poetry were and ought to be unbourgeois and anti-establishment. It was an exhilarating new pose, though only a pose. Paying his debts, seeing his patients, fathering his family, Williams remained safely within the bourgeois fold.

The literary and artistic milieu in and around New York differed considerably from that of Pound or Eliot in London. The First World War was far away and had little impact on New York imaginations. The uses of past literatures in Pound and Eliot did not appeal. Neither was Greece, China, or Provence the scene of this poetry, which was completely contemporary. In Alfred

Kreymborg, Donald Evans, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, and Wallace Stevens, New York writing was humorous, whimsical, sometimes dandified, and innovative in form. Most of these poets had heard of the French *symbolistes,* and some, such as Mina Loy, knew them well. But *symbolisme* and other French literature seemed less exciting than the painters and paintings just come to New York from Paris. The Armory Show of 1913 exhibited works by, among others, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso, Cézanne, Braque, Gauguin, and Picabia. Duchamp, Picabia, and Albert Gleizes were in New York during these years. Walter Conrad Arensberg already had a collection of Cubist paintings on his apartment walls. Painter friends of Williams, such as Charles Demuth, adapted Cubism in their own work and helped Williams understand and appreciate it. Arguments, anecdotes, manifestoes, attacks, patrons, parties, and disciples sprang up. "We'd have arguments over cubism which would fill an afternoon," Williams later recalled. "Impressionism, dadaism, surrealism applied to both painting and the poem." All this gave Williams a *point d'appui* for his thinking about poetry, a collection of ideas from outside the traditions of English and American literature. Also it intensified his dispositions to astonish the bourgeois, including the bourgeois in himself, and to welcome almost anything if only it was new. As Williams summed it up, the French paintings and painters "created an atmosphere of release, color release, release from stereotyped forms, trite subjects. There was a lot of humor in French painting, and a kind of loose carelessness."

Amid these excitements Williams' lyrics took an immense stride from the still traditional *The Tempers* to *Al Que Quiere!* in 1917. By 1923, when he published *Spring and All,* he had further developed his vision and technical methods. Meanwhile, *Kora in Hell* (1920) experimented in spontaneous improvisation; Williams hoped thereby to escape the limitations of the too-conscious mind. "For a year [1917–18] I used to come home and no matter how late it was before I went to bed I would write *something.*" Of the 365 pieces of writing thus produced, 84 were eventually kept, arranged, and accompanied by "interpretations."

In the Prologue (1918) to *Kora* Williams began his lifelong quarrel with Eliot and Pound. He objected to their preoccupation, as he saw it, with the literature of the past and of Europe. Their work is "conformist," "rehash," academic. Paris must be surprised "to find parodies of the middle ages, Dante and *langue d'oc* foisted upon it as the best in United States poetry." Their influence would obstruct the creation or at least the acceptance of a vital new art. In the pages of *Contact* (1920–23), a short-lived magazine he started with Robert McAlmon, Williams went on theorizing and manifestoing. More of this moiling prose was interspersed among the lyrics of *Spring and All,* and still more constituted *The Great American Novel* (1923). This book gave the thoughts of someone who is trying to start a novel but is unable to accept the conventions of the form. It was a slightly Dadaist critique of fictional art by the criterion of reality. Despite or because of this formal impasse, Williams wrote mainly novels and short stories for the next fifteen years. *In the American Grain* (1925) was not a novel but portrayed worthies and unworthies of American history: Eric the Red, Daniel Boone, Montezuma, Cotton Mather, and so forth. Williams aimed to discover the psychological, imaginative, and moral character of Americans. But in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), D. H. Lawrence had already carried out the same exploration. Though Williams' book was not "rehash," his point of view was not new to readers of Lawrence.

He traveled in Europe in 1924 and 1927, renewing contacts in literary circles there. In the late 1920s and early 1930s he involved himself in Objectivism, a minor movement I shall describe in Chapter 13 in connection with Louis Zukofsky. Amid the political strife of the 1930s Williams was just a busy doctor who sympathized with the poor, as may be seen in the short stories of *The Knife of the Times and Other Stories* (1932) and *Life along the Passaic River* (1938). But the *Partisan Review* labeled him a "bourgeois decadent," an attack matched from the far right in the 1950s, when an obscure McCarthyite raised a minor persecution by calling Williams "the very voice of Communism." In 1938 he started serious work on his long poem, *Paterson.*

Williams' reputation had spread very slowly, a fact that greatly distressed him. He had favorable reviews in the 1920s from friends and acquaintances around New York—Marianne Moore, Kenneth Burke, Gorham Munson, and Paul Rosenfeld—and by the end of the 1920s these reviewers had established what is still, mutatis mutandis, the usual critical portrait. But outside this circle hardly anyone, it seemed, was paying attention. The *Dial* Award in 1926 and the *Poetry* prize in 1931 were not much consolation, especially when compared with the éclat of *The Waste Land,* which, Williams later said, "wiped out our world as if an atom-bomb had been dropped on it." "My contemporaries flocked to Eliot."

But in the 1950s and 1960s young poets flocked to Williams. His poetry was unchallengeably Modernist—in fact, he said, it was the vanguard—yet offered an alternative to Eliot, Tate, Ransom, and others who now seemed academic. It was supported with theorizings, a program. Its style was not intimidating. Williams' feelings and values were sympathetic and he himself was encouraging. He belonged to the now almost mythical generation of Joyce, Pound, Eliot, yet he praised the poetry his young admirers sent him to read. When, for example, he included part of Charles Olson's essay on "Projective Verse" in his *Autobiography* (1951), Olson gratefully exploded: "My god, BILL, OF COURSE, god, how wonderful . . . crazy good, crazy wonderful, crazy manna." The young poets—Ginsberg, Olson, Creeley, Levertov—naturally reinterpreted Williams by their own lights, but they acknowledged his importance.

Even the disciples of Eliot and the New Criticism were building bridges toward him. Williams had classified Randall Jarrell among these picky and snippy ones, but in 1946 Jarrell reviewed Book I of *Paterson* favorably. Williams was delighted, and in 1949 Jarrell edited his *Selected Poems.* (But Jarrell cooled toward *Paterson,* and Williams toward him.) Though trained in the enemy camp, Robert Lowell also liked *Paterson* I, and later told Williams, "I have crossed the river into your world." Between 1946 and his death in 1963 Williams received five honorary degrees and seven prizes or awards for his poetry. In the 1950s graduate students and professors of English began to explain his poems and arrange his theorizings into coherence. Having damned "academics" all his life, Williams was now delighted by their analyses and deeply grateful.

But when the house is ready, death comes. Williams was hit by a heart attack in 1948, followed within the next years by a series of strokes. He resigned his medical practice, lost the use of his right arm, was often depressed. But he bravely taught himself to type with his left hand and went on writing until his death in 1963.

THE WILLIAMS LYRIC

By 1917, when he published *Al Que Quiere!*, Williams sympathized eagerly with the Modernist revolution. But this was still Modernism in its first phase, the phase of Sandburg and Amy Lowell, of Pound's *Cathay* (1915) and *Lustra* (1916), of the *Spoon River Anthology* and the Imagists—which, in the first volume of this history, I have called popular Modernism in order to distinguish it from the high Modernism of the 1920s. Repudiating the poetically Genteel and the Victorian, Modernists of this phase eliminated "Thous!" and "Ahs!," allusions to classical myth, capital letters at the start of lines, meter, rhyme, and stanzas, beautiful objects, glamour, romance, uplifting thoughts, idealism, philosophy and philosophic pathos, and strong, urgent emotion. Though they sometimes exhibited ancient Greece or China for exemplary purposes, mostly they dwelt in the contemporary world, which they delineated in simple, colloquial words and sharp-edged clarity.

Still in its infancy, the Modernist movement appeared to be relatively homogeneous. What separated Pound, Eliot, Amy Lowell, Sandburg, Bodenheim, Kreymborg, and Williams mattered less than the vast gulf between these rebels and the Genteel establishment. But in England there was another Modernism. So far as I know, F. R. Leavis is the only critic who has mentioned likenesses between Williams and the English Georgians. Since the Georgians still rhymed, metered, and capitalized at the start of lines, and Williams did not, his poems had a more modernized look and sound. But if the pleasures of Georgian poetry include especially an easy, natural speech, a close, appreciative rendering of suburban and rural existence, charm of personality—the tender, sympathetic, yet humorous speaker—and an outward unpretentiousness with inner subtlety, these characteristics may also be claimed for *Al Que Quiere!* Unlike Rupert Brooke, Williams would not have described himself in so many words as a "great lover" of "White plates and cups . . . the strong crust / Of friendly bread," but he enacted this role:

In brilliant gas light
I turn the kitchen spigot
and watch the water plash
into the clean white sink.
On the grooved drain-board
to one side is
a glass filled with parsley—
crisped green.

In *Sour Grapes* (1921), Williams' next collection, the talky "I" was less present. The engaging doctor telling his feelings and responses was replaced by relatively impersonal descriptions which were actually extended metaphors ("Spring Storms," "To Waken an Old Lady") or by packed images of two or three lines as in Pound's *Lustra* (1916). With Williams the speaker, Rutherford the place also disappeared, and the images of flowers and landscape lacked local provenience. Poems without a first-person speaker made their effect by the interactions among their images; in retrospect they showed a transition toward *Spring and All* (1923).

In this famous volume Williams entered the high Modernist phase of poetry. A myth of spring's coming is implied in many of the poems, and tends to link the separate lyrics. The formal principle is less that of Romantic, continuous transition, articulating somebody's evolving thoughts and emotions, and more that of Modernist composition by juxtaposition. The images may be fragmentary and the connection of one to another elliptical or broken. Williams experimented with collage ("Young Love," "Rapid Transit"), with free association ("At the Faucet of June") and with surrealism ("The Agonized Spires"). Some poems juxtaposed different voices in dialogue. The famous or notorious "The Red Wheelbarrow" suspended a few images in no context, like a mobile sculpture. "The Rose" illustrated a Cubist way of seeing:

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air.

Between *Spring and All* and the late 1930s, when he started working on *Paterson,* Williams devoted most of what little time

he had for writing to prose fiction. In his poems the Rutherford doctor talked as in *Al Que Quiere!* ("This Is Just to Say"); or descriptions implied metaphors; dramatic monologues portrayed character ("Invocation and Conclusion"); selections of images conveyed impressions ("Nantucket"); syntactical and grammatical tricks ("The Lily") went along with a general freedom from grammar; short lines ended in "the," "of," and the like. In summary, the variety was great but the elements of it were familiar from previous volumes. Occasionally there was mastery.

Williams prided himself that the diction and syntax of his poetry was based on the spoken language—Rutherford's talk. Sometimes the talk characterizes the speaker dramatically, and sometimes its virtue is just that it doesn't get in the way. The clear, easy, familiar medium transmits the object without calling attention to itself. To Williams the more idiosyncratic conversational mode of Robert Frost, with its allusion to Yankee dialect, must have seemed mannered, a kind of clutter. Dramatic characterization, in contrast, was obviously intended to be noticed, and Williams was skilled in bringing a person vividly before us:

Her milk don't seem to..
She's always hungry but..
She seems to *gain* all right,
I don't know.

Even when the speakers are versions of Williams, their voices may differ widely. "To a Solitary Disciple"—

Rather notice, mon cher,
that the moon is
tilted . . .

—strikes an opposite pose from the warm, abashed "January Morning":

But—
  Well, you know how
the young girls run giggling
on Park Avenue after dark
when they ought to be home in bed?
Well,
that's the way it is with me somehow.

Ways of speaking characterize not just a speaker but also a social and cultural context. "The pure products of America," begins

"To Elsie," and the line, as has often been remarked, fetches some of its irony from its vague echo of advertising or Chamber-of-Commerce boosterism. "Go crazy" is the surprising next line, returning us to blunt, everyday speech and to reality. "Somehow," the poem winds toward its conclusion, "it seems to destroy us." The colloquial signal of puzzled rumination—"Somehow"—is too comfortable to be urgent. "It" in this context is just America. So "somehow" points out something—to speak the same language—wrong with us. It is a small, additional point in the general indictment.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century one of the modern or contemporary kinds of poetry, represented by Cowper's *Task* or Coleridge's "conversation poems," was domestic, sincere, appreciative, and formally relaxed or "natural." Part of its complex appeal depended on its moment in literary history, for these poems "Affecting Not to Be Poetry" (as Coleridge put it) came as a reaction and relief after the formally tight, brilliant, often satiric work of Dryden and Pope. To a literary historian Williams' achievement and appeal seem somewhat analogous. Unlike Cowper or Coleridge, he developed his alternative mode at the same time as Eliot—his Dryden and Pope—but, as I mentioned, he was not widely recognized until the next generation itself reacted against his rival. His work raises critical issues similar to those raised by Cowper's. His naturalness and ease involved a lowered pressure or intensity, and for his followers he made poetry easier to write. Once the corset of Eliot's example and hegemony had been thrown off, it was easier to do handsprings, but it was also easier to loll and sprawl. But these central issues need concrete illustration. A "Pastoral" from *Al Que Quiere!* will bring them to a focus.

> When I was younger
> it was plain to me
> I must make something of myself.
> Older now
> I walk back streets
> admiring the houses
> of the very poor:
> roof out of line with sides
> the yards cluttered
> with old chicken wire, ashes,

> furniture gone wrong;
> the fences and outhouses
> built of barrel-staves
> and parts of boxes, all,
> if I am fortunate,
> smeared a bluish green
> that properly weathered
> pleases me best
> of all colors.
> No one
> will believe this
> of vast import to the nation.

Though it seems spontaneous and simple, the poem activates reflection—for example, in the interplay between ideas of making something of oneself and admiring the houses of the very poor. (The contrast is not just the obvious one between the middle-class rat race and the aesthetic, drop-out, take-things-as-they-come mood, for the values associated with the lives of the poor are complex.) The connoisseur's pleasure in bluish green (if "properly weathered") is blithe and eccentric, but expresses his way of taking life, his appreciative responsiveness, his readiness to make the most of whatever slight thing he may happen upon. The unpretentious idiom is that of talk. The lines break at natural pauses in speaking. They exhibit the ordinary by putting a frame around it. So does the poem as a whole.

Fresh, clean-edged presentation, swift, with humor and a marvelous lightness: so long as we are under Williams' spell, other poets seem cluttered and artificial. Milton's opening line in "Lycidas"—"Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more"—is inconceivably fine in its context, and so, in *The Waste Land*, is:

> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.

Yet after we have lived for a while with Williams, we may find even such famous verses slow, contrived, too elevated, and perhaps even empty. Had Williams rewritten "Lycidas," he would not have begun, "Here we go again," but the phrase is closer to his poetic world and may suggest something of its pleasantness. Of course his effects depend on the tradition they reject. His uncompressed, short lines seem peculiarly weightless and rapid because they offer in a line a lesser nexus of stimuli than our normal experience with verse has prepared us to expect. But since traditional poetry has trained us to bring a more active and concentrated attention to verse than we would to the same words in prose, we make the most we can out of whatever a Williams line presents. Attention creates vividness. Meanwhile the momentum is all the greater because these short lines tend also to be enjambed—sometimes violently so, for the lines may have very weak terminations ("of," "as"). And the accelerated momentum heightens attention all the more because it intensifies the counterpoint of the rhythm of the individual line against the rhythm of the syntax. These techniques were developed more radically over the twenty years after *Al Que Quiere!*, as in "The Flowers Alone" (1935):

> Now!
>   the cherry trees
> white in all back
> yards—
>
>   And bare as
> they are, the coral
> peach trees melting
> the harsh air—
>   excellence
> priceless beyond
> all later
>
>   fruit!

My argument, to repeat, is that the lightness, speed, and vividness of the Williams lyric in the 1920s and 1930s are permitted in part by the fact that his lines, individually considered, perform less than a poetic line ordinarily does. I say this in Williams' praise, for he saw and seized an opportunity that had not before been exploited, at least not systematically. Later poets adopted and developed the new type of poetry Williams created. But when the Williams line is the norm rather than the exception, the pleasurable effects I have described are much less felt.

In works such as "Pastoral" the underlying concept of poetry has much in common with Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades." With this in mind, I may phrase my point another way. "One

day," Williams recollected, "Duchamp decided that his composition for that day would be the first thing that struck his eye in the first hardware store he should enter. It turned out to be a pickax which he bought and set up in his studio." On another occasion Duchamp submitted a porcelain urinal for an art exhibition, calling it "Fountain." Williams' *Autobiography* does not rehearse the controversy this provoked, but it impressed him at the time. That Duchamp had not made the fountain with his own hands, his friends explained, "has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object." So also with Williams placing the ordinary under the title "Pastoral." To exhibit a urinal makes a statement about the nature of art. But the significance is in the gesture, in exhibiting the pickax or the urinal as art. Once we accept the gesture without protest and consider these useful objects as art, the question arises, how good are these works of art? Do we now, sixty years later, take much interest in Duchamp's "Fountain"? Or in Williams' talky, minimal lines?

Whatever we think of him as an artist, we like Williams as a person—the "I" we meet in the poems. Characterizing him, we may begin with his feelings about spring, for spring and winter make virtually all his seasons. "Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote," Chaucer starts his *Canterbury Tales*, and heaps up the conventional images that were carried down through English and American poetry: the sweet showers of spring, the gentle west wind, the tender new shoots, the small birds singing. "The birds thus sing a joyous song . . . the young lambs bound," wrote Wordsworth in May. Of course this is the English spring, hateful to Williams when it appeared in American poetry, as it often did. But Whitman had noticed the lilacs "With many a pointed blossom rising delicate" in spring, and a "shy and hidden bird is warbling a song." Williams had a gift for seeing as if for the first time, and in his "Spring and All" the traditional associations do not exist. His spring is not in the least sweet, delicate, joyous, or shy, but tough, tenacious, dynamic, and unstoppable; the rooted bushes "grip down and begin to awaken."

How is spring in other poems?

Maple, I see you have
a squirrel in your crotch—

And you have a woodpecker
in your hole, Sycamore.

Another tree has

knocking knees, buds
bursting from each pore
even the trunk's self
putting out leafheads—

Loose desire!

Thus Williams fetches his readers with humor, vitality, fresh imagination, and sympathy.

But though "Williams" is sunny and likable, the world he describes usually is not. Birth and old age, the spring season of startings up and the winter of endings can seem strangely similar in his cold, bare landscapes. Life just manages to hang on in winter; in spring it pushes up or out into a climate that does not warm or flatter it forth. In both seasons the world is adverse and the living thing needs all its toughness. Surviving is what Williams admires, but he does not mean just continuing to exist. He also means integrity, the thing being itself despite or against its environment, including the environment of social conventions. He sympathizes with resisting integrity that does not conform. Images of this virtue are everywhere in his poetry: in the defiance of the impoverished woman who says,

Try to help me
if you want trouble
or leave me alone—
that ends trouble;

in the chicory "out of the scorched ground"; and in "El Hombre,"

It's a strange courage
you give me ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part!

What Williams admired, if we look closely, was not just surviving as oneself, but making something—enough—out of very little. For since the world is unnourishing, wintry, very little is all there is to work with. But our imagination creates spring. The greatest and most necessary toughness, in other words, is that of the imagination. Williams and Stevens took this theme from poets of the Romantic period, who had also affirmed the power of the imagination to go out in "greeting," as Keats put it, to the world and to find or make it a place of fulfillment and happiness. Williams demonstrated or enacted the imaginative process in a different way from Stevens. He presented his world with vivid and graphic concreteness, and he displayed himself in the role of someone going out to it with creative, exemplary response. Hence his poetry is realistic, dramatic, and intimate in senses that are not true of Stevens'.

For Williams our creative response or greeting is more exactly a finding, a making vivid what is actually there. If it is winter, our greeting does not change its character, but realizes its sufficiency for us. For the other pole of Stevens' musing—that the imagination creates what did not exist before, and that this also may be real—Williams had no affinity. In *Kora in Hell* a few sentences on chicory beautifully express the interaction, as he construes it, between the world and the mind. Chicory is a wild, long-limbed, almost leafless plant with a blue flower. "A poet witnessing the chicory flower and realizing its virtues of form and color so constructs his praise of it as to borrow no particle from right or left. He gives his poem over to the flower and its plant themselves." But the flower and plant "benefit by those cooling winds of the imagination which thus returned upon them will refresh them at their task of saving the world."

If we think of the world he sees, rather than of his creative response to it, Williams seems pessimistic. If we emphasize his imaginative ebullience, he is an optimist. In a sense the optimism is greater as the world is grimmer. This, I should say, is Williams' essential theme—the possibility of making much out of little.

He pictured the urban scene vividly and authentically: "the oil-streaked highway";

the old man
in a sweater and soft black
hat who sweeps the sidewalk;

the billboard that pictures "two / gigantic highschool boys / ten feet tall" and adds that "¼ of their energy comes from bread"; and the advertisement in neon lights (which Williams renders in concrete poetry),

* * *
* S *
* O *
* D *
* A *
* * *

He sympathized with every impulse and type of person in rebellion against, or escaping from, or never touched by middle-class conventionalities, though he himself was riddled with them. He had a special understanding and compassion for the poor, old, and derelict. Yet Williams' compassion is a complex recognition that includes identification—he feels himself to be like them—aesthetic interest, and even admiration. A poor old woman eating plums is both pathetic and exemplary.

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her.

. . . .

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her.

The intensity of her satisfaction expresses her poverty. But also her gusto is happiness and is a lesson in living.

Like so many of Williams' poems, this is also a writing lesson. It repeats an ordinary, colloquial sentence three times. Though the words and their order do not change, the line-breaks in different places slightly change the meaning. With each repetition there is an increment of emphasis and significance, the stanza thus rendering the continuing and deepening pleasure. The verbal resources and techniques could hardly be more minimal, but they create a fairly rich, evolving complex of stimuli. Just as it is a lesson in writing, the poem is—also typically—a lesson in seeing: the poet making much out of a completely familiar sight.

When the intricate sensitivity of his reaction—his superior "emotional equipment," as Pound put it—was fully engaged, Williams achieved a remarkably balanced, objective vision. In his best poems—"An Early Martyr," "The Yachts," "Spring and All," "To Elsie," "Burning the Christmas Greens"—the finest thing is the delicacy and complexity of his awareness. The poems embody this in ambiguities within and tensions between their images and gestures. "Winter" offers a brief example:

Now the snow
lies on the ground
and more snow
is descending upon it—
Patches of red dirt
hold together
the old
snow patches

This is winter—
rosettes of
leather-green leaves
by the old fence
and bare trees
marking the sky—

This is winter
winter, winter
leather-green leaves
spearshaped
in the falling snow.

Winter may here express a state of mind, or time of life, or even the general adversity of the world, but the poem remains objectively focused on what is seen. Yet the intensity of recognition at the end ("This is winter / winter, winter") suggests that something more than the season is being talked about; otherwise the emotion would seem too great for the subject. If we ask what is realized about winter, we find harshness, bleakness, lifelessness or life just hanging on, and more snow coming. The central image is of leaves:

rosettes of
leather-green leaves

. . . .

leather-green leaves
spearshaped
in the falling snow.

The suggestions are of endurance and hostility ("spearshaped"). But the green leaves are at least surviving. There is a certain promise, not exactly cheery, that the plant will withstand and outlast winter. And—typical Williams touch!—the leaves make "rosettes." The word contains the flower: a rose, of sorts. Even in the winter the plant blooms in a way. It is like the broken bottle that shines in the cinders, or the dandelion at the sewage treatment site, or the chicory lifting its flowers from "the scorched ground," or all the people in Rutherford and Paterson, including the poet speaker, whose undefeated vitality and integrity are a kind of beauty. The exclamations of the speaker at the end celebrate a tough, minimal flowering.

THE THEORY OF THE POEM

Though imperfectly qualified for theorizing—his worst bedevilment, he once wrote Pound, was "confusion of thought"—Williams kept it up in little magazines, books, letters, and diaries all his life, scribbling away hastily but with passionate concern. Poetry—how to do it and to what end—is also a subject of many of his poems. His poetry agrees with his ideas, but not completely, for his practice was more old-fashioned than his program. Except for his views on meter, his main emphases did not change after the 1920s. Neither was his career of influence in the world gradual. Instead, as I said, when the young poets in the 1950s and 1960s looked around for an alternative to Eliot and the New Critics, there was Bill Williams with his argument, an argument backed by his poetry, his credentials as a veteran poet, and his warm personal presence.

Poetry, he said, must always make "a fresh beginning." Otherwise it dies. Like life itself, he had told Harriet Monroe, poetry must be "at any moment subversive of life as it was the moment before . . . Verse to be alive must have infused into it . . . some tincture of disestablishment." In 1947 he was still of the same mind. Eliot, Pound, Auden, St.-John Perse are "dead"—"not a breath of anything new"—but the work of some Italian poets he was reading "really breathes the air of the present-day world as if it wanted to be alive." A poet does not become contemporary by mentioning automobiles or jazz bands in poems that are otherwise traditional. He must restructure "the poem" (Williams' word for poetry) if he wants to express the present sensibility. He might begin by reshaping the poetic line. Since the poetry of the past was formed by a different sensibility, it cannot be a model. Europe's "enemy is the past. Our enemy is Europe, a thing unrelated to us in any way." It was because of such attitudes that Pound thought Williams a Futurist.

Live poetry will necessarily be unfinished, imperfect. The generation of the nineties had taught that poetry is not immediate impulse but deliberate art. Frost and many of his contemporaries artfully shaped poems that sounded like spontaneous talk. D. H. Lawrence defined a poetry of "the immediate present": "there must be mutation, swifter than iridescence, haste, not rest, come-and-go, not fixity, inconclusiveness, immediacy, the quality of life itself, without denouement or close." Differing in kind from traditional poetry, a poem of the immediate present, as Lawrence conceived it, might still be unbetterable in its own way. Believing with Lawrence that a poem should be of the present, Williams also believed, with Pound and Eliot, that a poetic form can be fully developed and perfected only gradually through experiment. But since the present is always "at that very moment moving on," by the time a form has been perfected, it will express a sensibility that is past. Any form that is in touch with the new moment will be "defective and ineffectual." "The new . . . cannot be correct. It hasn't time." "Nothing but a gnat is born the week following its conception." Hence a "really first-rate modern movement" must have "gross imperfections." Conversely—triumphant paradox!—whatever is brilliantly finished must be passé. The next step of the argument could easily follow: "Write carelessly," says a voice in *Paterson*, "so that nothing that is not green will survive."

He wanted to present "the truth of the object," and could have said with Wallace Stevens in his stronger rhetoric,

Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight,
Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Any new, any authentic poetry could begin only in contact with the thing. And maybe it would end there: "poetry should strive for nothing else," he said, and added, virtually quoting T. E. Hulme, "this vividness alone, *per se*, for itself . . . makes the poem." The object was the outward world known by the senses—bedraggled poplars, a man sweeping the street, birds piping. "Why do you write," Williams asked himself, and replied, "To have nothing in my head." No thoughts, that is, no ideas, considerations, opinions. Nothing but the object. It came "as joy, as release."

But how to achieve contact "with an immediate objective world of actual experience"? Maybe it seems contact cannot fail. We are in the world; our senses register it. But like all arguers of this tendency, Williams means that we live too much in our minds, not our bodies, in concepts, memories, worries, hopes, desires, not in the fullness of the moment. The thing offers itself, now and always, in all the particularities of its being, but we are too busy, abstracted, repentant, or dreamy, too beset by our own internal uproar or too stereotyped and conventional in our responses. So we do not take it in. It is an old theme. Maybe any perception we can have of anything must inevitably be a stereotyped one, so great is the pressure of culture on us, of "the tradition."

To see the thing, breaking through all this, and to present it in poetry are almost the same. Certainly the technique can be described in the same terms. Negatively, you do not cogitate the thing or ask questions about it. You approach without presuppositions and draw no conclusions. You don't compare it, or make it into a symbol, or associate it with anything, for associations lead the mind away from it. In fact you dissociate the thing. You isolate it, put white space about it, make it stand out by framing it. You juxtapose it with objects that no one would expect to find near it. Williams learned from Duchamp that "a stained-glass window that had fallen out and lay more or less together on the ground was of far greater interest than the thing conventionally composed *in situ*." Encrusted connotations must be stripped away. Hence the value of the nongrammatical, nonlogical style of the Surrealists or of the "destructive" moments in Poe, who sometimes "used words so playfully his sentences seemed to fly away from sense." Forced thus to look attentively at single words, we recapture their "elemental qualities," find them "clean" again.

Beyond such few practical pointers, Williams could only wait for moments of heightened being, when the longed-for contact would come. Everything depends on the psychic state in which a poet writes. He must be all immediately there, unlocked, focused, and flowing. As Williams put it, we must "perfect the ability to record at the moment when the consciousness is enlarged by the sympathies and the unity of understanding which the imagination gives." This view of the matter was present as a strong element in the poetic theory of the Romantics. Lawrence and Williams caught it especially from Whitman and transmitted it to the Beat poets. It overcame the distinction between writing and living—so sharply drawn and fateful for the *fin de siècle* generation—by asserting that they are the same thing.

Since writing is living, and since you "cannot live after a prearranged pattern, it is all simply dead," you cannot know where your poem may be going as you compose it. At any point it should be open, its next gesture undetermined, its direction unpredictable. A poet's greatest single gift is motion, a rapid, energetic, changing onwardness of mind. A motion, Williams says, like a tree, for his trees are not "great rooted" Yeatsian ones, interwoven and perduring, but images of dynamic thrust with branchings and windy tosses:

the tree moving diversely
in all parts;

the young sycamore that rises

into the air with
one undulant
thrust half its height—
and then

dividing and waning
sending out
young branches on
all sides.

We have been taught to suppose, Williams says, that either the mind moves "in a logical sequence to a definite end which is its goal," or else the mind "will embrace movement without goal other than movement itself for an end and hail 'transition' only as supreme." But neither alternative describes the motion of intelligence at its "optimum." Such motion is not preconceived or logical, but neither is it aimless or happy-go-lucky. It has an inner direction, but is alert at every moment to alternatives, contrary impulses, and new departures that are possible. Ideally speaking, each word in a poem will be a node, defining a direction but charged also with counter-tensions and fresh suggestions.

Hence though Williams talked as if contact with exterior objects were the aim, he also harbored a subtler idea of mimesis as union with life's ongoing, dynamic creativity. This thought had come to the fore in the Romantic age, especially in Germany. Doubtless Williams caught it from the theorizings of modern art movements, for the premise was current in them. A work of art, they explained, should not represent what already exists, but should bring a new object into the world. Williams said that "The Red Wheelbarrow" illustrates how "Poetry has to do with . . . the perfection of new forms as additions to nature." But though they are "additions," the new forms will be just as "natural" or "real" as the chicory flower. As Coleridge had put it, if "the artist copies the mere nature, the *natura naturata*" or objects in nature, "what idle rivalry!" The artist must imitate the productive process of nature, not what nature has already brought forth but the bringing forth, "the *natura naturans,*" as Coleridge calls it—nature naturing. "The work of the imagination is not 'like' anything," Williams explained in *Spring and All,* but it is "transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth."

In the 1910s Pound had judged most American poets "provincial." Some of them had returned the insult, attacking Pound and Eliot as "cosmopolitan." Williams urged that poetry must be rooted in the "local." What he meant by this is not easy to say. Though their subjects were hardly local, he did not, for example, wish to criticize Shakespeare for writing *Antony and Cleopatra* or Dante the *Divine Comedy.* His most considered meaning was that art begins in sensation and the sensory response must be your own. If we think how at the end of the nineteenth century Genteel writing borrowed its sensibility from earlier, English work, we can sympathize with Williams' point. Additionally, when Williams said a writer must "become awake to his own locality," must "know his own world," he was asserting his moral doctrine: if you live in Rutherford—or Omaha, or Albuquerque—your imagination should inhabit it also, should make something out of it by creative response, so that your experience becomes full and vivid. The cathedrals, castles, museum hoards, and whatnot that one can enjoy in the "old world" are no advantage. A sensibility formed in Rutherford will be no less valid for art.

In fact, it will be more so. If Williams' argument were only for the "local phase of the game of writing," it would apply to any locality, for it would point out that all localities are equal. If there is no reason for an American to hie himself to Europe, there is equally no reason for a Frenchman to move to Des Moines. What Williams really had in mind was something else. It went back to his first premise. "Nothing is good save the new." Rutherford—America—was new. His argument was that sensibility is formed by "contact with experience"; experience in the American environment is a new thing in the world; therefore, Rutherford forms a new sensibility and it, not London, is the place to create a new poetry. Pound had forgotten that poetry depends on sensation, not sophistication; he "left the States under the assumption that it was mind that fertilizes mind," headed for London and "straight for literary sterility." He and Eliot had been "too quick to find a culture (the English continental) ready made for their assertions. They ran from something else, something cruder but, at the same time, newer, more dangerous but heavy with rewards for the sensibility that could reap them. They couldn't. Or didn't." The cachet of newness had come to Williams as an artistic value mainly from the avant-garde of Europe. Bestowing it on America, Williams hoped to outstrip Eliot and Pound by staying at home.

Obviously Williams' theories were shaped self-defensively under pressure from the prestige of Pound and Eliot. He had to stand for an alternative or be eclipsed. For if a poet must be aware of the "mind of Europe" and of the "order"—to continue Eliot's phrasing—that subsists within the "whole of the literature of Europe from Homer," how could a busy doctor in Rutherford hope to compete? Hence Williams dwelt on the distinction of his kind of poetry from Pound's and Eliot's and also, rather more than was generous, on their shortcomings. His wounds and rage were understandably exacerbated by Pound's tone of patronage. The tone was appropriate—for many years Williams was able to publish only in outlets Pound influenced—but that did not lessen resentment. Eliot, meanwhile, seemed totally unaware of Williams' existence, and Williams naturally assumed his silence was a deliberate insult.

Of course he did not view Pound and Eliot the same way. With Pound, his old college friend and sometime encourager, he kept up cordial relations. But the academic, deracinated, repressive, perfectionist, successful Eliot became his bogey. What Williams allowed himself to say about Eliot in public was nothing to his comments in private. In a letter of 1944, for example, "I don't know what it is . . . about Eliot that is so slimy. It is the affectation of authority, an offensive leaking from above so that the water is polluted whenever he appears in print." During the Blitz over London Williams came forth with a poem, never republished, that appeared to celebrate the bombing because it would cleanse England of all that Eliot represented.

It requires no odious suspicion of human nature to understand that Eliot and Pound offended Williams partly because his poetry derived from theirs to a far greater extent than he wanted to acknowledge. Not just from Pound's Imagism. I noted that Williams would hardly have conceived *Paterson,* his main poetic work in later years, without the *Cantos* and *The Waste Land* as precedents; moreover, the rhythm, perhaps also the meditative phrasing, of his late poems occasionally owe something to the *Four Quartets.* The other, even greater crime of Eliot and Pound was that they held the central position Williams wanted to hold. Young poets, as yet unknown or unestablished, could always count on Williams for warm praise and encouragement. It was lovely, but it was also political; he was trying to enlist them. To established poets of his own generation he was less receptive. He could usually be relied on for favorable reviews of old friends. Where praise was plainly due, he honorably struggled to give it, even to Eliot. But the effort usually collapsed, and his typical comments are querulous. "Dear fat Stevens, thawing out so beautifully at forty!" That was in 1918 in *Kora in Hell.* Or, for another example, there is the 1932 letter in which he goes through living American poets—Robinson, Stevens, Winters, Jeffers, Frost—and finds that none will do. He also implies that he himself won't do, thus raising himself to equality with the others. As for Eliot and Pound, he concludes elsewhere, "I dunno, I dunno—. If they are great then I'm just a pig."

The language of poetry, Williams said, should be based on ordinary and local speech. The idiom of American poetry has hitherto been a conventional one, a "poetic diction," formed out of the "unrelated traditions" of England. But in their own idiomatic talk, if only they dare exploit it, poets have the basis for an aesthetic medium that will unseal their own sensibility. And American talk, differing radically from English, is especially a medium with possibilities not yet explored. "The inner spirit of the new language is original. Its difference from standard English is not merely a difference in vocabulary . . . it is above all a difference in pronunciation, in intonation, in conjugation, in metaphor and idiom." In fact, a poet who draws on contemporary speech will always have a medium that is unexplored because the spoken language is always changing. Rutherford's speech today has "jumps, swiftnesses, colors, movements" that were not present twenty years before. Williams did not necessarily intend that poets should reproduce contemporary speech. His argument was again influenced by the anti-illusionist strain in modern art. Modern painters or composers develop aesthetic possibilities suggested by the visual forms or sounds of contemporary life. They do not render contemporary life in a naturalistic way. So also the poet should develop the "new means" and "expanded possibilities in literary expression" that are latent in the speech habits of his time.

On the subject of prosody Williams began to change his mind in the 1920s. Until then he had practiced and believed in free verse; his prosody had carried his own stylistic signature and developed from volume to volume, but he had not talked much about it. In the 1920s, however, he began to feel that poets were not going to "discover beyond" Eliot and Pound by "slopping about in vers libre." He was joining a trend, for a reaction against free verse was general at this time. Trying to conceive a new prosody, he urged that there must be a "measure" (a term he first used in 1928), "some sort of discipline *to free* from the vagaries of mere chance." The measure must be "new" and "intrinsic" to actual American speech. "Speech is the fountain of the line," and "it is in the newness of a live speech that the new line exists." And the new line must express our modern civilization, just "as the Homeric line included Greece . . . and the Shakespearian line England." But what is the modern reality? And what measure does it determine? Williams did not know but was willing to grope. The new line would have "internal tension" and be "pliable" to register "the intricacies of the new thought." Its foot would be capable of more modifications than the old, rigid foot and would contain more. Pound's line in the *Cantos* is "something *like* what we shall achieve," but its inspiration is medieval, not modern; it will have to be "realized in living, breathing stuff." The main thing to hold on to is that "Speech for poetry is nothing but time—I mean time in the musical sense"; and our search must be for "a new time that catches thought as it lags and swings it up into the attention." Williams had got this far by the end of 1932.

His breakthrough, as he saw it, occured in the 1940s. He located it in the lines in *Paterson* II (published in 1948) that begin,

> The descent beckons
> as the ascent beckoned
> Memory is a kind
> of accomplishment
> a sort of renewal
> even
> an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places
> inhabited by hordes
> heretofore unrealized . . .

This passage, he later said, "brought all my thinking about free verse to a head." "It took me several years to get the concept clear," but gradually he saw that "in our new relativistic world" the poetic foot would also have to be relative or "variable." But since the "variable foot" is a paradox, a self-contradiction, Williams never got the concept clear, though he revolved it perpetually thenceforth. In practice the "variable foot" was the "measure" he had discovered in *Paterson* II, and he wrote in it (naturally with many variations) during the last ten years of his life. But if we ask how this measure is to be interpreted, Williams offers little help, for his many remarks were maddeningly general, inapplicable, or inconsistent. He has a "triadic" or three-part unit. Each part may be considered a foot, a single "beat," but evidently the "measure" does not lie in any regularity based on quantity, stress, number of syllables, or duration. Neither do the parts of this triad necessarily coincide with units of natural breathing or of syntax, though they tend toward this. If we accepted Williams' idea of a prosody consonant with Einstein's theory of relativity, we might say that the "measure" is constantly changing, each foot determining a new measure. But in prosody I remain stuck at Copernicus, and a variable or relative measure seems none at all. Three parts in each unit is the only regularity in this prosody, and since this would never be heard, it is a regularity only for the eye. Nevertheless, it is a regular pattern; Williams was no longer composing vers libre as this had ordinarily been conceived in the 1920s.

PATERSON AND THE LAST POEMS

Paterson is Williams' long poem, his challenge to the *Cantos* in five books, 178 pages. He published it book by book from 1946 to 1958. The *Cantos* roam the history of the world, but *Paterson* roots itself locally, dwelling on a New Jersey city with its diverse life. Williams wanted, he explained in his *Autobiography*, "to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me."

At least since the early nineteenth century, "poetry" has meant primarily the lyric, the short utterance in verse. Not in dictionary definitions, but in the far more important realm of half-conscious expectation. But the idea of a major poem continues to presuppose length. As Williams put it, "isolated observations and experience" in short poems need "pulling together to gain 'profundity.'" He puts "profundity" in quotes to apologize, with aggressive defensiveness, for so Victorian a value, and one so contrary to his pose. But his thought was typical of modern poets. He had written short poems for forty years, but from early on he had been restless under their restrictions.

Paterson the city is also, in Williams' poem, a giant figure, a poet and doctor, whose thoughts or dreams are the images and vignettes presented. These render the landscape around Paterson, fragments of conversation, snapshot characterizations of persons, love affairs, religious sensibilities, and American life histories. All this comes in discontinuous, concrete, juxtaposed fragments and, as in *The Waste Land* or the *Cantos,* different attitudes, tones of voice, and styles play suddenly against one another. There is social protest and criticism of the culture or civilization of the United States. So many of Paterson's people are like flowers the bee missed; they are divorced from their own bodies, from their lives, and from the power to express themselves adequately. The poem evokes the historical past of the city along with its present; the past is brought to bear chiefly by the collage of prose passages, bits from old newspapers that Williams extracted from local histories. (Among its literally "real" materials the poem also includes extracts from letters that had been written to Williams.) Images and symbols recur incrementally (the river, the waterfall, marriage and divorce). Myth is created; the giant Paterson, for example, reclines against the feminine figure of the landscape. The poem is not continually concrete, for it includes reflective passages and lyrics in many styles.

The great difficulty in the Modernist long poem is to shape a coherent and developing structure. I discussed this problem in connection with Pound's *Cantos,* where discontinuous juxtaposition of fragments, allusion, and evocation of myths assemble an extraordinary number of diverse materials, and Pound hoped and struggled to order them into a "major form," a comprehensive yet organized whole. Williams cared much less about creating an ordered total form. He did not believe that experience is mere chaos and flux, meaningless or of no knowable meaning, so that any order would be a falsification, but he set other values—contact with experience, openness, flexibility, continuously fresh creativity—before those which might make for structure and coherence.

Like all Modernist long poems *Paterson* makes its own form a part of its subject. Explaining and justifying its procedures, it deploys metaphors of formlessness, jumble. Life, Paterson's thoughts, and the poem itself are like the flowing Passaic, rolling things up and along miscellaneously—

> the drunk the sober; the illustrious
> the gross.

Always immediate, new, changing, ongoing, Paterson's thoughts

> interlace, repel and cut under,
> rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
>
> . . . .
>
> Retake later the advance and
> are replaced by succeeding hordes.

As the waterfall crashes down, the "tumult" and "spray" fill "the void." Nothing more could or should be desired. The amnesiac "roar of the present" is "of necessity, my sole concern." The metaphors, in short, suggest diversity, multiplicity, one thing replacing another in no meaningful order. Even memory is discovered, paradoxically, to be a "sort of renewal" that opens "new places." In Williams' extreme Romantic celebration of open possibilities and spontaneous creativity, the form must begin anew in every moment. Otherwise it would be dead.

It can be argued that the poem belies its own programmatic formlessness. Themes recur and interrelate, and the longer we read and study *Paterson,* the more we find it coherent. Of course. But maybe, even so, not very coherent, relatively speaking. Our judgment or response will depend especially on the expectations we bring to bear. If we come to *The Waste Land* from earlier poems, as its first readers did, it seems disjunctive, but it is integrated in comparison to *Paterson.* The important point is that the less a work of art has or seems to have a coherent structure, the more emphasis falls on its texture, in other words, on the workmanship and imagination in each successive detail. For as I remarked in connection with the *Cantos,* something must motivate us to continue reading, and if it is not an emerging sense of a whole, meaningful experience, it can only be the delight we have from moment to moment. In this aspect *Paterson* fails in a way that matters seriously. From page to page there is much dull or even bad writing. Whoever disagrees will not be convinced by brief demonstrations; examples I cited could always be ingeniously defended or called exceptions. And there is no pleasure in citing a botch. Readers of the poem who consult their own feelings as they read, rather than the arguments of specialist defenders, will probably find that if they go on to the end, the cause is conscience rather than interest or pleasure.

In the short poems of his last fifteen years Williams' style changed, becoming much more continuous, relaxed, and perspicuous. Transitions are leisurely. Diction and syntax are as natural and ordinary as ever, but merely so. There are fewer of the experimental "jumps, swiftnesses, colors, movements" caught, supposedly, from contemporary Rutherford speech. The poetry goes like the following passage from "To Daphne and Virginia":

Staying here in the country
on an old farm
we eat our breakfasts
on a balcony under an elm.
The shrubs below us
are neglected.

Poetic tradition had been his "enemy"; now he sometimes invoked it. "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," begins with the epic propositio:

Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
like a buttercup
upon its branching stem—
save that it's green and wooden—
I come, my sweet,
to sing to you.

The domestic intimacy of this also typifies Williams' new manner; this long poem retains some of the incremental symbolism and mythical allusion of *Paterson,* but it is addressed to his wife and filled with reminiscences of their marriage. "No ideas but in things" had once been his slogan. He now generalized:

What power has love but forgiveness?
In other words
by its intervention
what has been done
can be undone.
What good is it otherwise?

We might call this "abstract," but the speaker is strongly characterized and so is the dramatic moment: he is about to plead for forgiveness.

Not just Williams' style but his whole conception of poetry was shifting. He had once composed in the convention that a poem is a made thing, impersonal and objective with respect to its author. But traditionally Romantic conventions had always shaped

his work also, and now they emerged more strongly. Quite as much as Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," his poems might now embody the poet's intimate thoughts and feelings as they flow and develop in a brief moment of time. As their careers drew toward a close, almost all the Modernist poets of his generation modified their revolutionary techniques and returned partly toward the elegiac poetry of the nineteenth century. So also with Williams:

So we come to watch time's flight
as we might watch

summer lightning
or fireflies, secure,
by grace of the imagination,

safe in its care.