

The Cultural Politics of William Carlos Williams's Poetry

by

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Ciarán O'Rourke.

## Summary

This thesis offers a political reading of William Carlos Williams's poetry. Grounding its analysis in the work of a range of authors and theorists, as well as his own biography and writings, it approaches Williams's poems as critical texts that in complex ways represent, reinvent, and call into question the societal life and social spaces to which they refer. This approach exemplifies a new framework for understanding Williams's work and literary evolution: one that is as historically attuned as it is aesthetically exploratory. As such, this thesis also assesses Williams's engagement with genre and poetic form, arguing that these last are closely related to his understanding of American democracy, political commentary, and radical commitment – as detailed in the opening chapter.

The second chapter examines the political aesthetic that Williams establishes in his work from 1913 to 1939, highlighting the often subtle – sometimes problematic – discourses of class, race, gender, and materiality that permeate his poetry. The chapter encompasses: the social element of Williams's break with traditional form in “The Wanderer”; his modernisation of the pastoral mode and treatment of gender, class, and national identity in suburban settings; the close association of his poetry with the politics of advertising, social portraiture, and race in his time; the poetics of perception he evolves to engage both the global “facts” that define his era and the material “vision” presented to him in his New Jersey locale (*CP I* 312). This chapter demonstrates that Williams's work is calibrated to combine formal innovation with social representation, while such representation frequently itself functions as a mode of political implication and critique – the poem standing as “a social instrument” that

enables “the lifting of an environment to expression” (SL 286).

Focusing on the period 1939-1963, the third chapter explores the development of Williams's home-grown poetics in light of his engagements with issues of race, nationalism, and violence (including atomic warfare), among others, in American and global contexts. As in the preceding chapters, this section probes Williams's aesthetic assumptions, but also shows his work evolving new capacities for self-critique and a general criticism of his society. The chapter thus addresses Williams's objectification of working-class, racial, and female figures, as well as his apparent ease in substituting rhetorical provocation for meaningful political response, while also counterposing these tendencies against his effort to democratise his verse and criticise his times.

The fourth chapter attends to the formal and political valencies informing *Paterson*. Taking issue with a number of scholarly interpretations of the poem – from critics as eclectic in their emphases as Frederic Jameson and Marjorie Perloff – this chapter casts *Paterson* as a distinctly postmodern work, highlighting Williams's deployment of documentary and cinematic techniques in the poem, and his engagement of a number of complex (often self-ironising) literary and political discourses. Breaking the formal barriers of an art-form burdened by artificial conventions, Williams in *Paterson* combines the body breathing with the body politic to create an epic vision of modern American life – one that is as politically resonant today as it is interrogatory of Williams's era.

Drawing on the pedagogical philosophies of *radical hope* outlined by Paulo Freire

and Maxine Greene, the concluding portion of this thesis argues for a socially conscious and performatively engaged pedagogical approach to Williams's poetics. By close reading of individual poems and with reference to his own writings on educational reform, this final segment argues that Williams's cultural politics invite exactly that mode of politically efficacious pedagogy which Freire and Greene, among others, have advocated in their respective studies. This conclusion encourages students and educators alike to approach Williams's poetry as a platform from which to fashion a creative vision and critical understanding of their own society.

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I've come to realise that most individual endeavours, if worthwhile, are enabled by the example and companionship of others. Because they showed the way, this thesis is dedicated to my schoolfriends: Rob, Simon, Will, and the magnificent Charlie. *Sic itur ad astra.*

## Abbreviations

- ARI* Williams, William Carlos, Dijkstra, Bram, ed., *A Recognizable Image: WCW on Art and Artists* (New York, 1978).
- CPI* — : Litz, Walton A., MacGowan, Christopher, eds., *Collected Poems I: 1909-1939* (New York, 2000/1991).
- CP II* — : MacGowan, Christopher, ed., *Collected Poems II: 1939-1962* (New York, 2000/1991).
- DL / WCW* — : MacGowan, ed., *The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams* (New York, 1998).
- EK* — : *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (New York, 1974).
- I* — : Schott, Webster, ed., *Imaginations* (New York, 1970).
- LAG* — : *In the American Grain* (New York, 1966/1925).
- IWWP* — : Heal, Edith, ed., *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (New York, 1976/1958).
- P* — : MacGowan, ed., *Paterson* (New York, 1995/1992).
- SE* — : *Selected Essays* (New York, 1969/1954).
- SL* — : Thirlwall, John C., ed., *Selected Letters* (New York, 1957).
- SS* — : Breslin, James E., ed., *Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets* (New York, 1985).
- TFD* — : *The Farmers' Daughters: Collected Stories* (New York, 1961).
- WCW / JL* — : Wintemeyer, Hugh, ed., *William Carlos Williams & James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York, 1989).
- WCW / LZ* — : Ahearn, Barry, ed., *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams & Louis Zukofsky* (Middletown, 2003).
- YMW* — : *Yes, Mrs Williams: A Personal Record of My Mother* (New York, 1982/1959).

## 1. “I cannot tell it all”: Williams in History

### 1.1 *Approaching Williams*

“Mourn O Ye Angels of the Left Wing!”, Allen Ginsberg writes on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1963, three weeks after the death of William Carlos Williams: “that the poet / of the streets is a skeleton under the pavement now”.<sup>1</sup> The accolade, although brief, is both fitting and instructive. Williams, the physician and perennial celebrant of physical experience, has become “a skeleton”; the documentarian of urban New Jersey now resides “under the pavement” – an appropriate resting place for a “poet of the streets”, who was also, and specifically, a stalwart “of the Left Wing!”. The egalitarian, roots-up character of Williams's work is framed by and explicitly associated with his apparently longstanding reputation, in Ginsberg's view, for egalitarian political engagement. Importantly, also, and unlike in the analyses of many later scholars, this association Ginsberg posits – between “Left Wing” beliefs and literary praxis – is understood as inhering in Williams's poetry, rather than in his essays or short fiction. In this respect, what Ginsberg states and condenses in poetic terms is an argument that many commentators even today seem to deny, delimit, or plainly shy away from: that the demotic inflections and democratic emphasis of Williams's most personal art – his poetry – relate not just to the materialities of his habitual environment (including “the streets”), but to his stance and attitude toward the evolving public affairs and civic struggles of his day. If Ginsberg's reading of Williams “the poet” seems instinctively partisan as well as laudatory, then this, crucially, is what makes it valuable.

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<sup>1</sup> Ginsberg, “Death News”, eds., Sheila Coghill, Thom Tammaro, *Visiting Dr. Williams* (Iowa, 2011), p. 5.

Ginsberg's insight into Williams's poetry has been not only critically suggestive, but intrinsic to the approach adopted in this thesis. To understand Williams as being a socially excursive innovator, and to take his creative outlook and politically left-wing sensibility as mutually symbiotic, is a necessary first step to understanding the originality and evolution of his poetic work. This, at least, is one of the organising principles of the discussion here, which attends to the cultural politics of William Carlos Williams's creative practice, with a view to clarifying both the formal development and the recurring concerns of his poetry .

As such comments may suggest, this discussion is distinctive in both its general approach and its specific focus. I contend, for instance, that Williams's literary engagement with political questions cannot solely be confined to his work in the 1930s, but rather is a consistent (and creatively vital) component of his aesthetic praxis from the mid-1910s onwards. Similarly, while the social bent of his prose and short fiction has long been acknowledged in critical circles, this thesis sets out to claim (or re-claim) Williams's poetic work as the primary vehicle and testing-ground for his political concerns. Why such an argument should be so rarely engaged by academic critics is difficult to ascertain – although Cary Nelson, for one, suggests that the “delayed scholarly recognition” of Williams's status as a poet in the first place “was partly a response to his politics”, a condition of Williams's acceptance into the poetic canon thus being the suppression or editing out of the considerable political commitments of his literary practice.<sup>2</sup> Whatever its origins, in this analysis I take issue with what is by now a long-standing strain of Williams criticism that sanitises the poetic work of its social valencies in favour of a

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<sup>2</sup> Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York, 2001), p. 150.

largely de-politicised aesthetic – with one scholar even going so far as to remark upon the supposed “absence of portrayals of serious poverty and economic depression in Williams' poetry [despite] his numerous representations of persons courageously struggling with illness or mental depression.”<sup>3</sup> While Williams's medical sensitivities no doubt affect the tone and perspective of his poetry – as the discussion that follows also demonstrates – this thesis attempts to restore Williams's heightened awareness of “serious poverty and economic depression” as an integral element of his poetic praxis. I argue that Williams's evolving urge towards poetic innovation (his modernism, in other words) is most clearly understood in terms of a radical cultural politics he develops over the course of his career – or rather, that each expressive mode, for Williams, holds a shaping and implicating relation to the other.

Before delving into the precise themes and tendencies of such an analysis, a few definitional notes are perhaps merited. Firstly: my hope is that the base term, *culture*, invoked above and throughout this study, is precise enough to indicate my primary areas of focus in approaching Williams's work, while also allowing sufficient breathing-space for the different critical modes deployed over the course of this discussion to overlap and co-exist without compromising the fluency of the project. With an epistemological spectrum spanning “the processes of cultivation, caring, or tending” to “the nourishment and growth [of] society” – with resonances including “cultural hybridity [and] cultural in-betweenness, [which draw] attention to the fluidity and impermanence” of myriad social “distinctions and relationships” – *culture* combines a conception of aesthetic creation and betterment with ideas of community formation and identities-in-making: a balance of

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<sup>3</sup> Bram Dijkstra, “Introduction”, *A Recognizable Image: WCW on Art and Artists* (New York, 1978), p. 20.

signifying elements not inappropriate to the study of so searching and outward-looking a poet as Williams.<sup>4</sup> As “a noun of process”, *culture* – and that which is *cultural* – provides both an illuminating theoretical framework and a plausible historical context (or series of contexts) by which to measure Williams's poetic output and the trajectory of his literary development.<sup>5</sup> As such, the discussion below will feature formalistically inclined interpretations of single poems, as well as exercises in the political and discursive grounding of broader themes – often, indeed, both together.

Similarly, I hope that the *politics* of my title, with its etymological root in the Greek *polis* – denoting a *city-state* and the shared affairs of its citizens – is potentially both an apt frame and a wide enough concept through which to gain an understanding of the self-consciously social literature that Williams produces throughout his career. This literature ranges from Williams's observational snapshots of daily life in New Jersey (from the 1910s onwards) to his formally expansive meditations on the meaning and obligations of the creative artist in the technological, and later the post-atomic, age – in the years following the mid-1940s. In many cases, Williams emerges as a distinctively urban poet – establishing the American city and its hinterlands as the crucible in which a modern poetics may be forged. “Urban poverty”, observes the geographical theorist, David Harvey, “is, for the most part, rural poverty refashioned within the city system”, an insight to which Williams's vivid, early pastoral poems attest – laying bare the limitations and problematics of a traditionally rural genre by adapting its mode of address to the specific deprivations of New Jersey's urban (and newly formed suburban) environments.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, Meaghan Morris, eds., *New Keywords* (Oxford, 2005/2009), pp. 63-68.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London, 1976), p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Edward Arnold; London, 1973), p. 308.

“I walk back streets”, the pastoralist Williams muses, “admiring the houses / of the very poor” (*CP I* 64). Addressing such phases (and the urban character) of his literary progression, among others, this thesis attempts to shed light on the centrality of the modern American *polis* to the evolution of Williams's creative concerns – while also interrogating, in specific material and literary contexts, the discourses of class, race, and gender mediated throughout Williams's work.

Of course, the initial framing of this study of Williams's poetry by reference to the *polis* (a term and concept originating in ancient Greece) may seem misjudged, given Williams's reputation as a writer of the American local, as well as his frequent skepticism toward established literary canons and conventions – which very often seem steeped, for Williams, in institutional elitism and imperial ambition. “Those who led yesterday wish to hold their sway a while longer”, Williams, fully the iconoclast, writes in 1923: “They have their great weapons to hand [...] 'science,' 'philosophy,' and most dangerous of all 'art.’” (*CP I* 185). In a similar vein, Williams declares to Louis Zukofsky some years later: “I begin to think that Aristotle is the arch-criminal of the ages” (*WCW / LZ* 437). To dress Williams's poetry in classical robes at the outset thus may be to misrepresent or disguise what seems often to be its essence: its insistent contemporaneity. “You can do lots / if you know / what's around you” (*CP I* 401), Williams asserts – an adage that proposes local life, rather than literary tradition, as the richest hunting-ground for poetic inspiration and value.

However, such a frame in fact serves as a reminder of the many formal screens against which Williams projects his images of American life, and the disparate sources from

which he draws his apparently plain-spoken modernism. Despite the pastoral being “by tradition”, as W. H. Auden observes, “the most aristocratic [of] all literary forms”,<sup>7</sup> for example, we may recall that Williams's literary career closes with an energetic, line-gapped translation of Theocritus's *Idylls*. The piece supplies counterweight to Williams's pastoral poems of the 1910s. You “have most deeply /                          meditated the pastoral mode”, one persona in the later piece cries, “let us sit down, /                          under this elm / facing Priapus and the fountain fairies” (*CP II* 270). “I am always fascinated”, Williams summarises, “by translation directly into our language from the older classics”, for “they seem to gain something to my ears by having avoided all intervening contacts”, concluding that the “inventions of the classic manner, too, have their place” (*SS* 135-36).

Just as he keeps his ear attuned to the language of the streets in which he works, then, Williams's home-grown renovations of the style and content of American verse evolve with a view to the precedents of an eclectic literary canon of his own choosing – a canon notable, indeed, for its polyvocal range. Hence, we find *Paterson* populated with transmogrified satyrs – perhaps confirming, as Terrence Diggory observes, the poem's complex “art of shortcomings”, Williams's “‘satyric’, punning on ‘satiric’” suggesting that “[p]arody” may be the “essential mode” of his modern epic.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, *Paterson's* first book ends by citing an observation from a study of ancient Greek poetry and metre: namely, that “[d]eformed verse [is] suited to deformed morality” (*P* 40). “*The Greek Poets* has been my constant reading”, Williams writes to James Laughlin in 1945, “What a thrill to me! [...] that in the entire literature of ancient Greece with all its magnificence

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<sup>7</sup> W. H. Auden, “The Dyer's Hand”, ed., Edward Mendelson, *The Complete Works of WH Auden: Prose 1956-1962* (Princeton, 2010), p. 698.

<sup>8</sup> Terence Diggory, *Yeats and American Poetry: The Tradition of the Self* (Princeton, 1983), p. 84.



there is not one rhyme!” (*JL / WCW* 116).

As such remarks imply, Williams's accessible, speech-based poetry of his place and time is as much a result of traditional engagements as it is of any ground-breaking conception of literary meaning – or, more precisely, it results from the creative fusion of each to each. This of course revises the standard view of Williams's development and distinctiveness as a poet, as articulated by John Felstiner, whereby while “Williams stayed local, in Walt Whitman's footsteps”, Eliot and others “turned back to Europe and a classic source”.<sup>9</sup> Williams, the “obstinate, generous titan of demotic verse” (as another writer describes him) is indeed intent to anchor his work in his place and moment, but he is more than capable of drawing from “a classic source” to serve this purpose.<sup>10</sup> As Angelica Duran observes: Williams's modernism “does not as much radically break from but rather eagerly reconceives of traditional forms of social organisation” – including that of the poem itself.<sup>11</sup>

It's a point worth bearing in mind, suggesting as it does that the combination of seemingly oppositional creative impulses is a consistent feature of Williams's work – which often leans simultaneously towards formal iconoclasm and rhythmic concision, or conveys a sense of the aesthetic self-sufficiency of the poem-object, while at the same time enacting a plausible imitation of daily (even over-heard) speech. So in *Spring and All* (1923), grounding Williams's belief that “[p]oetry has to do with the crystallization of the

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<sup>9</sup> John Felstiner, “A Selection from So Much Depends: Poetry and Environmental Urgency”, *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 36 No. 1 (Jan/Feb 2007), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Eavan Boland, “The Poet's Total Involvement”, *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 42 Issue 5 (Sept/Oct 2013), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Angelica Duran, “Walter Raleigh, Through John Milton, According to William Carlos Williams”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 31 No. 1 (Spring 2014), p. 15.

imagination – the perfection of new forms as additions to nature” (*CP I* 226), is his forthright assertion of the “reality” on which imaginative art may be said to rely: “What I put down of value will have this [merit]... the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from 'reality' – such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work” (*CP I* 189). This fruitful tension between rhyme and ritual, metre and meaning, animates some of Williams's most iconic poems – a note Seamus Heaney touches on when reminiscing over his experience of reading Williams for the first time in the early 1970s. Although he himself “couldn't leave the gravitational pull of the poetry field [he] knew, couldn't slip the halter of the verse line and stanza”, Heaney remarks, in the end he “came to happy enough terms with Carlos Williams, whose ear is actually very delicate” – casting Williams as both a projective innovator and a skillful songsmith.<sup>12</sup>

One clear ramification of such a literary praxis is that the intermittent symbolism of Williams's poetic procedures – as lamented by Marjorie Perloff in her discussion of *Paterson* – and the persistent tendency towards social documentation in his work may not be so separable as standard critical narratives of his poetic development suggest. Certainly in approaching *Paterson*, this perspective is vital – for it allows us to dislodge the critical bugbear that Williams effectively cannot make it cohere (to adapt Pound's phrase), and to replace it with what may be the defining circumstance of the *Paterson* project: that Williams doesn't need it to. Pound's acknowledgement of the *Cantos*'s final limitation may thus profitably be compared with Williams's understated equivalent in

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<sup>12</sup> Seamus Heaney, ed., Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* (London, 2009), p. 145; Irish poet Thomas Kinsella, incidentally, has acknowledged Williams's influence in similar terms, writing that he was instrumental in “opening up the voice” of the modern poem, as recounted in Ian Flanagan, “‘Hearing the American Voice’: Thomas Kinsella and William Carlos Williams”, *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 16 No. 3 (August, 2008), pp. 305-327.

*Book Five*: “I cannot tell it all” (P 232). The distinction is arguably as political as it is creative, Pound's fascistic will to *make cohere* illuminating by contrast Williams's ultimate opposition to the regimentation of life – his continuing capacity, that is, to acknowledge and celebrate (and sometimes, also, to diagnose) the intrinsic disorders of that modernity with which he finds himself faced. In formal terms, similarly, and against *The Cantos*, the limit of *Paterson* becomes only the limit of Williams's own life – a scarcity of literal time, rather than of expressive resources. The implication being that in purely aesthetic terms, *Paterson* could indeed go on forever – as its indefatigable meshing of factual reportage, dramatic invention, symbolist-style extravagance, and notational observations of place, surely evidences. As such, *Paterson* arguably serves also as a revisionary counter-example to Daniel Gabriel's understanding that “the modernist epic constitutes a mythological retelling of history” – replacing this last with its own complex imbrication of documentary and imaginative narratives, symbolic and literal modes.<sup>13</sup> As Oliver Southall suggests, in *Paterson* Williams balances an “increasingly urgent need for political statement” with an equally propulsive and “dutiful attention to 'composition'” and its formal frames.<sup>14</sup>

As Chapter 4 of this thesis suggests, *Paterson's* disjunctive, improvisatory, seemingly open-ended style of progression is a key element of its originality and meaning – a factor that even as nuanced and sympathetic a reader as Frederic Jameson occasionally misses. Hence, while *Paterson* may indeed be, as Jameson suggests it is, “ideologically complicitous with the whole teleological theory of the modern itself”, his supporting claim that “[few] great modern works can have been so insistently punctuated by the

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Gabriel, *Hart Crane and the Modernist Epic* (New York, 2007), p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Southall, “Desperate Measures: Williams's 'new line' and the Political Economy of *Paterson*”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 33 Nos 1-2 (2016), p. 207.

presence of non-symbolic animals”, for instance, is plainly prone to the same pitfall (albeit approached from the opposite critical direction) as Perloff’s. The poem’s “yelping dog” (*P* 27) and later “dog [that] descends toward Acheron” (*P* 132) may be actual animals, after all, but like Paterson himself, they also serve to give symbolic life to Williams’s abiding belief that the myth or imagination of a place is accessible in the most apparently banal details of that place, if noticed: “the dogs barked, [and] trees / stuck their fingers to their noses. No / poet has come, no poet has come” (*P* 79). In the same way – to continue test-driving Jameson’s argument – the seabirds over Paterson are alternately “gulls” and “vortices of despair”, shapeshifting between fact and metaphor, both in one (*P* 161). The poem thus provides an evolving palimpsest of Paterson’s “things”, “ideas”, and the relations between them (*P* 9) – mutually contradictory as these may be, and yet, as Williams brilliantly perceives, equally present and true. The notion that in his portrait of Paterson Williams’s symbolist instincts can be divided comfortably from his urge for persuasive resemblance is anachronistic at best – as Chapter 4 of this discussion argues.

Beyond *Paterson*, also, (throughout his work, in fact) Williams writes of the people, the conversations, and the material texture of his own locality *because* of the formal implications that accompany such attentions – as well as in the politically efficacious belief that such subjects are worth writing about. As Tyrus Miller has argued in general terms, “formally innovative experimentalism and naturalistic explorations of daily life” are not so much “opposed as instead *complementary* moments of a broader modernist poetics” – a critical insight that certainly rings true in Williams’s case.<sup>15</sup> It is partly with this dual tendency in mind, moreover, that Matterson can posit Williams’s “developing

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<sup>15</sup> Tyrus Miller, “Documentary / Modernism: Convergence and Complementarity in the 1930s”, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 9 No. 2 (April, 2002), p. 226.

poetic” as being “grounded in an ethical dimension”, his poems advancing – in their language, formal make-up, and outlook – “a claim to equality of observing mind and observed things.”<sup>16</sup> Copestake, similarly, identifies Williams's praxis-based affirmation of “inclusivity” and “[o]penness” as one of the “ethical roots of his poetry.”<sup>17</sup> If this thesis sometimes calls into question the sufficiency of Williams's social egalitarianism, and unveils the prejudicial presumptions that undergird Williams's vivid American imaginary on occasion, the point is nonetheless instructive: that the almost phenomenological grace Williams bestows on his poetic subjects and settings is both sociological and aesthetic, his insistence on the integrity of actual life a symptom of his deeper understanding of poetry itself as a site and instrument of ethical endeavour.

In this last respect, Williams's creative approach may bear some resemblance to that of his friend and fellow poet, Marianne Moore. “Every time I see a newspaper that mentions Hitler or Abyssinia”, Moore writes Williams in 1935, “I wonder why I do not walk up and down the street like a sandwich-man wearing as broadside your [poem] 'Item', for good though certain other things are this says it all.”<sup>18</sup> Suffused with Goya-esque dread, the poem depicts a woman “with a face / like a mashed blood orange” who wears a “thick, ragged coat” and “broken shoes”, and goes “stumbling for dread” as soldiers “with their gun-butts / shove her // sprawling” (*CP I 379*) – and so melds formal precision with political intent. If “Item” could hardly be mistaken for one of Moore's own compositions, her praise for the piece is telling, and suggests a correlation of creative concerns between

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Matterson, “American Modernism from the 1930s to the 1950s: Williams and Stevens to Black Mountain and The Beats”, eds., Alex Davis, Lee Jenkins, *A History of Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 350-351.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Copestake, *The Ethics of Williams Carlos Williams's Poetry* (New York, 2010), p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Marianne Moore, “To William Carlos Williams; 22 June 1935”, eds., Bonnie Costello, Celeste Goodridge, Cristianne Miller, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore* (Faber, 1998), p. 345.

the two writers. As Victoria Bazin has observed, Moore's work is self-consciously “responsive to and shaped by American modernity”, her poems serving as “dialectical images of modernity revealing the extent to which the pure poetry of abstraction can never be isolated or detached but it always already implicated in the very processes” of history.<sup>19</sup> “To Miss Moore”, Williams himself notes (admiringly), “an apple remains an apple whether it be in Eden or the fruit bowl where it curls” (*SE* 25) – the two writers implicitly sustaining that regard for concrete conditions in their work, which Williams perceives as an essential precursor to the creation of modern art.

Although Moore professes to find Williams's “everyday images” at times “too everyday to be condoned” –<sup>20</sup> elsewhere declaring that “the heroisms of abstinence are as great as the heroisms of courage, and so are the rewards” –<sup>21</sup> the two writers may be seen to share an ethically charged conception of poetic purpose. “Miss Moore is an oddly moral writer”, Randall Jarrell observes, casting her (with a hint of condescension) as the “representative of a morality divorced both from religion and from economics”, who nonetheless retains the material groundedness and imaginative force of each in her aesthetic endeavours.<sup>22</sup> Or as Ronald J. Latimer proposes in 1936, Moore's “formal control” implies an association between “the mastery of facts” on the page and “the possibility of more effective action in the historical sphere” – an assertion that may be made (perhaps even more fruitfully) of Williams's work, as the discussion below suggests.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Victoria Bazin, *Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity* (Ashgate, 2010), pp. 199-200.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, *Letters*, p. 408.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>22</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York, 1955), p. 159.

<sup>23</sup> *cit.*, Bazin, p. 200.

Such an ethically framed understanding of Williams's poetic work in any case revises a once-dominant trend in critical studies, which interprets the quiddity and perceptual subtlety of the poems in universalist (and even quasi-Romantic) terms. "Poetry of this kind", J. Hillis Miller suggests, "is a way of letting things be", vividly apprehending an array of discrete, often disregarded material objects and allowing them to exist "within the universal realm made of the poet's coextension with the world."<sup>24</sup> This thesis attempts to dispel with such abstractions, arguing that the literary perceptions and material concerns of Williams's work are ethically engaged (and so, politically implicating) by design.

Time and again we find Williams's fascination with – and particulate evocation of – the gestures, tribulations, and interactions of his day-to-day muses merging with a powerful stance towards his own aesthetic and craft. So in "Fine Work with Pitch and Copper", Williams's close-focus scan of workmen – "resting / in the fleckless light [...] like the sacks / of sifted stone stacked / regularly by twos // about the flat roof" – posits a textural continuity between the labourers and the materials they work with, and then concludes by conflating the poet's own observing vision with that of the men themselves. "One still chewing / picks up a copper strip / and runs his eye along it", Williams finishes, the worker's dexterity in measuring the copper sheets now akin to Williams's own stripping down of each poetic line – a craftsmanship revealed, in both cases, by the most apparently casual of gestures (*CP I* 405). "[To] be an artist", Williams proposes elsewhere, "is to be a kind of laborer – a workman – a maker in a very plain sense" (*EK* 23).

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<sup>24</sup> Miller, "William Carlos Williams", eds., Steven Gould Axelrod, Helen Deese, *Critical Essays on WCW* (New York, 1995), p. 94.

Such proposed symmetries, of course, are not always unproblematic. For if “Williams is liberal, anti-orthodox, and a descendant of Emerson and Whitman”, as Robert Lowell pithily notes, he also perhaps proves the latter's apothegm that “if a man is intense and honest enough, the half-truth of any extreme position will in time absorb much of its opposite.” Consequently, Lowell observes, Williams has “much in common with Catholic, aristocratic, and agrarian writers.”<sup>25</sup> Although hardly the final word as far as the cultural politics of Williams's work are concerned, Lowell's remarks offer a suggestive insight into the dominant tone, direction, and focus of the older poet's writing.

If this analysis advances an attentiveness to the materiality of daily experience as a consistent feature and major innovation of Williams's modernism, it also questions the often exuberant aestheticisation of the lives, bodies, and speech habits of Williams's “townspeople”, which that process involves. Hence, while much popular and scholarly discourse has been generated in an effort to parse the redness of Williams's “red wheel / barrow” – a discourse this thesis also engages – I have been keen also to focus on the supposed redness of Williams's “red squaw” in 1948, for example, and indeed on the meaning of his *Pink Church* of artists, outcasts, and dissidents, published the following year. “Come all ye aberrant”, Williams writes, “drunks, prostitutes, / Surrealists [...] to bear witness” to his art – which bids them “Sing!” in unison, while he himself implicitly whirls “among [...] the rest... // like a Communist” (*CP II* 177-180).

Acknowledging the vigour of Williams's socially based understanding of literary craft, this discussion probes the categorisations that Williams employs (and at times seems to

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Lowell, “Paterson I”, ed., Robert Giroux, *Collected Prose* (London, 1987), pp. 32-33.



presume) for cultural valencies that may hitherto have gone unremarked upon in general discussions of his work. To this end, almost every chapter and subsection of this study addresses some aspect of such a double tendency on Williams's part – towards the poeticisation of the experiences of his everyday muses and the life around him (often characterised by violence and deprivation), while at the same time towards a trail-blazing creation of a *grounded* language and stylistic mode, producing poems like the “yellow grass-onion... and the best part / of it is they grow everywhere” (*CP I* 400). “The niggers and wops on Tulip Street / have few prejudices, I none”, Williams writes (with only partial irony), “and fig trees grow freely there / for practically anyone” (*CP II* 42) – lines that neatly encapsulate the egalitarian aims of Williams's poetics, as well as their frequent (and obvious) inadequacy.

A thorough-going examination of such issues may naturally serve to qualify or deflate Ginsberg's celebratory identification of Williams's work with “the Left Wing”. More particularly, such criticism opens to scrutiny the claims of democratic wholeheartedness and politically remedial intent which sympathetic readers (including this one) make for Williams's work and politics. And so, by contextualisation, comparison, and close-reading of poems, this analysis has had continually to test its own assumptions as it progressed, as well as those underpinning Williams's creative praxis. Without downplaying this critical emphasis, however, the discussion below is also clear in linking the materially inflected concerns of Williams's work to his laudably anti-establishmentarian impulses, as both a writer and a medical practitioner – as the next portion of this introductory discussion elaborates.

## 1.2 *Williams Among the Rest*

“I am boiling mad”, Williams declares in the late 1940s, at “this morning's mail from the American Medical Association”, which “in the name of 'democracy' orders me to pay \$25 into their treasury to fight 'socialized medicine'”: this “represents what we are up against in our times,” Williams concludes, “Our writing also affects it” (*SL* 273). If such remarks offer a clear indication of Williams's politics as a doctor, they also help to strengthen and explicate the analogy often drawn between his medical experience and poetic practice – two areas which, as Williams himself famously states, “amount for [him] to nearly the same thing” (*A* 186). Of course, and as the commentary below also indicates, the principal implication of such an analogy (between medicine and poetry) is not so much that poetry be understood as a necessarily curative activity: even Williams, who contends on one occasion that “writing *is* bricklaying” (*SL* 55; emphasis mine), refrains from making that claim in full. Rather, Williams's understanding of poetry as a medically informed art stems from its capacity to reach and “go back to people”; as Williams sees it, the poem serves a function in the general community that is at once diagnostic, interventionist, and materially clarifying (*SE* 178). As he writes in 1931: “On the poet devolves the most vital function of society: to recreate it – the collective world – in time of stress, in a new mode, fresh in every part” (*SE* 103).

Like the practice of medicine, for Williams the poem does not automatically resolve the conflicts and tensions of society, but it nonetheless forms a potentially restorative field of contact and expression. As Kenneth Burke observes, Williams may be understood as being an essentially “nosological poet. His great humaneness was equally present in both

roles” of doctor and writer.<sup>26</sup> Or as Williams himself asserts, some decades earlier, the “reason people marvel at works of art [is] that they know nothing of the physiology of the nervous system” (*CP I* 209-210) – the study of (and skilled intervention into) human bodies in society linking quite naturally, for Williams, to his own literary projects and projections. If Benedict Anderson can later suggest that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”, Williams’s medically informed aesthetics are deployed with the aim of making that contact and identification a reality – his efforts in the poetic field testifying, indeed, to Anderson’s contention that communities will be “distinguished” primarily “by the style in which they are imagined.”<sup>27</sup>

As such, and perhaps of a piece with his rejection of the “fight [against] ‘socialized medicine’” in his correspondence, it is surely notable that throughout his poems Williams is so keen to critique the increasing commercialisation of American social life – his culturally self-conscious acknowledgement of the ubiquitous “yellow grass-onion” above, for example, prefiguring his later, disdainful recognition, in “Christmas 1950”, of storefront flowers that can “bloom so / long!” and “[i]n spring” will thrive “out / side”, but which remain “guarded / by the lynx-eyed / dragon // money” (*CP II* 234). In like fashion, Williams’s attention to the corporeality of his subjects (which persists over the full five decades of his writing life) relates not just to his medical experience, but to his perception of the increased mechanisation of life and labour in the emerging American century. As Paula Rabinowitz notes of the documentary photography movements of the

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<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Burke, “William Carlos Williams: 1883-1963”, *The New York Review of Books* (June 1, 1963), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1963/06/01/william-carlos-williams-18831963/> (accessed 27/07/18).

<sup>27</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1983/2006), p. 6.

1930s (but with a critical stress that also illuminates Williams's poetic procedures): by “bringing images of daily life and ordinary people into public view” documentary-style art “remakes vision and in so doing produces” and helps to embody “new forms of (class) consciousness.”<sup>28</sup> Remembering a picket-line of workers during the Paterson strike of 1913, Williams thus notes not only their “flat heads with the unkempt black or blond hair”, but “the men's arms” and “the ugly legs of the young girls”, which are treated in the factory system like “[p]istons too powerful for delicacy!” (*CP I* 31) – as discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.

As such quotations imply, Williams's modernism is remarkable as much for the insight into industrial modernity it conveys as for the literary innovations that it attempts – or rather, and again, the originality of Williams is to interlink one to the other. Williams's early likening of the steam-reddened arms and legs of striking factory workers above, indeed, anticipates and converses with his later depiction of New York city as a conglomerate of “[s]weatshops / and railroad yards at dusk / (puffed up by fantasy / to seem real)” (*CP I* 165), as well as his poetic portrait of Henry Ford, which envisions frankly “[a] tin bucket / full of small used parts / nuts and short bolts / slowly draining onto / the dented bottom” and “forming a heavy sludge / of oil” (*CP II* 12).

The latter piece in particular is indicative of the overlap between Williams's literary inclinations and his politico-critical instincts – which, as in this case, are often astute. Contemporaneously analysing the same phenomenon of Fordism from afar, Antonio Gramsci reflects that “the new type of man demanded by the rationalisation of production

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<sup>28</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *The Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London, 1994), p. 35.

and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalised.... In America, rationalisation of work and prohibition are undoubtedly connected”.<sup>29</sup> Williams's perennial insistence on the scatological vitality to be found in the streets, homes, and public places that he and his literary personae pass through may be taken as advancing a similar perspective – his urge to encounter and describe the supposedly “grotesque fellows” (*CP I* 63), “unfortunates / cowering in the wind” (*CP I* 48), and “the very poor” (*CP I* 64) a retort to a political culture which views such figures in mechanistic and desexualised terms, or which makes them invisible. As Paula Rabinowitz has argued, “questions of labor” in American art and society (“racialised” or otherwise codified as they may be) are very often “questions of citizenship” – a discourse that arguably underlies the egalitarian impetus of Williams's poems.<sup>30</sup> “Why do I write today?”, Williams rhetoricises: the “beauty of / the terrible faces / of our nonentities / stirs me to it” (*CP I* 70). Or as Calista McRae observes, “Williams [focuses] a sympathetic look on people ignored, belittled, or rendered picturesque in most previous poetry” – a theme I return to at greater length in the next chapter.<sup>31</sup>

If Williams's poems are intended, famously, to resemble a “machine made of words” (*CP II* 54), then as the comments above imply, their vocabulary and outlook nevertheless present a counter-vision to the mechanisations and resulting alienations of industrial modernity in America – an alterantive literary narrative, with all the lasting force (and occasionally the same slapstuck sincerity) of a Charlie Chaplin performance on the big

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<sup>29</sup> Gramsci, eds., Quintin Hoare, Geoffrey Nowell Smith, *Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1971), pp. 296-302.

<sup>30</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *Black, White and Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York, 2002), p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Calista McRae, “Williams, Thom Gunn, and Humane Attention”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Volume 34 No. 1 (Spring, 2017), p. 25.

screen. The comparison is suggestive. For notwithstanding its effortless hilarity, Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) pivots on exactly those material contrasts and contradictions on which Williams's poems themselves so frequently hinge. The film's narrative sways between the errant, precarious life of the nameless "Factory Worker" and "Gamin" on the streets, and the plentiful securities promised by the luxurious department store in which the Chaplin character intermittently works as a night attendant. Similarly, the clownish malfunctions of the "Factory Worker"'s initial attempts to fulfil his function in the assembly line, resulting from the physical repetition and mental strain of the job, stand out – or leap out, rather – against the smooth, familiar motions of his more comfortable line-managers.<sup>32</sup> The gloriously haywire dance of the Chaplin character's "nervous breakdown" in the factory makes for superb entertainment, recalling Hart Crane's earlier, gleeful celebration of Chaplin's artistic insight: that "we can still love the world", despite modernity's vista of "meek adjustments" and "random consolations".<sup>33</sup> But Chaplin's performance also speaks to precisely that condition of social invisibility, that deformity-in-labour, which repeatedly inscribes Williams's literary portraits – portraits that are also attentive to the ways in which working-class figures, entrenched in a "profoundly alienating situation", as David Harvey has written, attempt to cultivate "their own creative pleasures [that are] compensatory for what industrial capitalism" denies them.<sup>34</sup>

"I / saw men fishing", Williams writes in 1941,

[...] in the backwash  
between slips, where at the time

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<sup>32</sup> Which suggests that there is a class dimension, in this instance, to Michelle Clayton's interpretation of Chaplin as striving to create a "body" on-screen that "distarticulates and rearticulates itself in scenes tied together by the movements of that body around their space"; Clayton, "Modernism's Moving Bodies", *Modernist Cultures*, Vol. 39 Issue 1 (May, 2014), p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Hart Crane, "Chaplinesque", ed., Brom Weber, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane* (New York, 1948), p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 124-125.

no ship lay. But though I stood

watching long enough, I didn't see  
one of them catch anything...

as the speaker stays transfixed and bemused by their “formal / rhythms of casting – that slow dance”, which is both physically desperate and visually elegant (*CP II* 10).

The juxtaposition of Williams's work with Chaplin's perhaps invites explicit mention here of an occasional subtheme of this thesis – namely, Williams's active curiosity about modern visual culture, and in particular cinema, photography, and the technological innovations pioneered by these emerging art forms. As such, my analysis differs from much critical work on Williams, which foregrounds the (undoubtedly formative) relationship between his literary modernism and transatlantic painting.<sup>35</sup> While acknowledging this relationship, more often than not I have chosen to highlight instead Williams's engagement with the technologies and media (including multimedia) of the new photographic century. If nothing else, such a perspective may revise Jameson's contention that *Paterson* “is to be thought of as a gigantic material collage” – suggesting instead that, especially in light of Jim Jarmusch's film of the same name, Williams's work may be understood as an elaborate film-poem, or the script thereof.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, as the discussion in the second chapter of this thesis shows, for Williams photographic art is peculiarly American in its possibilities and example – as implied, perhaps, by his cinematographic interpretation of Whitman, in a 1960 review of a photographic companion of *Leaves of Grass*:

[Photography] made the poem come alive for me as it were for the first time. It

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Christopher MacGowan's *William Carlos Williams's Early Poetry: The Visual Arts Background* (Ann Arbor, 1984).

<sup>36</sup> Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, p. 37.

needed the breadth of such a poem, the minutiae of such a poem in its comprehensive all-seeingness to in some way compete with it. The photographic process was predestined, I realized, to have waited for just this moment for its realization.

(*ARI* 231-32)

The so-called Americanness of art – and indeed of Williams himself – is a question that tacitly frames much of this analysis: what that national category of identification might mean for Williams, and indeed for the nation in which he lives and works. Williams is “so American that the adjective itself seems inadequate”, Randall Jarrell can exclaim in a late review, “[h]e is the America of poets.”<sup>37</sup> And yet, as Harris Feinsod writes:

[in] 1883 Williams [arrived in] a family newly displaced from Spanish America, but whose language, livelihood, and identity all very much depended upon it. He grew up bilingual at home, the slinger of a 'choice Rutherford Spanish' with 'a peculiar Hackensack accent,' as he described his linguistic capacities as a young man.<sup>38</sup>

“My mother was half French... the other half was a mixed breed”, Williams himself notes in 1954: “My father was English... [and] never became a citizen of the United States though he made no objection to my remaining one after I had been born in the country.” Such an upbringing, Williams summarises, “led me to look at writing with very different eyes from any to be found about Philadelphia” (*YMW* 3) – to the extent, indeed, that James Edward Smethurst can propose Williams as the USA's “first Nuyorican (or Nujerican) poet”.<sup>39</sup>

This thesis does not cast Williams as being a primarily Hispanic or trans-American writer, and my discussion remains (of necessity) a monolingual one – attending to Williams's poems, theorisations of craft, and his thoughts on linguistic innovation in Anglophone

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<sup>37</sup> Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age*, pp. 210-11.

<sup>38</sup> Harris Feinsod, *The Poetry of the Americas* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 76-77.

<sup>39</sup> James Edward Smethurst, *the black arts movement: literary nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 2005), p. 42.



contexts only. Yet I do attempt to keep Williams's thoughts about his background, ancestry, and cultural-geographical heritage in view, particularly when these seem relevant to the colonially conscious depiction of American history and space that he engages on occasion – his sensitivity, that is, to questions of imperial conquest and material control of geographical space. In America, Williams writes in 1924, “we have a class of witty men who are able to drill the lesser gluttons, men who 'organize'”, a class that has proven itself “able to bring bananas in quantity from Central America, nectarines from Cape Town and pearls, sables, etc. coffee, rubber, tea, ivory, anything from the various hot and cold and temperate and deep and difficult places of the earth” – adding, with a conclusive fusion of global consciousness and political critique, that “[t]his is the natural history of America” (*ARI* 21). Such a scathingly ironic sense of American identity on Williams's part indicates a great deal about his own social outlook – and so informs the reading of *Paterson* in Chapter 4, for example, as well as the engagement with his 1940s poems dealing with Native American experience in Chapter 3. Whatever the critical and cultural limitations of the approach adopted in this thesis, in short, its primary focus has nevertheless lead me to engage questions of race, idigeneity, and the meaning and implications of Williams's use of “American English” in his work in ways that a conventionally aesthetic interpretation may have been less inclined to.

On a related note, one of the main themes to emerge over the course of this commentary centres around the recognition: that by writing in (and sometimes against) what he calls the American grain, Williams is attempting to tap into an expressive tradition that for him is as politically exemplary as it is linguistically original. Curiously, perhaps, for so individual and antagonistic a literary innovator, “tradition” is once again a keyword

among Williams's motivating cultural concerns here – and is the trope, indeed, that he resurrects in the aftermath of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, when he searingly blames the American public at large for the outcome. “Americans”, Williams writes, “You are inheritors of a great / tradition”, despite doing only “what you're told to do. You don't / answer back the way Tommy Jeff did or Ben / Frank [...] You're civilized” (*CP I* 272). The logic here is telling. For if Williams's seemingly perennial urge as a poet is to “answer back” to his times, then such an impulsion, in his view, is almost by definition an American one: to be both dissident and dissonant amid the prevailing orthodoxies of the time, like “Tommy Jeff” or “Ben / Frank” – or, as Williams suggests, like Sacco and Vanzetti themselves.

As may be clear by now – and even though Williams can claim to find it perceptibly “difficult / to get the news from poems” (*CP II* 318) – one of the hoped-for outcomes of the critical framework employed here will be to illustrate the remarkable extent to which Williams's poems respond to “the news” of his day. Indeed, an underlying assumption of this analysis is that the development of Williams's literary craft may be understood in terms of his ongoing literary responsiveness to public events and the debates of his time, as much as through its stylistic evolution. To read Williams's work chronologically is to encounter a critical and engaged timeline of some of the defining social crises, public spectacles, and contemporaneous debates in American life in the first half of the twentieth century – a trajectory of national self-fashioning that Williams meets and records with interrogatory vigour, as well as formal inventiveness.

As such, it must be acknowledged that my own efforts to foreground the social concerns

and (sometimes conflicting) discursive politics of his poetry form a small part of a much larger project among scholars of Anglo-American modernism in general: to interrogate the past and its literary texts, and to re-historicise our study of them. In which context, of course, the example of Williams's political and activist commitments arguably provides an alternative model of literary politics to that associated with many writers among whom he is regularly ranked today. Ezra Pound may be taken as a case in point. A longstanding friend – from their time as university students together, through Pound's incarceration for treason, and then insanity, from the mid-1940s onwards, until Williams's death in the early 1960s – Pound is instrumental in offering Williams constructive criticism during his formative years as a poet, and remains an important personal influence on Williams's life and art thereafter. In contrast to Williams, however, Pound becomes an active supporter of Italian fascism, broadcasting openly anti-Semitic views, as well as being notoriously elitist in his political and aesthetic outlook. His example naturally casts a foreboding shadow over politically framed studies of Anglo-American modernists in general, and the same is true of his closeness to Williams in particular.

This is arguably all the more the case for the fact that Pound and Williams bear a number of superficial similarities to one another as poets: not least in their respective later attempts, as mentioned above, to compose epic works of their time and moment. As Alec Marsh notes, both writers “were engaged in what we would now call 'cultural criticism'”, a criticism that “extends to their poetry and into the poems themselves”, which set out to measure “the true ideal of democracy” against “the false ideal of success, especially commercial and monetary triumph” that each perceives as an active force in American

society.<sup>40</sup> Even in their earlier lyric work, however, the writers bear a mutual resemblance. Just as Pound famously transmutes a crowd of faces in a station of the metro into “petals on a wet, black bough”,<sup>41</sup> for example, so Williams resolves the social and intimate topographies of one poem into a natural imaginary:

Who shall hear of us  
in the time to come?  
Let him say there was  
a burst of fragrance  
from black branches.

(*CP I 79*)

Similarly, Pound's image in 1913 of the “filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor” who shall “inherit the earth” seems to have exactly that balance of irony, realism, and exultancy of tone for which Williams's early pastorals (discussed in the second chapter of this thesis) are known,<sup>42</sup> the latter's persona wandering “head down under heaven, nostrils lipping the wind!” and “admiring”, as we have seen, “the houses / of the very poor” (*CP I 63-64*). Both poets convert their own instinctive responses of social distaste and incomprehension into occasions for literary self-fashioning – their aloofness giving way to a kind of observational self-satisfaction, as their poetic vision performs and expands itself by a series of close-ups of their chosen scenes' material details.

If such comparisons seem to rely on a mere similarity of formal approach and technical procedure, there are of course other instances in Williams's work that may suggest a correlation of literary sensibilities – and of a particularly disturbing nature. “He was one of these fresh Jewish types you want to kill at sight”, we find Williams writing of one

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<sup>40</sup> Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson* (The University of Alabama Press, 1998), p. 55.

<sup>41</sup> Ezra Pound, *Personae* (London, 1926/2001), p. 251.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

character in his short story “A Stone Face”, “the presuming poor whose looks change the minute cash is mentioned. But they're insistent, trying to force attention, taking advantage of good nature at the first crack” (*TFD* 167). Jarringly, here and elsewhere in his work Williams makes casual use of ethnic and racial (as well as gendered) stereotypes for literary effect – apparently going so far as to naturalise eugenicist assumptions and transparently anti-Semitic prejudices, in this case, for which Pound and others have been justly condemned.

Unlike Pound, however – and one of the pitfalls of Marsh's commentary, referenced above, is its failure to draw out such differences – the prejudicial discourses detectable in Williams's work are not deployed with politically efficacious intent, nor are they systematised in ideological terms. As unpalatable as Williams's breezy racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism are, his engagement of such modes seems rather to be one expression of a broad tendency throughout his poetry to represent not so much *things as they are*, but *things as they are perceived* and mediated in modern America: Williams brings to literature what he sees and hears around him in life, often for the sake of cultural provocation, and the results can be unsettling. “My wonderful friends, the Wops of Guinea Hill”, Williams recalls of his early medical practice, “At one time during those years I 'gave birth', as one woman phrased it, to nearly every baby born on [their] streets above the old copper mine” (*A* 149). Williams's couching of social consciousness in blatantly discriminatory language and presumptions is enervatingly typical – as later portions of this analysis attest.

Of course, and also in contrast to Pound and others, one of the remarkable attributes of

Williams as a literary figure is his active and consistent condemnation of political movements that propound racist and anti-Semitic ideological concepts. Expressing his contempt for “that murderous gang [Pound] says he's for” (referring to the fascist parties of Hitler and Mussolini in Europe), Williams confesses to James Laughlin in 1939 that he “can hardly bear the thought of shaking hands with the guy if he does show up here – I'd say the same to my own father under the circumstances ”, adding later:

The logicallity [sic] of fascist rationalizations is soon going to kill him. You can't argue away wanton slaughter of innocent women and children by the neo-scholasticism of a controlled economy program.

(*JL / WCW 45-49*)

In addition to such privately expressed sentiments, Williams pens an open criticism of Pound in 1941, published as “Ezra Pound: Lord Ga-Ga!” – a *takedown*, described succinctly by Paul Mariani as “a very palpable hit at the man who had set himself up as an insane Lord Haw Haw”, an attempt by Williams “to cut [himself] clean” from Pound's increasingly murderous pronouncements.<sup>43</sup> As Williams asserts elsewhere of Pound's “totalitarianism”: “I disagree with him fundamentally and finally in what I believe he, as a man of responsibility, represents.”<sup>44</sup>

The episode is telling in its own right, but also provides a counter-point to the literary phases discussed in the third chapter of this thesis – whereby Williams appears to rationalise the aerial bombing of London as an appropriate fate for British society marked, in his view, by its own history of colonial violence and exploitation. If Williams's will to make the ineffabilities of such history speakable in every sense is commendable,

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (San Antonio, 1981), p. 456.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, “A review of *Culture*, by Ezra Pound”, *New Republic* (28 June 1939), <https://newrepublic.com/article/102632/penny-wise-pound-foolish> (accessed 14/07/18).

his apparent ease in acclimatising to the destructive effects of modern warfare is perturbing and problematic – as detailed in later portions of this thesis.

In such matters, the question of *commitment* – in Adorno's sense of the term – has proven a recurring theme. Prompted by his observation of the migration of “politics... into autonomous art”, Adorno explores the parallel antithesis facing so-called “committed” artworks – which refuse “to sleep through the deluge that threatens them” in the modern era, and yet seem simultaneously destined to “assimilate themselves [to] the brute existence against which they protest”, so that “from their first day they belong to the seminars in which they inevitably end.”<sup>45</sup> Many of Williams's poems could serve as literary case-studies for such a theorisation, while the very fact of their discussion in this commentary arguably affirms Adorno's skepticism of the role played by the academic humanities in institutionalising the violences of modern life. At any rate, Adorno's aesthetic reflections in general have proven helpful in clarifying the focus followed and conclusions reached in this thesis: from his understanding that in “an age of incomprehensible horror... the truth is concrete”<sup>46</sup> to his ethically charged identification of modernity's “loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people, too”,<sup>47</sup> as well as his stringently persuasive emphasis that “one paints a painting, not what it represents”.<sup>48</sup> As we've seen even in the discussion so far, the same clear-eyed dedication to the materiality of disregarded (or imperilled) lives and experiences, along with a simultaneous and unwavering awareness of aesthetic form, pervades Williams's poetics –

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<sup>45</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Commitment”, eds., Andrew Arato, Eike Gebhardt, *The Frankfurt School Reader* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 300-318.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, 1997), pp. 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> Adorno, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (Verso: London, 1951/1974/2005), p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 4.

one dualism among many that can be seen in the work of both authors.

However, if some of the central critical tenets from Adorno's writings ostensibly cast light on Williams's understanding of the role of literature and the literary artist in modern society, Adorno's total outlook is arguably more elitist than Williams – for all the passionate self-certitude of his literary praxis – could plausibly sanction. Of course, and as this analysis indicates, Williams himself shows symptoms of literary and intellectual self-importance, easily and often – a factor which does little to dilute his dislike for academicised discourses and institutions that smack of the same. Yet what seems predominantly like a penchant for impulsive provocation on Williams's part manifests itself in Adorno's work as an intractable view of social relations. “If written language codifies the estrangement of classes, redress [is possible] only in the consistent exercise of strictest linguistic objectivity”, Adorno asserts, before adding the somewhat disdainful observation that, by contrast, the “poor chew words to fill their bellies” and “maim the body of language” with their speech –<sup>49</sup> a declaration that stands in clear contradistinction to Williams's praxis. Likewise, Adorno's contention that “all efforts to restore art by giving it a social function [are] doomed” moves in an opposing direction to what is perhaps Williams's most consistent, if occasionally opaque, creative credo: that “the poem [is] a social instrument”, as he writes to one correspondent (*SL* 286), and fulfils this function precisely in its ability to mediate the materiality of lived experience in aesthetic terms.<sup>50</sup> What Adorno, in analytic mode, views as an irreconcilable tension at the heart of aesthetic creation, Williams deploys as a precondition of his creative practice.

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<sup>49</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 102.

<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 4.



On the matter of political ideology – rather than social outlook – Adorno's adaptation of a self-consciously dialectical mode of critique would also appear to distinguish his aims and methods from those of Williams, who expresses his opposition to the Marxist world-view – which represents, for him, “the regimentation of thought and action” (*SL* 157). And yet, if Williams is keen to differentiate the impetus of his poetry from the prerogatives of Marxism – “I am not”, he asserts, “a Marxian” (*SL* 259) – then as this thesis demonstrates, he nevertheless writes of the scenes and characters from his locale with a sharp understanding of the radical discourses available for the classification of such experiences. Williams's “Proletarian Portrait” may service a relevant example here – suggesting that his consciousness of such discourses is often made manifest at the level of tone and form (and in this case, title), rather than in terms of overt rhetorical engagement. Williams's approach is aesthetic more than jargonistic, as we can see in the the entwined imagistic elegance and political feist of this piece – and particularly in the (underappreciated) wryness of its first line-break: “A big young bareheaded woman / in an apron....” (*CP I* 384). The poem is self-aware in its enquiry not just into the reality of class (or “Proletarian”) experience, but into a specifically American phenomenon: that of the daily encountered, but apparently domesticated revolutionary.

The social voltage of the poem, and the very fact of Williams's documenting of such a figure, is arguably comparable to the stylistically entrancing and politically urgent descriptions of George Orwell in his account of revolutionary Catalonia in the 1930s: the people, strangers, and volunteers, Orwell writes, who have stayed “vividly in my memory”, faces caught in “sudden glimpses”, which somehow seem to contain an “idea

of what it felt like to be in the middle of the Barcelona” at the time.<sup>51</sup> Williams's “big young bareheaded woman” proletarian would not be out of place among such figures, or indeed among the daily revolutionaries photographed by Robert Capa in the same conflict – although never (and here lies the crux of Williams's social insight) “in an apron” (*CP I* 383). “The bourgeois [is] tolerant. His love of people as they are stems from his hatred of what they might be”, Adorno writes;<sup>52</sup> and yet often what is most remarkable about Williams's social portraits is his affectionate identification of both states, as well as his insistent belief that in the very physicality of their disenfranchisement may lie the political promise of his social subjects – as we see in the closing gesture of the piece above, when the woman is described, with both literalistic precision and parabolic force, reaching into her shoe to remove “the nail / That has been hurting her” (*CP I* 384).

The comparison of Williams with Orwell is useful not only in foregrounding the invariably social and critical engagements that undergird the literary style of both writers, but also once again in highlighting the limitations of such an aesthetic. The problem of an aloof, occasionally self-admiring style of social observation that one critic has identified with Orwell's work is equally apparent in Williams's characteristic method of literary portraiture:

In thinking, from his position, of the working class primarily as a class, [Orwell] assumed too readily that observation of particular working-class people was an observation of all working-class behaviour...his principal failure was inevitable: he observed what was evident, the external factors, and only guessed at what was not evident, the inherent patterns of feeling. This failure is most obvious in its consequences: that he did come to think, half against his will, that the working people were really helpless, that they could never finally help themselves.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> George Orwell, ed., P. H. Davison, *The Complete Works of George Orwell: Homage to Catalonia* (London, 1938/98), pp. 2-3.

<sup>52</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London, 1958/1993), p. 292-93.

In his inarguably vivid portrayals of working-class life, Williams also can be at times too keen – to adopt a formulation of his contemporary and friend, Wallace Stevens – to “let be be finale of seem”, a pattern repeated in matters of racial and gendered difference (from himself), as this thesis outlines. In this respect, Williams in particular may resemble the “flâneur” famously described and theorised by Walter Benjamin: that figure of modernity who “still stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class”, and who “flatters himself that, on seeing a passerby swept along by the crowd, he has accurately classified him, seen straight through to the innermost recesses of his soul – all on the basis of his external appearance.”<sup>54</sup> Williams’ presumption to see into the heart of things carries with it a number of creative implications, some of which are socially problematic, and in this sense (as Benjamin’s perspective suggests) tellingly symptomatic of the modern moment in which he is writing – as the discussion of his early pastorals in the next chapter of this thesis attests.

Finally, if the juxtaposition of Williams’s poems of urban New Jersey with Orwell’s dispatches from war-torn Spain seem arbitrary or critically problematic, we should remember that Williams himself is often swift to propose such contextual resonances for his work. In 1944, for instance, we find Williams arguing that his poems – as well as the collective social life they record – are “the war, or a part of it”, constituting “merely a different sector of the field” (*CP II* 53). Indeed, one of the most compelling assertions engrained throughout Williams’s writing is that of the violence of so-called ordinary life – his perception of the abiding circumstances of destitution, struggle, and material conflict to which he, as a medical doctor on-call, often serves as a kind of first-hand witness. As

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<sup>54</sup> Benjamin, Walter, eds., Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 10-21.

Dickran Tashjian notes, the “dark side of [modernity] was evident” to Williams “in the factory towns of Passaic and Paterson, neighbouring Rutherford. On his daily rounds Williams was privy to the disease and poverty of first-generation immigrants recently cast off from Ellis Island.”<sup>55</sup>

So in 1914, Williams may be found critiquing the proliferation of nationalistic discourses and debates surrounding potential American entry into the European war: “It is stupid to advocate peace in order to have me work in a factory or a field or a mine or a quarry [...] unless I please to do these things” (*CP I* 41). As José María Rodríguez García suggests, Williams posits an “interchangeability” between “the New Jersey copper mines and textile mills” and “the European trenches.”<sup>56</sup> “[W]ho is there that advocates peace? I have seen no true apostles”, Williams continues, observing that “to substitute war with fire by war with mud is vilest deception” (*CP I* 41). Thirty years later, at the height of American involvement in the second world war, a similar perspective frames Williams's account (in verse) of attending to a “woman with a dead face” who “has seven foster children” and needs “pills // for an abortion” – a scene William pointedly entitles, “A Cold Front” (*CP II* 92-93). “America adores violence”, Williams likewise declaims in his book, *In the American Grain*, “we have violence *for service* [...] Battleships *for peace*. The force of enterprise *for bringing bananas* to the breakfast table” (*LAG* 177-178).

In pioneering his definitively American street-speak for the modern age, Williams may indeed criticise and distance himself from Marxism ; yet his appreciation of ordinary

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<sup>55</sup> Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene* (Berkeley, 1978), p. 100.

<sup>56</sup> José María Rodríguez García, “War and Degradation in Edgar Lee Masters and William Carlos Williams”, *Orbis Litterarum*, Vol. 58 Issue 2 (2003), p. 84.

American life (and daily American “things”) often stands in equal measure as an exposé of those hierarchies of social, neo-imperial, and militaristic power on which – as *In the American Grain* forcefully suggests – the development of capital in America has so frequently depended. “I feel sure that one of the things I ought not to do”, the cautiously conservative Wallace Stevens confides to Marianne Moore in 1925, “is to review Williams's book [*In the American Grain*]. What Columbus discovered is nothing to what Williams is looking for.”

But look for it he certainly does: an America laid bare – in poems flecked and coloured with all the dirt, tint, verve and vitality of the life Williams encounters around him in his varied investigations of his place and moment. As such, ultimately I have attempted to engage with Williams's poems primarily on their own terms. While throughout this study I draw on different strands of cultural criticism, and the work of writerly forebears and followers, this is mainly done for the sake of suggestion and clarification – rather than with a view to bringing Williams's work in line with any one totalising political or literary genealogy. Hence, if this thesis references – as it does – the work of Walt Whitman and Walter Benjamin, bell hooks and Adrienne Rich, Seamus Heaney and Method Man, it does so with the aim of either appreciating the range and radicalism of Williams's work, or illuminating its limitations. Such references, moreover, are exactly that – instances, in passing, of what I hope will be taken as creative comparison, intended to complement the close-readings and historical-political contextualisations of the overarching analysis.

### 1.3 *A Note on Structure*

Mainly for the purpose of critical coherence, I have chosen to discuss Williams's work on

either side of the periodic break represented by 1939 – the landmark year in which his *Collected Poems* is issued – with a fourth chapter devoted to *Paterson*, the long poem composed over the final two decades of his life. Such a structure is significant not just for literary-biographical reasons, but also in historical terms. Given that this thesis claims Williams to be a contemporaneously engaged and politically inclined poet of modernity, indeed, the year 1939 is a clearly resonant (and hopefully, an appropriate) one: marking the juncture just before the second world war, at which the failings of Roosevelt's “New Deal” reform programme have become apparent to all, while news reverberates across America of democracy's decisive defeat in Spain by Europe's increasingly consolidated fascist powers – to the despair of Williams, and other writers on the radical-liberal spectrum. 1939 marks the moment at which W. H. Auden, watching “the clever hopes expire / Of a low dishonest decade”<sup>57</sup> and elegising “William Yeats”, recasts the materially interventionist conception of poetry previously held by himself and his leftist contemporaries in the more sober light of recent (and expected) historical events, famously asserting that “poetry makes nothing happen” –<sup>58</sup> and so expressing what Benjamin Kohlmann has argued to be one of the many long-standing and “deep-seated anxieties” evident throughout “Thirties writing” in general “regarding literature's political articulacy.”<sup>59</sup>

Less remarked upon, however, are the holistic politics of Auden's revised understanding of poetic meaning – which in their demotic emphasis and aspirational democracy are remarkably akin to Williams's tenaciously held creative tenets across the Atlantic. Poetry,

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<sup>57</sup> W. H. Auden, “September 1, 1939”, ed., Edward Mendelson, *Selected Poems* (London, 1979), p. 86.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, p. 81.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford, 2014), p. 3

Auden writes, is “a way of happening, a mouth”, which “survives / In the valley of its making where executives / Would never want to tamper” –<sup>60</sup> lines that chime not only with Williams's passionate anti-corporatism, but also with his declarative belief that American verse may be drawn from “the mouths of Polish mothers” (*A* 311), his faith, that is, in the symbiotic possibilities of poetry and the grassroots community from which it springs (“the valley of its making”). The periodisation this thesis adopts thus helps to magnify the speech-based impetus and persistent ethical charge of Williams's work – while delineating the changes and the intensified continuities in his understanding of poetry as a mode of social redress and celebration before and after 1939.

As the second chapter of this thesis demonstrates, Williams's work published before 1939 consistently registers an awareness of (and a variety of embedded protests against) material inequality and what he perceives as the many forms of illiberalism in American society – ranging from the elitism and traditionalism of academic verse to the “bought courts” of America's legal system (*CP I* 384). Writing of the pervasive atmosphere of discrimination against families of German descent in the Rutherford area in 1917 (after America's entrance into the war in Europe), Williams recalls how “[people] accused me of being pro-German.... Later the same mouths were calling me a Communist... I just kept writing my protests into [my] poems” (*A* 155). In this respect, Williams can be seen from the beginning to establish the poem as a site of political contestation and critique – a verbal space in which discourses of nationhood and nationality, social formations such as poverty and inequality, and questions of literary meaning and form are together exposed, tested and refigured. The key point remaining: that for Williams, aesthetic innovation and

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<sup>60</sup> Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, *Selected Poems*, p. 81.

political response are naturally inter-related projects – finding common form on the printed page.

One of the assumptions underlying such a critical periodisation is that Williams's poetry before this year (i.e. between 1913 and 1939) may be approached as a reasonably homogeneous discursive field. The contention being, for instance, that the formally conventional lyrics of Williams's earliest poems in this period may be understood as developmentally related to the vibrant, multi-form structure of *Spring and All* (1923) and to the almost sociological mode of commentary and description evidenced in the collection *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935); and moreover, that all of these may be distinguished to some extent from Williams's poetic work produced after 1939. Importantly, to have adopted such a framework at the outset is in many ways to have already positioned one's argument amid a series of continuing scholarly discussions about Williams's work – discussions that revolve around a number of stimulating questions. What, for example, are the defining formal and thematic qualities of Williams's early published poems, and how do these relate to the more obviously radical commitments of the pieces collected in *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) or *The Descent of Winter* (1928)? Similarly, do Williams's poems of the 1930s represent a unique stage (even “a point of crisis”<sup>61</sup>) in his literary development – symptomatic of an increasingly exacerbated tension between the desire for formal innovation, on the one hand, and the demands for social verisimilitude in Depression-era America, on the other? And on the topic of literary form in Williams's work: should critics view the gestation of Williams's late epic *Paterson* as beginning in his earliest attempts to write a long poem – in “The Wanderer: A Rococo

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Rozendal, “Forms of Need: William Carlos Williams in the Radical Thirties Little Journals”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Volume 27 No. 2 (Fall, 2007), p. 137.



Study” (1914), the ground-breaking *Spring and All* (1923), or his early “Paterson” (1927) – or should analyses of *Paterson* be periodised by the time Williams spent productively working on his epic, from the early 1940s until his death?

The fourth chapter of this thesis offers a thorough survey of the formal, political and developmental valencies informing *Paterson* as a work – a topic also mentioned in the introductory remarks above. Regarding the other questions raised here (and more besides), however, the second chapter hopefully indicates the strength of the argument that while William's poetic concerns and innovations before 1939 are indeed eclectic, from a critical perspective they nonetheless constitute a solid foundational field on which Williams's later poetics are built. While many of the pieces discussed in the next chapter may appear to prefigure the formal mechanisms of the so-called *variable foot*, for example, Williams explicitly elaborates and expounds this prosodic concept only in the poetry and criticism published from the late 1940s onwards – and does so, moreover, in a new and specifically post-war frame of mind.

As indicated in the third chapter of this thesis, in the years following 1939 Williams's poetry adopts a new inflection and concern: namely, the desire to understand the scale of violence and to address the implications of technological progress that define his era. During and following the cataclysmic conflict of the second world war, Williams's urge (as professed in *Spring and All*) to discover an “imagination” that can “destroy” and reinvent “the world” (*CP I* 179) becomes re-focused by global “peace movements”; by the palpable reality of global devastation witnessed in the second world war and promised by the proliferation of nuclear weapons; and by the relationship of these to the “principles

of knowledge and culture” with which his work is engaged (*SL* 214). “The war is the first and only thing in the world today”, Williams argues in 1944, adding some years later that the revelations of “Germany's bestiality” cannot be deplored in isolation, but should be seen as “a reflection of the world's / evil” (*CP II* 139-40).

After 1939, in brief, Williams's poetic world-view alters from one of energetic engagement with (and exposure of) material conditions in America, to a painstaking acknowledgement of the forms of violence and foreboding generated by the new “vision of the facts” his time demands (*CP I* 312). “I am reminded”, Williams confesses as he reflects on humanity's (and the artist's) connection to the created world,

[...] that the bomb  
also  
is a flower  
dedicated  
howbeit  
to our destruction.

(*CP II* 321)

In his later years, Williams's compulsion to record and counteract the degradations of modernity in verse becomes tinged with a politicised urgency, as well as a near-existential will to probe art's relationship to “the business of love” – defined by Williams as the world's “cruelty *which, / by our wills, / we transform / to live together*” (*CP II* 288). By contrast, in the pre-1939 period Williams's poetics remain unshadowed by the reality of modernity-as-annihilation or the prospect of planetary obliteration as such. Which is not to suggest that his poetry during these years somehow lacks ethical or political resonance. Indeed, the contrary is the case – as the next chapter will show.

## 2. “Poetry is a rival government”: 1913-1939

### 2.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to examine the political aesthetic that Williams establishes and explores in his work from 1913 to 1939, highlighting the often subtle – and occasionally problematic – discourses of class, race, gender, and materiality that permeate his poetry in this period. I approach Williams's early poems as critical texts, which in complex ways represent, reinvent, and call into question the societal life and social spaces to which they make reference. As such, the discussion below also involves an assessment of Williams's engagement with genre and poetic form – and indeed one of the contentions of this chapter is that these last are closely related to his understanding of American democracy, political commentary, and radical commitment.

One of the intended off-shoots of such an approach is to reveal Williams's engaged attention *as a poet* to the political questions of his time in these years: from his writing contemporaneously of incidents such as the Paterson Strike of 1913 and the execution of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, to his long-term efforts to expose and criticise the prejudice against immigrants, the working-class, and communities of colour that prevails in the opening decades of the American century. If Williams's concern with these themes and issues is rarely above critique itself – as this chapter will show – the fact that they have so vital and recurrent a place in his work offers a seldom acknowledged insight into his poetics as such. For Williams, the creation of a demonstrably modern “literature” is the task “[by] which alone humanity is protected against tyrannous design” (*IAG* 189), whether this is embodied in restrictive literary conventions or in the diktats of exclusionary power systems, the poem thus emerging for him as a kind of freedom – “the

expression”, that is, of a “democracy of feeling rebelling against an aristocracy of form” (I 314).

Mainly for the sake of structural coherence once again, I have chosen to divide this section into a series of interlinked segments, each of which draws attention to a particular aspect of Williams's early politico-poetic development. My discussion encompasses: the social element of Williams's somewhat fitful break with traditional form and language in “The Wanderer” (1914); his modernisation of the pastoral mode to reflect urban and suburban American settings, as well as his concomitant treatment of gender, class, and national identity in those settings; the close association of the speakable poetry he seeks to create with the politics of corporate advertising, social portraiture, and race in his time; the poetics of perception he evolves in his early years, designed to engage both the global and historical “facts” that define his era and the material “vision” presented to him in his New Jersey locale (CP I 312). Such a framework I hope has the merit of lending Williams's early development both the close focus and the slow exposure it deserves, while remaining consistent with the overall format of this thesis, outlined in the introductory chapter.

From 1913 to 1939, Williams develops an increasingly idiomatic and stylistically innovative body of poetic work based on the material conditions (and the American speech) of his own locale. “The exaltation men feel before a work of art”, Williams writes in *Spring and All*, “is the feeling of reality they draw from it” (CP I 215), so the task facing the poet becomes that of gaining access to (and rendering artistically accessible) the actualities of their surroundings – as felicitous or otherwise as these may be: “Vistas /

of delight”, Williams writes, “waking suddenly / before a cheated world (*CP I* 405). If Williams begins in these years to conceive of himself as a modernist writer, this self-conception is in part formed by his increasing understanding of the need for art to respond to the strangenesses of its place and moment. “I myself seek to enter the lists”, he writes in 1923, “with these few notes jotted down in the midst of the action, under distracting circumstances” (*CP I* 186). Whether conceived as brick-layers or note-takers, then, in Williams's understanding modern poets will be recognisable for their embeddedness in and consciousness of the greater “action” around them. It is perhaps for this reason, indeed, as Kenneth Burke notes, that Williams's “descriptions of things” so often resemble “portraits of personalities”, his “objectivist' accuracy” an exercise in personal immersion and identification, rather than an assertion of life's quiddity alone – a point that is often overlooked in Williams studies, and to which I return in the analysis below.<sup>62</sup>

Williams consolidates the poem as a particular kind of political calculus in these years – one that simultaneously renovates the cultural traditions and responds to the often deprived social circumstances that define his community in Rutherford, New Jersey, and indeed American society at large. In Williams's early poems, “to engage the free world” (*CP I* 207), to be “a mirror to this modernity” (*CP I* 28), is in the first instance a matter of acknowledging the “prohibitions” (poetic and material alike) which conspire against such a task (*CP I* 179). For Williams, the most rational response is then to enact a kind of discursive resistance – or more simply: to “be conscious and talk of these things” (*CP I* 45). Consciousness leading to “talk”, a shared understanding that serves to articulate the

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<sup>62</sup> Burke, “William Carlos Williams”, *The New York Review of Books*;  
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1963/06/01/william-carlos-williams-18831963/>.

materiality of our life in common: this is the task Williams sets himself. And he does so, moreover, with vim, humanity, humour, and almost always to innovative artistic effect – overhauling traditional verse conventions for the poem to *fit* that modernity (to manifest it) which he discerns in the life around him. Williams establishes himself in this period as a “discoverer”, as Edward Dahlberg puts it, “word-sick and place-crazy”.<sup>63</sup>

As mentioned previously, one of the principal arguments here is that Williams's complicated attraction to the striking masses of 1913, his experimentation with the poetic line and language in his portraits of his impoverished patients in the 1920s, his championing of democratic struggle in Spain and depiction of working-class poverty and protest at home throughout the 1930s, are all diverse expressions of a common concern: namely, his belief in the mutually enhancing relationship of the demands of poetic expression with (for him) the necessities of political and moral response. Such a critical approach builds on, but also diverges from the work of other scholars in Williams and modernist studies. For example, I take issue with Bob Johnson's suggestion that “the Depression shifted the emphasis of [Williams's] work from primarily formal matters to socio-political concerns”,<sup>64</sup> along with James Breslin's earlier claim that “the Depression clearly turned his sympathetic attention to the lower class inhabitants of his native locality”,<sup>65</sup> which both seem to me to reach a narrow and inaccurate conclusion – not just in relation to the nature of Williams's poetics and the timeline of his political evolution, but also regarding issues of inequality in American life more generally, which are visible and palpable well before the Great Depression. “The poor are ostracized”, Williams

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<sup>63</sup> Edward Dahlberg, *alms for oblivion* (Minneapolis, 1964), pp. 24-27.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, “‘A Whole Synthesis of His Time’: Political Ideology and Cultural Politics in the Writings of William Carlos Williams, 1929-1939”, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 54 Issue 2 (2002), p. 188.

<sup>65</sup> James Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York, 1970), p. 138.

himself decries in 1925, “Cults are built to abolish them, as if they were cockroaches, and not human beings who may not want what we have in such abundance. THAT would be an offense an American could not stomach” (*IAG* 176).

If Williams takes aim at the violence and inequities at the heart of American history in his early prose, students of his poetry collection *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), or indeed of his early pastorals throughout the 1910s, will find equally ample evidence of Cary Nelson's later claim that:

the much-heralded Roaring Twenties had not brought economic health to everyone. Not only agriculture but also the entire rural economy had remained depressed throughout the decade; moreover, several major industries were already in recession before the stock market crash of 1929.<sup>66</sup>

Cut to Williams in 1921, contemplating “The Desolate Field” and its owner, “whose days / are vast and grey” (*CP I* 150) – or attending to “The Poor”, frustrated as they are with constant “reminders of the lice in / their children's hair” (*CP I* 159). To read Williams in these years is to encounter, on a case by case basis, the long catastrophe of economic precarity and material deprivation that follows *and precedes* the market crisis of 1929, which many communities adapt to as a matter of necessity. Hence, whereas Charles Doyle can argue that in the 1930s Williams approaches poetic “extinction” as a result of the pressure exerted by America's economic depression on the principles of modernist art, this thesis takes a similar view to that of Marianne Moore, who in a review of *Adam and Eve in the City* (1936) asserts the opposite.<sup>67</sup> Moore writes in 1936:

Temperament does not change, and Dr. Williams is not *becoming* sociological, hostile to war or vivid against injustice; *he was always all of these*. But he does seem, with time, wiser and juster; and more completely the poet.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory*, p. 141.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Doyle, *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem* (London, 1982), p. 70.

<sup>68</sup> Marianne Moore, “A Vein of Anthracite”, ed., Patricia Willis, *Complete Prose* (London, 1987), p. 345;

This chapter demonstrates the astuteness of Moore's first observation, and attempts to gauge and trace the ways in which her second may be true – how and whether, that is, Williams's poetry fulfils its own potential and expands its range of radical commitments from 1913 to 1939. My discussion moreover attempts to demonstrate in detail how both of these processes in Williams's work, the political and the aesthetic, are directly interlinked.

## 2.2 *Mirroring Modernity: "The Wanderer"*

Contra to what critics such as Charles Doyle suggest, Williams's conception of poetry as "a social instrument" can be seen emerging as early as 1914 (*SL* 286), and certainly cannot be parenthesised by the 1930s alone. A key claim of this chapter, in fact, is that the years between 1913 and 1939 *in toto* form the testing ground on which Williams establishes a creative reciprocity between political self-consciousness and literary innovation – a reciprocity on which his later work very often relies for its effects. If Williams's poetry from the mid-1910s onwards displays similar radical tendencies to – and in this respect actively prefigures – his later poetics, however, it is perhaps worth pausing to acknowledge how far his political and stylistic modernism has to travel, especially in this early period. His poem, "First Praise" (1913), may serve as a case in point.

A love poem for his wife Florence, "First Praise" seems a paragon of many of the pseudo-Romantic verse conventions Williams later reacts against with such gusto. If anything,

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emphasis mine.



indeed, the piece seems noteworthy mainly for its cumbersome vocabulary and conventional format. “Lady of dusk-wood fastnesses”, the poem begins:

Thou art my Lady.  
I have known the crisp, splintering leaf-tread with thee on before,  
White, slender through green saplings;  
I have lain by thee on the brown forest floor  
Beside thee, my lady.

(CP I 4)

Williams goes on to describe his “Lady” on a riverbank, where, he observes without any apparent guile or humour: “thousand the freshets are crowded like peasants to a fair”,

Clear-skinned, wild from seclusion  
They jostle white-armed down the tent-bordered thoroughfare  
Praising my Lady.

(CP I 4-5)

In its quaint formality and archaic language, the poem is bizarrely representative of the work compiled in Williams's *The Tempers* (1913) – a book that contains little to no trace of the form-resistant poetic portraits or the class consciously modern pastorals to come (and for which his collection *Al Que Quiere!* four years later, for example, is famed). It is exactly for this reason, however, that an appreciation of Williams's radicalism as a poet must begin with the changes his work effects in the 1910s rather than in a later period of his career, such as the 1930s.

Williams's break with formal conventions evolves rapidly and decisively in these years – a process quite crucially paralleled by (if not to some extent dependent on) a fundamental thematic shift in his work. By 1914 Williams can be found contextualising his romantic emotions by “thinking / Of the freezing poor” of Rutherford (CP I 49), rather than conjuring quasi-medievalist images of “peasants [at] a fair” (CP I 4), as in the piece

above. The newfound modernity of Williams's verse, in other words, is accompanied by a vividness and contemporaneity of political perception – and this is a vital part of its meaning.

Among Williams's early works, his long poem, “The Wanderer: A Rococo Study” (1914) perhaps offers the clearest indication of this nascent modernism in progress – and sometimes, in regress. It is telling, for example, that the oft-quoted question Williams poses in the poem, “How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?”, is prefaced by what is almost a pastiche of Whitman's “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”.<sup>69</sup> “Flow on, river!”, Whitman proclaims,<sup>70</sup> an exhortation echoed by Williams here: “Stand forth, river!” (*CP I 27*). In like fashion, observing “the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east”, Whitman in the earlier poem calls out to future generations of writers and travellers: “Just as you are refreshed by the gladness of the river, and the bright flow, I was refreshed.”<sup>71</sup> Williams attempts to answer the situation and project of so iconic an address, albeit to little avail – achieving a stilted reverie of artistic purpose, in place of what in Whitman's piece is a rhythmic and time-expansive vision of democratic transit. Williams writes:

But one day crossing the ferry  
With the great towers of Manhattan before me,  
Out at the prow with the sea-wind blowing  
I had been wearying many questions  
Which she had put on to try me:  
How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?

(*CP I 27-8*)

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<sup>69</sup> Perhaps affirming Wendell Berry's suggestion that Williams's “need to go beyond the example of Whitman is just as significant as his need to dispense with traditional English prosody”; Berry, “The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford”, *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 39 No. 6 (November/December, 2010), p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, ed., Kaplan *Poetry and Prose* (New York, 1982), p. 312.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

Here and throughout, the poem is burdened by Williams's imitative debt to both Whitman and Keats – a feature of his early work in general – resulting in a sententious tone as well as a narrative structure that often seems at odds with the authenticity of the poetic vision desired. The poem thus organises itself around the movements and dictates of a somewhat fanciful muse figure – an amalgamation of Williams's grandmother with a number of motifs symbolising the degradations of modernity: a “Great Queen”, “Indiscriminate reveller in all ages”, “Knower of all fires out of the bodies / of all men”, who is synonymous by turns with “the filthy Passaic” river and poetry itself (*CP I* 30-35).

However, if Williams displays an apparent penchant for mutually ill-fitted tropes of modernity and Romantic verse in “The Wanderer”, the poem is nonetheless significant for the considerable space it accords to the near-contemporaneous Paterson strike of 1913 – as well as its laudable efforts to convey the texture of New York's crowded streets in poetic terms. Williams's turn to such subjects in his work may in some respects be taken as symptomatic of the times – and of his increased contact with New York's avant-garde and artistic milieu in these years. As Terese Svoboda observes:

Jacob Riis's bestselling book of photographs, *How the Other Half Lives*, had been in circulation for a decade, and silent movies like Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917) [would soon be] popular. Israel Zangwill's 1909 play *The Melting Pot*, based on his novel *The Children of the Ghetto*, earned accolades from former president Theodore Roosevelt, who leaned out of his box to shout, 'That's a great play, Mr. Zangwill, that's a great play.'<sup>72</sup>

In particular, Williams's poem may borrow from the (photographic) documentary excursions of his acquaintance, Alfred Stieglitz, in the 1890s. As Bram Dijkstra has noted: “Stieglitz's desire to reestablish his lost 'contact' with America drove him out onto the

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<sup>72</sup> Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet* (Tucson, 2016), p. 102.

streets of Manhattan. He photographed trolley-car horses, steaming, worn out in the snow, being watered at the line terminal by a weary, freezing attendant” – and so helped to alter the culturally accepted sense of art's aims and methods.<sup>73</sup>

Certainly, Williams's similar literary gestures in the early 1910s indicate his own shifting concerns and emerging originality as poet. In contrast to Pound's “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”, for example, striving “to resuscitate the dead art / of poetry” by escaping his “half savage country, out of date”, “The Wanderer” at least attempts to embrace the materialities of his moment.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Williams's verse-record of the “Rasping voices” and “filthy habits” of Paterson's poor perhaps most nearly resembles Lola Ridge's politically attuned and scatologically vivid depiction of New York's ghetto in the same period:

Bodies dangle from the fire escapes  
Or sprawl over the stoops...  
Upturned faces glimmer pallidly –  
Herring-yellow faces, spotted as with a mold,  
And moist faces of girls  
Like dank white lilies [...]<sup>75</sup>

Like Williams's, Ridge's depiction of the mould-ridden, lily-like faces of urban America's working classes may come close to objectifying or over-aestheticising the same. And yet there is a crucial difference between her poetic portraits and Williams's in this period: one that stems in the main from the material circumstances from which her literary perspective is drawn. For as Svoboda notes, Ridge “knew the miseries and disappointments of the immigrants firsthand, as one of them.”<sup>76</sup> Williams's position in

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<sup>73</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Cubism, Stieglitz and the Early Poetry of WCW* (Princeton, 1969), pp. 89-90.

<sup>74</sup> Ezra Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: E. P. Ode pour l'election de son sepulchre”, *Personae*, p. 185.

<sup>75</sup> cit., Terese Svoboda, *Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet* (Tucson, 2016), p. 101.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

“The Wanderer”, however, appears to remain that of a spectator-on-call.

Trawling the “tense air” of Paterson and “enjoying the dusty fight!”, Williams thus describes a “short bread-line” of desperate, striking workers – as if recounting a revelation:

The women's wrists, the men's arms, red,  
Used to heat and cold, to toss quartered beeves  
And barrels and milk cans and crates of fruit!  
Faces all knotted up like burls on oaks,  
Grasping, fox snouted, thick lipped,  
Sagging breasts and protruding stomachs,  
Rasping voices, filthy habits with the hands.

(*CP I 31*)

Significantly, the revelation in question is as monstrous and dehumanising as it is impactful – and in this sense serves as an early reflection of the complicated (and occasionally self-compromising) sympathy Williams reserves for poor and working-class figures throughout his poetry. As Cynthia Barounis notes, Williams's poems often “showcase what has been demanded of [working-class] bodies by systems of labor, sexism, and other institutional oppressions”, but also “distance and fetishize” those bodies in unsettling ways.<sup>77</sup> “Waken! O people”, Williams's poetically light-headed character exclaims, “to the boughs green / With unripe fruit within you!” (*CP I 32*) – his diagnosis of the social maladies of Paterson serving to register his own bemusement and alarm at the sights he sees, rather than mounting a critically engaged (and self-interrogating) perspective on those maladies, as in his later long poem, *Paterson*.

Attempting to reconcile the “marvellous queen” of his poetic ambitions with the

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<sup>77</sup> Cynthia Barounis, “Undisturbed By Colors!: Photorealism and Narrative Bioethics in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams”, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, Vol. 30 (2009), p. 44.

“savagery” of the American streets, Williams goes on to constellate the motifs of his poem into a meditation on the role of the artist in society – a somewhat self-congratulatory motion, which reveals the crux of the piece's contradictions. Recording the spectacle of “fox snouted” and “thick lipped” labourers, Williams rhetoricises: “Why since I have failed them can it be anything / But their own brood? Can it be anything but brutality?” (*CP I 31*). For Williams here, by virtue of his material distance from (but presumed aesthetic insight into) the workers' hardship, the artist's task has become that of identifying and ameliorating the supposedly brute habits of the masses – a challenge the poem's persona meets, as we have seen, by sharing his refined appreciation for nature with the crowd:

Waken to the myriad cinquefoil  
In the waving grass of your minds!  
Waken to the silent Phoebe nest  
Under the eaves of your spirit!

(*CP I 32*)

If the paternalism and prettified imagery of these lines seem remarkably unreconstructed, it is important to note how Williams's sense of the bread-queue in this segment foretokens his later (much-celebrated) depiction of the “crowd at the ball game” in *Spring and All* (1923). Just as the striking workers in “The Wanderer” stand “patiently, / Dominated by one idea: something / That carried them as they are always wanting to be carried” (*CP I 31*), so in the later piece, the crowd's aesthetic appeal and political potential are portrayed as mutually enhancing:

It is the Inquisition, the  
Revolution

It is beauty itself  
that lives

day by day in them  
idly –

(*CP I 233*)

“The meaning of America”, writes W. E. B. Du Bois, “is the beginning of the discovery of the Crowd” – an insight advanced equally by Williams in the two pieces above (albeit without the same sense of the lynch-mob as a perniciously American phenomenon).<sup>78</sup> Crowds, Williams perceives in general terms, have a political force that is both plainly evident and strangely disguised – a combustible combination that art (and the appreciations on which it rests) can adapt to progressive or peaceful ends.

If Williams casts his role as being “a mirror [to] modernity”, then part of the function he serves is to convert the image reflected in his work from what is “[u]gly, venomous, gigantic!” (*CP I 31*) to a vista that includes the “[d]eepest foliage, the thickest beeches” (*CP I 35*) – to effect, that is, a “clear marriage” between that which is actual and that which is aesthetic, highlighting the ways in each may be brought to inflect the other (*CP I 36*). Unlike in “The crowd at the ball game”, however, which maintains its sharpness of social observation throughout, in “The Wanderer” these frictions are resolved only at the level of symbolic speculation – one of the major weaknesses of the poem. So Williams pictures the wanderer's muse in the following terms:

She bent forward and knelt by the river,  
The Passaic, that filthy river.  
And there, dabbling her mad hands,  
She called me close beside her.  
Raising the black water, then in the cupped palm  
She bathed our brows wailing and laughing....

(*CP I 34*)

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<sup>78</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York, 2007 / 1920), p. 50.

It is Williams's ultimate detachment from the material implications of his theme – in favour of the semi-mystical tropism above – that distinguishes “The Wanderer” from his later, more critically incisive poems of a similar compulsion in this period. Indeed, in his blatant attempt to elicit readerly astonishment by blending what appear as “ugly” and “filthy” with the poetic “spirit”, Williams seems to be in thrall to exactly that dichotomy he later views with such disdain, and for which he holds Wallace Stevens in umbrage following the latter's review of his *Collected Poems* in 1932: the dichotomy, that is, between the literary and the real. Of Stevens's suggestion that he nurses “a passion for the anti-poetic”,<sup>79</sup> Williams notes with conviction in his later years: “the anti-poetic is not something to enhance the poetic – it's all one piece” (*IWWP* 52).<sup>80</sup> Perhaps in proof of its own astuteness, the same objection may be levelled, critically speaking, at “The Wanderer”.

Nonetheless, there is an abiding energy to Williams's perception in this early poem of the political circumstances that so surround, appall, and inspire him – and even in his vexed desire to relate these conditions to the aesthetics of his craft. In terms of its formal make-up and politico-poetic contentions, the gap between life as Williams finds it and the literature he wishes to create remains considerable by the poem's end – and yet the lineaments of their later fusion may still be discerned. In the same way that the author, “peering out / into a cold world”, is left “shaken, broken against a might / that splits comfort” in the poems of social portraiture that recur in his 1921 collection *Sour Grapes* (*CP I* 172), so in “The Wanderer” Williams is intent to record what he sees – and finds

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<sup>79</sup> Wallace Stevens, “Preface to the *Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*”, eds., Steven Gould Axelrod, Helen Deese, *Critical Essays on WCW* (New York, 1995), p. 69.

<sup>80</sup> Alan Filreis suggests that Williams fundamentally misunderstands Stevens on this issue, arguing that “Stevens was himself searching for what [he] repeatedly called ‘the new romantic’” in the early 1930s; Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 139-40.



himself poetically, politically, and existentially unsettled. The working classes of New York hold a perturbing presence in the poem: “There came crowds walking”, Williams writes,

... – men as visions  
With expressionless, animate faces;  
Empty men with shell-thin bodies,  
Jostling close above the gutter,  
Hasting nowhere!

(*CP I 29*)

Importantly, in this segment Williams can be seen distinguishing his version of modernity from the earlier democratic vistas of Whitman. The latter famously perceives (and invests) the fullness of life and selfhood in even the minutest gestures of the figures he describes. “[W]hat is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face”, Whitman writes, “Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you”.<sup>81</sup> Williams, by contrast, offers an alternative vision – in which to be modern is to be emptied of vitality and identity, a face in a crowd, defined less by intimate connection than by meaningless foray, jostling “above the gutter” (*CP I 29*).

It is to Williams's credit that the poem accords such vivid attention to such a scene, however hollow the overarching aesthetics of the piece may appear. As Judith Butler has argued in another context – although one equally concerned with the politics of community and nationhood that Williams later engages, and here prefigures – to think critically about the times we are living in very often demands an acknowledgement of “[t]hose who remain faceless” in society. “Certain faces must be admitted into public view”, Butler writes, “[they] must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value

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<sup>81</sup> Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 312.

of life, all life, to take hold” – an apothegm that neatly summarises the impetus of Williams's troubled poetic perceptions above.<sup>82</sup>

“The Wanderer”, then, may be understood as an early, imperfect, but still notable attempt by Williams to create a modern artistic vision that includes the often “ugly” and conflicted material life of America as he encounters it – and specifically, the America of the poor and working classes. In this quality, at least, Williams's poem stands as an effort not just to explore the meaning of his art, but in doing so to reach a new, radical understanding of modern society. As the following segments of this chapter demonstrate, it is by ending the open imitation of his literary predecessors in favour of a wholehearted embrace of modern existence, and through his increasing attraction to both the pastoral mode and his own suburban surroundings in these years that Williams begins to develop the themes and shake off the various constraints exhibited in “The Wanderer” as an early work.

### *2.3 Creation / Destruction: American Visions*

According to critic John Marsh, Williams is the “pastoral poet” of note among his generation, who “perhaps more than any other poet of this period helped to make [the pastoral mode] new”.<sup>83</sup> Williams's engagement with the pastoral in fact evolves in unusual ways over the course of his career: via his poems detailing “the anarchy of poverty” in the 1930s, for example, and his return to classical sources in his 1954 translation of

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<sup>82</sup> Judith Butler is speaking specifically of the meaning of American nationhood in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; see Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York, 2004).

<sup>83</sup> John Marsh, “Thinking / Of the Freezing Poor’: The Suburban Counter-Pastoral in William Carlos Williams's Early Poetry”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol 27 No 2 (Fall, 2007), p. 98.

Theocritus's *Idyls* – which imagines a conversation between “Thyrsis” and a goatherd, whose song “is sweet as the murmur of live water” (*CP II* 268). Similarly, Williams's range as a poet is broader in form, thematic scope, and ambition than the pastoral categorisation alone implies – as the shifting discourses of *Spring and All* (1923), the choral poetics of *The Pink Church* (1949), and the epic proportions of *Paterson* (1946-1958) suggest. Yet as the concluding remarks of the previous segment indicate, Marsh's recognition of Williams's radicalism as a pastoral poet in his early years is suggestive and well founded.

Traditionally a literary perspective “that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city”, and often does so as a means of smoothing over the social divisions that undergird each, the pastoral becomes in Williams's poetry an instrument for aesthetic self-scrutiny and political critique.<sup>84</sup> “[T]his is a poem about a poor person”, Williams observes of his piece, “Woman Walking” – and “not”, he adds, about “the lovely milkmaids of [traditional] pastorals” (*IWWP* 22). Nonetheless admiring of the woman's “breasts straight forward, / supple shoulders, full arms” as she approaches, Williams positions this figure at the literal intersection of urban and rural environments – emerging against the “silhouette / of house sides and tiny trees”, her form framed to “the right, jutting in, [by] a dark crimson corner of roof” and to “the left [by] half a tree” (*CP I* 66). As such, and with pleasing literalism, the poem reflects the changes taking place in Williams's own locale in this period. As Williams's son, William Eric, recalls, “Rutherford was” essentially a “small town with farms” during his childhood, the nearby “Jersey meadows” a “freshwater swamp [with] cedar woods and springs... [d]eer

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<sup>84</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London, 1999), p. 4.

used to come from down there”, while he and his father would go there “to pick blackberries and wild flowers”.<sup>85</sup> Williams's modernisation of the pastoral mode corresponds quite precisely with (and so, serves in part to record) the general urbanisation of the social and natural landscapes he observes around him in these years: the poet's own situation serving as the meeting-point of such topographies and processes. As James Laughlin writes, the hill at the back of Williams's house in Rutherford held “a wide open view across / The wetlands” to “the skyscrapers / Of Manhattan which rose like / white flowers through the haze.”<sup>86</sup> Williams's pastorals thus provide a kind of cartological vivisection of American suburbia in its emerging stages.

Significantly, the poem above also simmers with erotic tension, concluding:

Yes, you, young as I,  
with boney brows,  
kind grey eyes and a kind mouth;  
you walking out toward me  
from that dead hillside!  
I might well see you oftener.

(CP I 67)

Williams's tone and mode of address here are again reminiscent of Whitman's, at least in that the poem stands as a conversationally inclined (and sexually saturated) acknowledgment of the mutual self-presence of poet and subject. Something similar may be observed, indeed, of the collection in which “Woman Walking” first appears in its entirety, *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) – with its Whitmanesque subtitle, *The Pleasures of Democracy*, and its flyleaf comment directly comparing the volume to *Leaves of Grass*.

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<sup>85</sup> Mark Hillringhouse, “An Interview with William Eric Williams”, *Paterson Literary Review*, Issue 34 (2005), p. 63.

<sup>86</sup> James Laughlin, *Remembering William Carlos Williams* (New York, 1995), p. 10.

“We [the publishers]”, the cover-note reads,

... have the satisfaction of offering that which will outweigh, in spite of its eighty small pages, a dozen volumes of pretty lyrics. We have the profound satisfaction of publishing a book in which, we venture to predict, the poets of the future will dig for material as the poets of today dig in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

(CP I 480)

If the generosity of address, the physical appreciations, and the iconic status of Whitman's work go some way towards framing Williams's poetic outlook in “Woman Walking” and other early pieces, however, we must also acknowledge the formal and thematic differences between the two poets – particularly if we are to gain an understanding of Williams's shifting literary trajectory in these years. For one thing, the lineation of Williams's conversational apostrophe is irregularly curtailed, each line rhythmically distinct and beginning without capitalisation – a new feature of Williams's maturing work. Although such details may seem minor to current readers, they are in fact tantamount to the artistic radicalism Williams is seeking to foster in the 1910s. “What can it matter to you what my theory of line construction happens to be?”, Williams challenges Harriet Monroe after her reorganisation of the typography of a poem he has submitted to *Poetry* magazine, in 1916:

As long as the poem in question is read aloud as intended, it makes no difference how it is written, but it will be physically impossible for anyone to guess how I intended it to be read the way you have rearranged matters... even in such a slight matter as the elimination of my small letters at the beginning of lines [...] eats the heart out of honest expression.

(SL 39)

As Williams sees it, the principle merit of such changes to poetic presentation, trivial though they may at first appear, is the return of art to the level of ordinary people, and away from its traditionally elite audience – making it legible and understandable (or

moreso, at least) to all. “We will be the great gainers”, Williams proclaims to Kenneth Burke in 1921, “if we learn what CONTACT with the Americans we want to meet means. It's a hell of a job meeting each other. It's a battle” (*SL* 46). And yet the “total effect” of said endeavour, Williams claims elsewhere, will be a veritable “social upheaval” (*ARI* 136)

This emphasis in Williams's work – on the necessity and “battle” of “meeting each other” (*SL* 46) – suggests another difference distinguishing the younger poet's work from Whitman's. For if Whitman conveys what he sees as the health and the democratic nature of his nation by cataloguing (in thrilling succession) a multiplicity of situations, gestures, and interactions from the collective life of his nation's far-flung denizens, for Williams, progressively, such a project is bound to remain abstracted from the texture and quality of those lives . Whitman breezes through the movements and rhythms of innumerable characters, synthesising them into a single, evolving vista:

The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
The deacons are ordained with crossed hands at the altar,  
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,  
The farmer stops by the bars of a Sunday and looks at the oats and rye ....<sup>87</sup>

Williams, on the other hand, particularises poetic meaning. His vision of American life unfurls at the level of sight and touch, among the compounded snow and dirt of a single street-corner:

A girl passes, in a red tam  
the coat above her quick ankles  
snow smeared from running and falling –  
Of what shall I think now  
but of death the bright dancer?

(*CP I* 133)

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<sup>87</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself”, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 39.

As Williams puts it, the modern poetry he is attempting to create “has roots. It stands solidly on the specific history of the place” (SS 70). And it is partly for this reason that Williams (with characteristic extremity) can cast Whitman as a “magnificent failure” in his private correspondence: “[he is] one broom stroke and that is all... his invention ended where it began” (SL 135-6).

Regardless of whether one agrees with such a heavy judgement, the point here is that as his own style evolves, Williams becomes less concerned with achieving an imagination of American democracy itself, and tries instead to offer a vivid rendition of individual experiences within it – particularly, indeed, when these experiences are overlooked in traditional political and poetic fora. As Patrick Redding summarises: in contrast to Whitman, Williams's “method of social description” is “one that aims to describe the particular lives of embodied subjects rather than enumerate idealized social types”.<sup>88</sup> As discussed below, and as the case of “Woman Walking” makes plain, the question remains as to whether Williams fully avoids idealising as types (including sexual types) his working-class subjects. However, from the 1910s onwards Williams can nevertheless be found self-consciously exploring the literary and social distinctions Redding outlines to creative effect. In most cases, moreover, such impulses on Williams's part play out in suburban (and socially fraught) American settings.

This is certainly true of Williams's poem, “The Young Housewife” (1916), which stands not just as an atmospheric evocation of a particular suburban presence – the literary

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<sup>88</sup> Redding, “Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912-1931”, *New Literary History*, Vol 41 No 3 (Spring, 2010), p. 688.

equivalent of an Edward Hopt-piece – but also as an attempt to parse the processes and problems involved in literary creation. The poem reads:

At ten A.M. the young housewife  
moves about in negligee behind  
the wooden walls of her husband's house.  
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb  
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands  
shy, uncorseted, tucking in  
stray ends of hair, and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

(*CP I 57*)

Significantly, the allegorical violence of the last three lines recurs in Williams's poem, "The Yachts" (1935) – in which the bodies of the masses are "[b]roken, // beaten, desolate" by the "skillful yachts" as they "pass over" them (*CP I 389*). In that poem, Williams's observational mode is notable for its combination of material verisimilitude with a mounting (and somewhat dismayed) sense of the yachts' symbolic importance, as the forms of division and exploitation on which the scene implicitly rests are laid bare over the poem's course – the yacht-crew "appear[ing] youthful, rare as the light of a happy eye" until the "horror of the race dawns staggering the mind" (*CP I 388-9*). As critic Robert Von Hallberg suggests: "Williams comes to realize that what is naturally to be desired – grace – is not always *politically* desirable, for capitalism has set political history at odds with nature".<sup>89</sup> If this is the poem's underlying argument, what its lines actively demonstrate is nothing less than the flex and process of the poetic imagination itself, social criticism emerging from Williams's blend of inward, political envisioning

<sup>89</sup> Von Hallberg, "The Politics of Description: William Carlos Williams in the Thirties", *ELH*, Vol 45, No 1 (Spring, 1978), p. 142.



and outward, plainspoken observation: “The yachts // move, jockeying for a start, the signal is set and they / are off”, Williams writes, “the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies / lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold” (*CP I* 389) – by which point the poem itself has tested its own formal limits by attempting to express such a vista in literary terms.

In “The Young Housewife”, the effect is arguably keener – not just for the poem's descriptive concision, but for the subtlety of the critique Williams elaborates against society at large, and against the artist figure. The principal assertion of the piece – the insight coursing through it to the “crackling” finish – is that the woman Williams perceives is a made figure: not in the sense of being an unreal fabrication, but in the fact that her identity is conditioned by, and for Williams is only accessible through, either constraining social categories or desiccating literary conceits. The woman remains inaccessible to the poet – sexually, of course, but also poetically and in terms of personal identification and understanding. This is because the poem functions quite knowingly as a double portrait: in the first instance, of the relationships defining middle-class identity in the suburban environment in which the poem is set, whereby the woman, as “housewife”, is viewed as an extension of “her husband's house”, while also availing of the services of the mongers who supply her husband's ice and fish; and secondly, of Williams's own insatiable sexual desire. As Irena Praitis suggests, the poem “draws our attention to the complicated ideology we bring to seeing”, testing the aesthetic line between voyeurism, which “involves watching another to have power over that person for one's own pleasure”, and surveillance, which includes “having the power to determine, judge, and

report on [another person's] adverse behaviour.”<sup>90</sup>

The poet passes, “solitary in my car” and aware of the “wooden walls of her husband's house” that preclude his own erotic contact with the woman – a contact implicitly defined in terms of male possession and access. The broader implication being that if Williams is “haunted”, as one critic contends, “by the invisibility, under dominant social systems, of many women's lives”, then this unsettled consciousness of Williams's is as much a mark of his own sexual acuity as of any socially critical instinct.<sup>91</sup> In similar fashion, the crushing image of the final lines, and the poetic analogy between woman and “leaf” on which it depends, seem prompted by the woman's altered dress (or state of un-dress) – her form perceived or imagined “in negligee” emerging afresh, and in a sexually suggestive state of dishevelment, when she stands on the curb “shy, uncorseted, tucking in / stray ends of hair” (*CP I 57*).

The woman's final “fallen” status thus appears a result of her change in sexual composure, which the poet observes but cannot himself stimulate or possess – except by way of literary analogy: “I compare her to a fallen leaf”, Williams writes, before

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

(*CP I 57*)

As Stephanie Spong has observed of the poem's close: “whether she is fallen because of her married state [is] unimportant as compared to her fate: she, by virtue of [Williams's]

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<sup>90</sup> Irena Praitis, “The Eye of the Beholder: Voyeurism and Surveillance in Williams's Speaker/Reader Matrix”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 34 No. 1 (Spring, 2017), p. 50.

<sup>91</sup> Ann W. Fisher-Wirth, “A Rose to the End of Time: William Carlos Williams and Marriage”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer, 1990), p. 158.

comparison is crushed”, the “lasting and unambiguous impact of her fallenness” in Williams's eyes.<sup>92</sup> The poet-as-voyeur remains in deference to the “housewife” by the poem's end, yet still retains a fantasised domination over her by means of the literary metamorphosis he envisages. As Susan McCabe notes in her suggestive discussion of vision and voyeurism in Williams's poetry (albeit without reference to this particular poem): “these [lines] propose a masochistic spectator disarrayed by his desires, a spectator continually putting his own ocular powers in crisis.”<sup>93</sup>

Yet “The Young Housewife” can also be understood as a self-conscious exposé by Williams of his own concerns – as a locally situated and formally loosened poetic description, that is, which nonetheless proves the inadequacy of both the poet's methods (of metaphor and analogy) and the social discourses and customs available for describing the lives that populate the New Jersey suburbs in which he works. If Williams seems at first to give licence to a patriarchal politics of sexual desire, on re-reading it seems instead to be this system of social relations in his locality (and the poetic procedures on which he himself relies as a writer) that collapses and crumbles in the final lines of the poem, rather than the woman herself, as a result of Williams's creative projections. In the last stanza of the poem, “The Young Housewife” is recognised as having been a screen for the vexed physicalities of Williams and his surroundings – yet the woman herself eludes both erasure and possession, a fact Williams submits to with a smile. The final lines may be taken as acknowledging Williams's own scarcity of literary resources: the poet compares the woman to “a fallen leaf” of necessity, because the instant of literary perception the

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<sup>92</sup> Stephanie Spong, “Transgression and Creative Force in William Carlos Williams's Early Love Poetry”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Volume 33 Nos 1-2 (2016), p. 241.

<sup>93</sup> McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 15.

poem evokes is permeated – and interrupted – by the “crackling sound” of the fallen leaves of the road. The closing image represents the compromise of a harried poet with a suburban environment that permits, but then intervenes in, only the briefest of his desired literary revelations.

In its attention to the problematics of desire and perception, at any rate, and in its nuanced navigation of suburban visualities, “The Young Housewife” exemplifies Williams's thoroughgoing effort – throughout the 1910s – to rethink the relationships between poetry and place, poet and subject, in his work. Very often, this emphasis takes on an explicitly social guise, illustrating both the material relationships that define a particular environment, and the contrasting perspectives of its inhabitants. The modern poem, in Williams's hands, becomes a means of identifying and analysing issues of social privation and literary meaning in the urban and suburban settings in which he writes.

This is evidently true in the case of Williams's “Pastoral 1” (1914), which opens with an image of impoverishment that also touches the pulse of the religious and material fissures pervading his locale. An “old man”, Williams observes, goes about “Gathering dog lime... Without looking up”, his “tread” more “majestic than / That of an Episcopal minister” (*CP I* 42). Even without the pointedly generic title, the embedded political and physical contrasts in the poem – between the degrading activity and the dignified demeanor of the old man, and between his inability or unwillingness to look around him and the poet's attentive gaze – function to reframe the scene as a commentary not only on Williams's surroundings as such, but also on the poetic mode that is being engaged. As the poem continues, similarly, Williams's speaker is presented as being part of a group of otherwise

undesigned figures, who think of themselves as insulated from the scene described – though their spectatorial role is in fact an enabling circumstance of the overall scenario – and yet erudite enough to understand it. As Williams writes: “we who are wiser...

Shut ourselves in  
On either hand  
And no one knows  
Whether we think good  
Or evil

(*CP I 43*)

This reticence and supposed perspectival balance is then shown up and undone by the speaker's concluding exclamation: “These things / Astonish me beyond words!” (*CP I 43*).

Such an apparently simple exercise in locational observation in fact marks a radical advance in Williams's work. For in addition to deploying the pastoral mode in a modern, suburban milieu, Williams sharply recognises the conflicting visual and verbal capabilities by which it is defined – shedding light on the marked social inequities of the scene, and of the genre. Significantly, Williams also identifies the potentially problematic status of the creative viewer (or voyeur) – putting paid to one strain of Williams criticism which contends, for example, that “[he] was exuberant... in believing that no alienating distance separated the writer of the poem, the protagonist of the poem, and the reader”.<sup>94</sup> On the contrary, it is Williams's subtle, self-conscious acknowledgement of such potentially “alienating distance” that generates the tensile attraction of the piece above – and the same is true of his most fully achieved work in general, as the discussion below suggests. “Voyeurism and its attendant sadism is at the heart of documentary” art, Paula

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<sup>94</sup> Kaplan, *Poetry, Politics and Culture: Argument in the Work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams* (New Jersey, 2006), p. 108.

Rabinowitz argues – a critical tension that Williams's poems both exemplify and interrogate.<sup>95</sup>

As we have seen, Williams's adoption of the pastoral mode in his early years involves the deliberate revision and critique of the poetic genre itself on a number of levels – including the situational (urbanising the pastoral) and the social (politicising its presumptions). This tendency is actually evident throughout Williams's work in this period, including in poems set in non-urban environments. In *Spring and All* (1923), Williams can be found watching a “farmer in deep thought / [...] pacing through the rain / among his blank fields” (CP I 186) – a vision as materially attuned as it is creatively self-searching:

Down past the brushwood  
bristling by  
the rainsluiced wagonroad  
looms the artist figure of  
the farmer – composing  
– antagonist

(CP I 186)

The poem, as Aleksandra Hernandez observes, “disrupts the promise of harmony between nature and culture with which it began”, and does so within a matrix of specific social (and not just literary or observational) relations.<sup>96</sup> As such, the piece retains the radical focus of Williams's forerunning pastoral work – in its attentiveness to the conflicted materiality of the scene addressed, and (more specifically) in its embedded friction between artist and subject. As William Q. Malcuit's notes in his discussion of the self-awareness of *Spring and All* in general: “what makes [this] a uniquely avant-garde text [is] that at the same time [as] it builds a class division between artist and audience, the

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<sup>95</sup> Rabinowitz, *The Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London, 1994), p. 51.

<sup>96</sup> Aleksandra Hernandez, “The (Non)Modern Imagination of a Noisy Williams”, *William Carlos William Review*, Vol. 34 No.1 (2017), p. 76.

volume also works to eliminate this division”.<sup>97</sup>

These contending impulses towards social split and poetic merging supply the principal thematic charge of Williams's work in this period: animated by the creeping awareness that his own role may be that of a potential “antagonist” to the working-class figures he describes, and yet seemingly fuelled, also, by a desire for total identification – for a clarity of understanding between poet and people, achieved by the mastery of a plainly speakable language. “Whenever I say 'I' I mean also 'you’”, Williams asserts, “And so, together, as one, we shall begin” (*CP I* 178).

*Spring and All* is perhaps a useful reference-point in this regard, in that it demonstrates not only Williams's dual (and sometimes opposing) tendencies to challenge and to reiterate social divisions, but also shows him treating of such dualisms as symptomatic of modernity. The entire volume may be understood as an experiment in fragmentation and synthesis, not least in its formal fusion of prose and poetry throughout – a feature praised by Louis Zukofsky, who calls the book (“most indigenously of these States”) the “beginning [of] perhaps a century of writing, as Wordsworth's preface of 1800 began it in England”.<sup>98</sup> If such claims are perhaps tempered by its highly limited print run, Zukofsky – whose Communist-aligned politics Williams can sympathise with in the 1930s, without sharing – sets a fine critical example, emphasising the formal radicalism of *Spring and All* as a work, and crediting its supple rhythmic shifts, experimental lineation, and “cadenced” (as opposed to “traditional”) verse to Williams's “salutary gift of quantity.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Malcuit, “The Poet's Place: William Carlos Williams and the Production of an American Avant-Garde”, *William Carlos Williams Review* Vol 28 Nos 1-2 (Spring/Fall, 2008), p. 70.

<sup>98</sup> Louis Zukofsky, “A” (Baltimore, 1978), p. 378.

<sup>99</sup> Zukofsky, “American Poetry, 1920-1930”, *Prepositions+* (London, 1967), p. 130.

The book is in many ways a provocation – at times impassioned, at times satiric – to what Williams views as a distinctly modern condition: the stifling of imaginative freedom in an era of often violent cultural change. As per the comparison with Gramsci earlier, so Williams here envisions a modernism forged from the deleterious after-effects of total warfare abroad and the coercive curtailing of pleasure at home via the eighteenth “Prohibition” amendment – effective from 1920 onwards – which bans the sale and consumption of alcohol:

The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy our world... To it now we dedicate our secret project: the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth... Then at last will the world be made anew.

(*CP I 179*)

The possibility of innovative, even radical change in a modernising world apparently bent on destruction recurs throughout the collection. “Clean is he alone / after whom stream / the broken pieces of the city”, Williams declares, challenging himself (as a kind of proto-Paterson, man and metropolis) to accommodate creatively the many contradictions of his place and time (*CP I 201-2*).

Such a process, however, is not solely as “annihilation”-prone and apocalyptic as it may at first appear (*CP I 179*). There is an evident note of satisfaction to be detected, for example, in Williams's understanding that cinema-going has surpassed religious observance as a feature of communal life – a theme, incidentally, which later critics of modernity have also highlighted. “In the thirties”, Jeffery Richards notes, “the mass of the people got their spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic sustenance from the screen” –<sup>100</sup> an

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<sup>100</sup> Jeffery Richards, “Modernism and the People: the View from the Cinema Stalls”, eds., Steven Matthews, Keith Williams, *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (Harlow, 1997), p. 199.



argument partially borne out in Williams's work:

The decay of cathedrals  
is efflorescent  
through the phenomenal  
growth of movie houses

whose catholicity is  
progress since  
destruction and creation  
are simultaneous

(*CP I* 213)

These last lines concisely summarise one of the central motifs of the collection: “destruction and creation / are simultaneous”. The same concept filters through one of *Spring and All*'s most anthologised poetic segments, beginning “By the road to the contagious hospital” and later titled simply “Spring and All” (*CP I* 183). In the piece, Spring, “[l]ifeless in appearance”, moves through the defeated landscape approaching and surrounding the hospital – Williams's literal place of work at the time – but brings with it every manner of vividness, so that it (“and all”) enter a “new world” of “waste”, which is at the same time “cold, familiar”, shocked to life:

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf  
One by one objects are defined –  
It quickens...

[...] the profound change  
has come upon them: rooted, they  
grip down and begin to awaken

(*CP I* 183)

Creation and destruction – or in this case, the desolation of life and its regeneration – are simultaneous. The poem, and the volume as a whole, crackles with the material pressure of such a dynamic, as “[o]ne by one objects are defined” in a landscape both blasted and

cluttered, coming alive to the season as to the doctor-poet's own perceiving vision – each thing suddenly a process in this shared instant of free-flung, animating concentration. As Williams writes elsewhere: “all things enter into the singleness of the moment and the moment partakes of the diversity of all things” (*SE* 95-7).

In this last respect, the poem is emblematic of one of the key trends discernible throughout Williams's work in these years. As Williams writes of Walter Evans's documentary photographs (in a remark that as easily pertains to his own poems): as artworks, they stand as the “products and remains of a life that is constantly in the process of passing”, rather than as the self-contained or solely self-referential artefacts we might otherwise presume them to be (*SE* 136). Such an emphasis is vital to grasping Williams's approach to the objects to which his poems attend; and moreover explains both the thematic tensions and the mode of ambulatory discovery his early poems in particular so frequently engage, as the following portions of this discussion make plain.

#### 2.4 *A Rival Government: The Objects of Speech*

As has been suggested at a number of points in the analysis so far, literary dichotomies and material antagonisms are the creative engine of Williams's poetics in this period – very often serving to expose the latent contradictions of his chosen social setting, and then to marshal these to critical, celebratory, even ludic effect. We see this in Williams's slightly earlier “Pastoral”, published in *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), for example, in which the alienation between speaker and subjects is both enhanced and subverted by the mode of meticulous observation deployed. Swaying between soft irony and laconic satisfaction, “Pastoral” begins:

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...

(*CP I 64*)

The poem is in many ways an attempt by Williams to *situate* himself as a poet – canonically and social-geographically. “When I was younger”, Williams writes, his task was to “make something of myself” – a quiet reference, perhaps, to Whitman's “Song of Myself”, and to his own early affection for that poet's work. Whatever received truths formerly impelled his sense of craft and purpose, in any case, the older Williams now internalises Whitman's expansive poetic creed by way of a new-found, centrifugal urge to wander free – “admiring the houses / of the very poor”, “the yards cluttered”, the “furniture gone wrong” (*CP I 64*). The poem dramatises Williams's coming-of-age as a writer attuned to the facts – the plainnesses, if you will – of his place and time: which are American and modern, respectively.

This personal context is acknowledged directly in the poem's final suggestion: that “[n]o one / will believe this / of vast import to the nation” (*CP I 65*). Williams recognises that the modern American “nation” he is writing in will be incredulous as to the worth (poetic or otherwise) of the distinctly impoverished environment he has described. And so, the poem may be understood as another attempt by Williams to redefine the parameters of American visibility – the scope of subjects his society and its literature deem viewable,

beholdable, and legible in aesthetic and political terms.

More specifically, Williams's attentiveness to the particularities of his place involves a concerted effort to investigate the conditions to which the working and immigrant poor are consigned. Writing in an era of virulent racism in the United States – one that witnesses a spate of anti-immigrant legislation throughout the 1910s –<sup>101</sup> Williams's understanding in the poem of poverty as a home-grown product of American society is particularly notable. This is especially the case in light of the sheer levels of immigration during the opening years of the twentieth century to Rutherford, Paterson, and the surrounding towns where Williams serves as a doctor. As Mike Weaver notes,

Passaic [where Williams has a surgery] had for a long time a higher percentage of foreign-born inhabitants than any other American city. Living and working conditions there were substandard; the infant mortality rate was higher there than anywhere else in New Jersey; the average wage of the mill-workers was less than 1,100 dollars a year.<sup>102</sup>

Just as Williams can later assert that the American idiom comes from “the mouths of Polish mothers” (*A* 311), so here he attends to the material conditions of “the very poor” in the belief that no-one could mistake them for an English or European “import” (*CP I* 64), the poem having uncovered a distinctly *American* reality in this tenement district to which the world's wide-dispersed working classes have come to live and labour. In this sense, the details comprising the poem are primarily evidential: Williams is daring – even attempting to compel – his heedless “nation” to see the things he describes with the same clarity that he has: to adopt a vision, in brief, accurately reflective of the times.

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<sup>101</sup> As Gary Gerstle has observed, “immigration acts of 1917, 1918, 1921 and 1924, in combination, reduced the level of immigration by approximately 85 percent”; Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2001), p. 94.

<sup>102</sup> Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (New York, 1971), p. 89.

Williams's notations in walking the “back streets” of his city can thus be read again as a calculated effort to lay bare the contradictions on which the pastoral mode itself has traditionally been based. Rather than allowing “economic reality [to be] absorbed into the natural vision” of the poem – as one scholar suggests is typical of the pastoral – Williams deliberately grounds his vision in that reality as the screen against which his persona's catalysing shift in consciousness occurs: from self-admiring insulation to one of excursion and receptive inquiry.<sup>103</sup> “[B]eauty' is related not to 'loveliness' but to a state in which reality plays a part”, Williams notes a decade later (*CP I* 204), an adage affirmed in the method of this poem – wherein the bare statement of the poet's perceptions seems enough to make such a relation clear. The speaker goes on to observe “fences and outhouses” that are:

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.

(*CP I* 64)

Of course, and as this passage suggests, there may be a critical danger in interpreting the poem entirely on Williams's terms. Williams's material ease and detachment in enjoying the cluttered vista of poverty before him may be self-conscious (and so, self-critical) aspects of his poetic approach, after all, but they also call into question the efficacy of the political insight and the generic redress the poem otherwise seeks to enact. As such, Williams may be seen again to exhibit those traits of Benjamin's “flâneur”: the leisured man who finds in the streets of his city “the dwelling place of the collective”, that

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<sup>103</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City* (London, 1972), p. 26.

“eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being”, which “in the space between the building fronts [...] experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls”.<sup>104</sup> Like Williams, the flâneur is as fascinated with the bric-a-brac of modern commodity (and urban) culture as he is insulated from the harsh and exploitative conditions which give rise to it – a figure, in Benjamin's terms, who attempts to solve the inauthenticity and alienation of his own existence by repeated passage through the hall of mirrors, the many conflicting surfaces, of the metropolis.

Such an interpretation is persuasive, at least in the sense that the typical speaker in Williams's early poems is both immersed in and fundamentally isolated from the urban environment that draws his attentions – so that the city does indeed seem, as Benjamin puts it, to “[open] up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room.”<sup>105</sup> The anonymous man who chooses to “walk back streets / admiring the houses / of the very poor” (*CP I* 64) is the same as (or similar to) the one who returns to the shelter of his private home, and sings softly to himself while protected from view in his “north room”, “I am lonely, lonely. / I was born to be lonely, / I am best so!” (*CP I* 86-87). “His living room is a box in the theater of the world”, Benjamin summarises, one from which a poet like Williams might ask (from his recently recovered solitude): “Who shall say I am not / the happy genius of my household?” (*CP I* 87).<sup>106</sup>

The same figure (and problematic figuration) recurs throughout Williams's work. “It's the anarchy of poverty / delights me”, Williams can declare in a later piece – a statement that

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<sup>104</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 423.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

appears to undercut the poem's subsequent critique of mass impoverishment in a nation that espouses freedom and material plentitude, as the “fences” of “the poor” show up the poet's supposedly “unfenced // age”, standing “enclosing nothing at all” (*CP I* 452-3). Repeatedly, Williams establishes an art of radical attention – one that is attuned to the conditions of economic inequality around him – and yet also seems to demean such a procedure by normalising his personas' capacity to draw pleasure from exactly these. As one critic has suggested of his attitude to physical hardship in general, Williams seems “to register the complaints of the working class [but] at the same time to frame their antagonisms in terms that would not unreservedly empower them” – and which even on occasion undermine their legitimacy.<sup>107</sup>

There is evident merit in this line of inquiry. And yet, in the case of “Pastoral” at least, Williams's procedures of political and poetic envisioning are perhaps more nuanced than such criticism allows. In the poem above, as we have seen, Williams indicates that if his persona is “fortunate” the houses will appear “properly weathered”, even anarchic (as his later piece will celebrate), and that this will please him best of all. Williams's proviso, however, may not necessarily refer to his persona's good fortune and social standing, but rather may serve as a conscious acknowledgement of the extent to which any person's circumstances and habitual environment will condition their sense of the new, the normal, and the poetically praise-worthy. Williams's expression of pleasure, in other words, may relate more to his realisation that a new vision has been discovered – a fresh way of seeing the life around him – than to his own bourgeois bias, delighting in a poverty to which he is unaccustomed.

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<sup>107</sup> Brian Brodhead Glaser, “Critical Portraits: Working-Class Corpeality in Williams's Poems of the 1930s”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall, 2007), p. 125.

This uncovered clarity of perception Williams celebrates in the poem – the mode of poetic seeing he tests and enjoys – is itself a symptom of that pervasive material consciousness the piece as a whole advocates. It's possible that nobody will regard Williams's itemising impulse among the back alleyways as being “of vast import / to the nation” (*CP I* 204), and yet the irony articulated in the final lines stems from Williams's indication throughout that, given the poem's own stance and example, the very opposite may be true.

The objects Williams has just described may be signs of deprivation and vulgarity to some, but they also represent a commonality of experience to many – their very vividness and visibility a proof of their poetic worth. As Ron Callan suggests (albeit without exploring the social implications of Williams's work), the “critical act [in these poems] is not simply to be or not to be figurative, but to engender a field of action where objects can meet without hierarchical implications”.<sup>108</sup> Or as Williams himself puts it elsewhere: the “only human value of anything, writing included, is intense vision of the facts” (*CP I* 312) – a credo the poem fulfils in abundance. “If I talk to things / Do not flatter yourself / That I am mad”, Williams writes in another piece from this period, “Rather realize yourself / To be deaf” – affirming that openness to sensory experience, and to the factuality of his own environment, implicitly demanded in “Pastoral” above (*CP I* 45).

If Williams's speaker in the 1917 piece may not quite have managed to “make something” of himself over the course of the poem (*CP I* 203), he perhaps goes farther by directing his poetic and sense perceptions to the “things” distinguishing the imperfectly fashioned tenement district he had previously ignored – a material structure left knowingly in

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<sup>108</sup> Callan, *William Carlos Williams and Transcendentalism* (London, 1992), p. 134.



decline, but pulsing, too, with vitality and colour. The moral of Williams's supposedly casual traverse of his city (if there is one) may be that the impoverished conditions in which America's immigrant poor are living, and the neglect with which these conditions are treated by the other townspeople of Williams's locale, are dual indicators of the kind of nation, and the kind of community, the modern poem must be galvanised to represent.

As Williams contends:

... the American addition to world culture will always be the 'new', in opposition to an 'old' represented by Europe. But that isn't satisfactory. What it is actually is something much deeper: a relation to the immediate conditions of the matter in hand, and a determination to assert them in opposition to an intermediate authority.

(SE 143)

For Williams, the intermediate authorities to which artists must oppose “the immediate conditions” of their place and time, are borne out by the socially regressive mores of his well-heeled fellow “townspeople” and in the blinkered standards of contemporary academic verse – both of which either disdain or exclude the material life that so impresses the speakers of the poems above. Williams in fact states such targets explicitly in his *Autobiography*, declaring that the modern poem stands as “a basic agent in putting pressure on the blackguards who compel servitude, abetted by the various English departments of 'the university' with their 'sacred' regard for a debased precedent” (A 341). Proof once more, it seems, that recording the material reality and recalibrating the poetic language of American life – the political and the aesthetic – are for Williams one and the same task.

Significantly, Williams deploys images of urban and suburban life in America as a counterweight to established discourses of national identity throughout his poetry in this

period. Twenty years after “Pastoral”, for example, in his piece “The Middle”, Williams casts a skeptical eye on the various incongruities at play during a summertime commemorative event. The “red white and / blue hangs / motionless”, Williams writes, while “a brass band” performs

and the children  
that paraded

the blistering streets  
are giving lustily  
to the memory  
of our war dead.

(*CP I 456*)

Rather than join in the patriotic occasion, however, Williams's persona considers exiting the scene, as in “Pastoral”, to glean politico-poetic insight instead from the homes of “the sick”, who remain ordinary and unobserved “among / the foliage [of] / infection” (*CP I 456*). “Remain and listen”, Williams muses,

... or  
use up the time  
perhaps  
among the side streets

watching the elms  
and rhododendrons the  
peonies and  
changeless laurels

(*CP I 456*)

If Williams seems to convert a vista of social and physical malady into a politically evasive vision of natural persistence in this instance, the poem is nevertheless instructive for the tension it posits between poverty and patriotism in the life of Williams's community – and in its willingness to open these to scrutiny. Williams elaborates such a thematic counterpoint throughout his early work. In his translation of Miguel Hernández's

“Sentado Sobre Los Muertos” (which he titles “Wind of the Village”), for example, Williams suggests that to expand the material scope of a poem's vision is to sharpen both its critical and aesthetic effects. The poet's task, Williams writes, must be:

to sing over and over  
for those who must hear,  
all that to poverty, all that to anguish,  
all that to country is referred

(CP I 447)

Written in solidarity with the anti-fascist fighters in Spain, the translation reflects Williams's career-long interest in Spanish-language poetry and literature, and is first published in the anthology *...and Spain Sings: Fifty Loyalist Ballads Adapted by American Poets* (1937).<sup>109</sup> As such, the piece is of course indicative of the range of linguistic traditions available to Williams, but also of his political sympathies in this period – not to mention his activist emphasis in expressing them as a poet. The piece is one of a number of gestures of anti-fascist solidarity on Williams's part from 1936 onwards, ranging from his contribution to Popular Front solidarity rallies for loyalist Spain to his organisation of a local medical supply board in Bergen County for the cause of Spanish democracy.

Although certainly not without parallel among his literary contemporaries, Williams's actions and outlook here stand in marked contrast to the cultivated inefficacy of a figure such as Wallace Stevens,<sup>110</sup> and to the openly fascist sentiments (as we have seen) of his friend Ezra Pound – a circumstance of which Williams himself is very much aware. Once

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<sup>109</sup> As noted in the introduction, Williams's early upbringing is conducted in Spanish and English, as per his parents' Puerto Rican background.

<sup>110</sup> As Alan Filreis has shown, however, the case of Stevens in its own way provides evidence of the resurgence and force of the political left in the 1930s, and of the pressures many writers (including Stevens) consequently feel to make their own political commitments plain; see Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left*, p. 222.

again, the relationship with Pound is a particularly clarifying one. Writing to Louis Zukovsky of Pound's beliefs, Williams observes:

'Beauty' to Pound is a very narrow thing, a cult and his words are the carefully selected words of a slender hand pointing minute points in a feild [sic.] of interest... let him translate the 'beauty' of his present position and he might, just might, turn into the world's greatest tragic poet.

(*WCW/LZ* 316)

As mentioned, Williams later escalates his disdain for Pound's political sympathies, naming his friend “Lord Ga-Ga” in public, while also delivering his political verdict in person: that “[n]o one forgives you for what you did” (although, he adds, “everyone forgives you for what you are”).<sup>111</sup>

Such details are worth reiterating, especially as they appear to contradict – certainly to qualify – critic Glen MacLeod's contention that the “chief disagreement between Pound and Williams [...] was over whether the revolutionary modernist movement was to be fundamentally local and American or cosmopolitan and European”.<sup>112</sup> Such a view vastly underplays the force of Williams's disagreement with Pound in the political arena – which, as seen above, relates directly to his literary beliefs and practice. As Williams himself will later write (with evident frustration) to Robert McAlmon, concerning Pound's imagination of a supposedly more “beautiful world”:

But Jesus, what did it lead him to? To an attempt to condone Hitler, to a completely unfeeling attitude toward the Spanish rebels, to real joy at the thought of Russians slaughtered by the millions at the time of Hitler's first successes. If that's the end of his grand schemes then he's a plain dupe of his own vanity.

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<sup>111</sup> cit., Richard Eder, “Splendidly Discordant : LETTERS : POUND / WILLIAMS”, *L. A. Times* (March 31, 1996), [http://articles.latimes.com/1996-03-31/books/bk-53098\\_1\\_william-carlos-williams](http://articles.latimes.com/1996-03-31/books/bk-53098_1_william-carlos-williams) (accessed 25/07/18).

<sup>112</sup> Glen MacLeod, “Williams Carlos Williams and his contemporaries”, ed., MacGowan, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 26.

(SL 213)

Aside from providing a concise indication of Williams's own political instincts, his insistence here that Pound's artistic and political ideas be taken, balanced, and judged in unison chimes with what his solidarity translation above also implies: that the political commitments of the artist hold an intimate relation to the attainments of the art itself. As Williams writes:

[Neville] Chamberlain had to make a choice, black or white, to defend the best of English tradition fighting for its life in Spain or to defend the British Empire under Tory rule. He chose the latter. This is a choice no artist could make without sacrificing his status as an artist.

(SE 211)

If such a sentiment seems applicable to Williams's poetry in general, it is of course especially germane to the piece above, which engages the craft of translation as a necessary act of internationalism – compelled as Williams feels to condemn Franco's putsch and nascent dictatorship in Spain. Richard H. Pells's notes on the response of liberal and radical American artists to the war may provide a helpful backdrop:

... the [Spanish civil] war quickly became a compelling symbol for all the values and aspirations to which the Left had given its allegiance in the 1930s. In America, no group followed the news from Spain with greater intensity than the intellectual community... Spain provided the last occasion in the 1930s when liberals and radicals could unite in defense of their most precious ideals, when it did seem possible that democracy might finally triumph, when the individual could still believe that his efforts made a difference in shaping the course of public events. Thus the defeat of the Loyalists in 1939 came as a crushing blow to the hopes of an entire generation.<sup>113</sup>

“Let my voice lift to the mountains / and crash to the earth again in thunder”, Williams declares, for “the people [have] wakened / naked and with nothing to wear / hungry with nothing to eat”: a spectacle arguably as identifiable in the conditions of American democracy as in wartime Spain – as Pells's analysis suggests, and as Williams's original

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<sup>113</sup> Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Toronto, 1973/1998), pp. 309-310.

work also indicates (*CP I 447*).

The critical point is that Williams's urge at a thematic level to convey the harsh realities that discourses of “poverty”, “anguish” and “country” often elide is also an urgent, direct expression of solidarity, the poem acting as a kind of political will and testament. “I am here”, Williams declares,

... to show my love  
and here to defend you  
with my blood as with word of mouth

(*CP I 447*)

In Williams's politically charged translation, poetry is conceived as an act of material intervention – one that recalibrates and fuses personal, political and aesthetic values. As such, the poem reflects one of the abiding concerns of Williams's work throughout these years: namely, how to make a claim for one's place in the world, and so for the politics of place itself. Which may go some way to explaining why Williams's poetic identifications in this period are so often directly responsive to the material conditions that prevail in his community:

... unexpectedly  
a small house with a soaring oak  
leafless above it

Someone should summarize these things  
in the interest of local  
government or how  
a spotted dog goes up a gutter –

(*CP I 310*)

As before, Williams's attentiveness to the ostensibly banal or vulgar details of the environment that surrounds him seems to be a matter of creative necessity, while at the

same time furnishing an opportunity for political protest and self-definition: to “summarize” the actualities of place “in the interest of local / government” (*CP I* 310).

If Williams approaches ordinary “things” that “astonish [him] beyond words” articulately – indeed, with something close to what Robert Lowell calls “the grace of accuracy” –<sup>114</sup> he also infuses the negative capability of this process with political purpose. With disarming kinaesthetic fluency, one poem thus gleans from the sight of “a green truck / dragging a concrete mixer” in the street “the clatter and true sound / of verse”, before opening this aesthetic act to critical interrogation:

But in the cross-current  
  
between what the hands reach  
and the mind desires  
  
and the eyes see  
and see starvation, it is  
  
useless to have it thought  
that we are full –

(*CP I* 333)

Poetic plenitude consists, for Williams, in a process of complex and continuing material implication – and against the background of a society in which, as he implies here, the bodies of “starvation” and the vehicles of industry are equally prevalent, if not mutually at odds. Attempting his desired summary “in the interest of local government” of “things” as he finds them, Williams proceeds:

[But] I believe  
in giving the farmer and  
land owner adequate protection

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<sup>114</sup> Robert Lowell, “Epilogue”, *Selected Poems* (New York, 2006), p. 338.

I believe  
I believe

I believe  
in equality for the negro –

THIS IS MY PLATFORM

I believe in your love...

(*CP I 333-4*)

“Poetry is a rival government”, Williams elsewhere asserts (*SE 180*) – a creative tenet given life in this poem, as each frantic interjection shows up the inadequacy of contemporary political rhetoric, while also demonstrating poetry's own capacity for communicative immediacy and discursive critique. If Williams's poems are exercises in social observation and egalitarian contact, they also expose the shortcomings of dominant democratic discourses of his day. Candidates for election can “believe [...] believe” in a great many ideals, after all, but this will have very little bearing on political actualities unless that belief is combined with “what the eyes see” (and what bodies feel) in the streets and slums of modern America – without that “intense vision of the facts”, in other words, which Williams's work conveys so immersively. As outlined in the closing segments of this chapter, however, such a critical tendency on Williams's part is far from unproblematic, and for a number of reasons.

### *2.5 Advertising America: The Language of Democracy*

As the hectic political “PLATFORM” above in part suggests, and as the analysis below will attempt to make clear, Williams's cultivation of an idiomatic and recognisable language in his work relates as much to his awareness of the commercialised nature of the democracy he's living in as it does to social inclusiveness. As Eric White has observed:



Advertising made an economic virtue of the cultural localism that [Williams] advanced... The economic prosody (if it can be labelled as such) of American advertising was the optimistic public face of a deeply complex, morally fraught underworld of global big business. Williams is as attuned to its potential as to its pitfalls, and he demands that the reader follow him into the convoluted cultural landscape of America's collective inheritance.<sup>115</sup>

Williams in fact frequently deploys the analogy between poetry and corporate advertising as an active thematic field in his work, using it as a means of extending (and interrogating) the formal scope of his work. Williams's poem "The Young Landryman" (1919) may be taken as a case in point.

Concerning the poet's "friend, Wu Kee", a Chinese immigrant living and working in the Rutherford area, Williams's social portrait first appears in *Poetry* magazine in 1919 – and so stands as an open acknowledgement of Wu Kee's presence (and labour) in a period of mounting anti-Asian sentiment in America. Indeed, whatever else may be said about Williams's poem, it is imperative to remember this context of virulent, state-stoked anti-Asian feeling in which it is written – a racist atmosphere that extends back even to the time of Williams's birth in 1883, one year after congress first legislates for Chinese exclusion, restricting immigration from China and rendering resident Sino-Americans, according to one scholar, as "permanent foreigners... a small, marginalized population in America".<sup>116</sup> By 1924, following a torrent of anti-immigrant legislation, and only five years after Williams publishes his poem, this national frenzy reaches a fever-pitch – with the pan-racist Johnson-Reed Act including a dictate to ban Asian immigrants from entry to the United States completely. As David Roediger has noted:

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<sup>115</sup> See White, "Advertising localist modernism: William Carlos Williams, 'Aladdin Einstein' and the transatlantic avantgarde in *Contact*", *European Journal of American Culture*, Vol 28 No 2 (2009), pp. 141-165.

<sup>116</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004), p. 18.

... the Johnson-Reed Act would represent anti-Southern and Eastern racism at its unmitigated worst. As Ku Klux Klan membership soared into the millions, that organization enjoined 'real whites' to defend the nation against 'mongrelized' new immigrants. The act's main author was the Republican representative from Washington, Albert Johnson, who had been schooled in anti-Asian campaigns.<sup>117</sup>

“The Young Laundryman” serves in the first instance as a reminder of such political developments in Williams's time – and in this respect demonstrates once again the socially attuned and often anti-establishmentarian concern that animates even his earliest (and most apparently innocuous) work. As the American congress escalates and codifies anti-Chinese racism in law, Williams can be found writing miniature odes of praise and social accomodation for a local Chinese labourer.

Having identified the politically interventionist nature of Williams's poetry, however – as much commentary on Williams's work still fails to – scholars must also scrutinise and assess the precise implications of the cultural politics involved. As the poem above exemplifies, even if the abiding trend in Williams's work remains in the direction of an egalitarian politico-poetic consciousness, its critical commitments can be as vexed and conflicted as they are pugnacious. On this point, the analogy Eric White discerns between Williams's creative procedures and the strategies of corporate advertising is especially illuminating.

To begin with, it is hardly incidental that “The Young Laundryman” approaches its working-class and immigrant subject by way of the supposed authenticity of his physical presence. Wu Kee, Williams observes, is “clear-eyed / And clean-limbed”:

...his muscles ripple

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<sup>117</sup> Roediger, p. 163.

Under the thin blue shirt; and his naked feet, in  
Their straw sandals, lift at the heels, shift  
And find new postures continually.

(*CP I* 122-23)

As Barry Ahearn has said of Williams's poetry in general: “[he] frequently makes two points about the lower class: first, that its members cannot be lightly dismissed or patronized; second, that the erotic dimension of those relegated to society's inferior ranks must be taken into account”.<sup>118</sup> These features of Williams's descriptive practice are arguably amplified in this instance by the fact that the poem is presented primarily as an advertisement of the laundryman's services – and so engages, in an unusually literalistic manner, the dual poetics of patronisation and erotic suggestiveness that Ahearn identifies. “Ladies, I crave your indulgence for / My friend Wu Kee”, Williams writes, finishing his description with the request, “Your husband's shirts to wash, please, for Wu Kee” (*CP I* 122-23).

As such, the poem also serves as a microcosm of middle-class identity in Williams's locale – wherein each woman is charged with (and partly defined by) the washing of her “husband's shirts”, while also being financially able (and perhaps socially expected) to delegate the actual labour of this service to the lower-class immigrant, Wu Kee. The poem's adaptive relationship to corporate advertising is the facilitating circumstance of this social insight – which of course concerns not only Wu Kee, but also Williams's poetic practice. Wu Kee's capacity to “Find new postures continually” may do little to convince prospective patronesses of his reliability as a laundryman, but it certainly serves Williams's agenda as a writer: to convince his audience of Wu Kee's legitimate status as a

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<sup>118</sup> Ahearn, *William Carlos Williams and Alterity: The Early Poetry* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 67.

muse, and not just as an exemplary figure who is skilled in his work – a dual role that a 1914 poem by Williams, resonantly titled “Chinese Nightingale”, also suggests:

Long before dawn your light  
Shone in the window, Sam Wu;  
You were at your trade.

(*CP I 59*)

Renovating Romantic tropes of birdsong and the *exotic other* to fit a local theme and American setting, the earlier piece likewise borrows from the logic of modern publicity, depicting Wu Kee and his work in a language that is both clear and familiar – an approach White has identified as dominant in corporate advertising campaigns in the New Jersey area during this period. As White observes:

As Standard Oil and other major corporations' advertisements began to outclass and displace local business in Williams's local newspaper, it appeared that Dewey's axiom – 'we are discovering that the locality is the only universal' – was also grasped by major corporations.<sup>119</sup>

Williams's efforts to create an identifiably local, speakable, and “indigenous art” in America, in short, closely parallel the concerns of American corporations seeking to promote their services in a relatable language, easy to comprehend (*SE 29*). What Williams writes of his own poetry elsewhere may legitimately be asked of any marketable product: “what good is it to me / if you can't understand it?” (*CP I 103*).

Importantly, “The Young Laundryman” is less the exception than the rule in Williams's work. Indeed, the same connections persist throughout Williams's poetry in this period: between his need to practice and demonstrate a new kind of verse, on the one hand, and the perceived social identities of his subjects, on the other. As Robert Von Hallberg notes (albeit without linking Williams's poetry to the culture of advertising as such): “the

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<sup>119</sup> White, p. 152.

characters of Williams's poems” are invariably “locateable in class terms: the poor, the old, the recently immigrated, the laborers”.<sup>120</sup>

Such observations raise the spectre of the relationship between – and indeed the social status of – the poet and the audience he presumes himself to be addressing. In his translation discussed previously, “Wind of the Village”, for example, Williams may sympathise with the plight of the victims of “anguish”, “poverty”, and “country”, but he does so by affirming the position of another class of individuals entirely: “those who must hear”, and who presumably constitute his readership (*CP I* 447). In a similar fashion, Williams's “Woman Walking” presents its working-class subject – who contrasts, for Williams, with her predecessors in the pastoral tradition – in terms that are designed to appeal to his readers and to authenticate her experience as being worthy of poetic attention. Describing the woman's appearance, Williams ensures not only that her working-class status is made clear (through the heaviness of her labour), but also that he corroborates the aesthetic claims he makes about her:

powerful woman,  
coming with swinging haunches,  
breasts straight forward,  
supple shoulders, full arms  
and strong, soft hands (*I've felt them*)  
carrying the heavy basket.

(*CP I* 66; emphasis mine)

While his well-to-do audience are not directly referenced in this instance, in many of Williams's poems the descriptions – arresting as they may be – are framed or qualified by an open apostrophe to his “townspeople” (*CP I* 72). “Why do I write today?”, Williams imagines his peers inquiring in one early piece:

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<sup>120</sup> Von Hallberg, p. 145.

The beauty of  
the terrible faces  
of our nonentities  
stirs me to it:

colored women  
day workers –  
old and experienced –  
returning home at dusk  
in cast off clothing  
faces like  
old Florentine oak.

(*CP I 70*)

Williams's objectification of working people here is founded on an assumption of at least three levels of difference: gendered, racial, and class-based. Such distinctions, of course, are predicated on a problematic understanding of social normalcy – in this case, one that is male, pale, and moneyed enough to appreciate the timbre and value of “old Florentine oak” (*CP I 70*). Williams's portrait of his subjects, in brief, also serves as an inverse description of his imagined audience, to whom he issues a contrasting address in the final part of the poem:

Also

the set pieces  
of your faces stir me –  
leading citizens –  
but not  
in the same way.

(*CP I 70*)

Williams may find little aesthetic diversion in the faces of his town's “leading citizens”, but he nonetheless tailors his poem to their tastes – granting “old and experienced” working-class figures a kind of democratic-artistic validity implicitly denied to them elsewhere, but in terms specifically designed to appeal to their well-heeled co-citizens.

It's an issue that raises vital questions as to the nature of Williams's politics in general. "When somebody writes the future history [of] proletarian literature in America", predicts Mike Gold, editor of the *New Masses* magazine, "William Carlos Williams will be somewhere large in the table of contents".<sup>121</sup> And yet as these poems exemplify, Williams's attitude to social materiality is clearly more strained – and apparently more elitist – than such a perspective suggests. "There cannot be a proletarian art, even among savages", Williams declares, before indicating his own evasive intentions: "There is a proletarian taste. To have achieved an organization even of that is to have escaped it" (*SE* 126-7).

Williams's attitude to class and culture is of course a complex one – his views on modern art, incidentally, corresponding quite closely with those of revolutionary John Reed, an acquaintance of Williams's who asserts: "Art must cease [to] be the aesthetic enjoyment of a few highly sensitive minds. It must go back to its original sources" in ordinary life.<sup>122</sup> For Williams, as for Reed, such a re-pivoting of conventional aesthetic wisdom involves the exposure (and the attempted overturning) of received social understandings – a perspective advanced in Williams's "Sympathetic Portrait of a Child", which desiccates the categories of social identification it invokes, through the sheer vividness of its attention to a "murderer's little daughter / who is barely ten years old":

As best as she can  
she hides herself  
in the full sunlight  
her cordy legs writhing  
beneath the little flowered dress

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<sup>121</sup> cit., Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (London, 1996), pp. 212-13.

<sup>122</sup> cit. Eric Homberger, *American Writers and Radical Politics: 1900-1939* (London, 1986), p. 83.

that leaves them bare  
from mid-thigh to ankle –

Why has she chosen me  
for the knife  
that darts along her smile?

(*CP* 194-5)

Similarly, Williams incorporates the often conflicted materialities of his surroundings – and as critics have observed, the physical features and gestures of the people he serves as a physician – into his work as a means of refashioning the concepts of aesthetic meaning his poetry engages. As Williams writes to Pound in his later years: for him the object of modern poetry is to replace “symbols [with] actual values”, less talking “about things” than “showing... the things themselves in action” (*SL* 249). And as he suggests in an earlier essay: by such means the poet may tap into the “genius of the American language. I mean not a human genius but an abstract of the language we all speak, which must be realized by everyone before we can have a literature” (*SE* 104). A speakable poetry based on the humane particulars of the American scene – this is the art that Williams envisions and evolves over the course of his career.

Yet as the discussion above makes plain, in Williams's hands such a project often progresses by way of the conscious objectification of working-class lives and living conditions, enacting a politics of description that may indeed radicalise traditional conceptions of poetic language, but which nonetheless demeans its social subjects. Williams's apparent consistency in assuming and enforcing social distinctions between himself and his poetic characters has long drawn the ire of attentive critics – with William Philips and Philip Rahv contemporaneously accusing Williams of “merely add[ing] the



proletariat to his store of American objects”.<sup>123</sup> Such a tendency (of commodifying the masses and then reducing their identities to superficial details) is evident in the “baseball” segment from *Spring and All* (1923) – a book, however, that also contains a notable thematic counter-narrative to such procedures, as the discussion below suggests.

Enthused by “the exciting detail” and exhilarating “beauty” of an initially homogeneous “crowd”, the poem begins:

The crowd at the ball game  
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness  
which delights them –

[...]

The flashy female with her  
mother, gets it –

The Jew gets it straight – it  
is deadly, terrifying –

(*CP I* 234)

Christina Oltmann reads this sequence as an “expression of socio-political criticism”, in which the “movement of the crowd coincides not with agency, dynamism, but with passivity”.<sup>124</sup> Crucially, however, the almost bovine conformity of the mass, combined with the caricatured identity of the individual spectators, seems here to be as much a function of Williams's own aloofness from the people described as it is of any factually descriptive tendency. Lacking any descriptive features of their own, indeed, the “flashy female” and “Jew” Williams observes can only be pictured by recourse to presumptive

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<sup>123</sup> cit. Glaser, p. 119.

<sup>124</sup> Oltmann, “Poetics-Poems-Politics: The Politically Subversive Force in Williams's Poems of the 1920s and 1930s”, ed., Ian Copstake, *The Legacy of William Carlos Williams: Points of Contact* (Newcastle, 2007), p. 53.

tropes or stereotypes. For all its searing evocative precision, the poem's identifications flirt with common prejudice for their communicative effect. And yet – in what signals Williams's abiding ability to embrace his own contradictions and expose the ingrained prejudices of the poetic procedures he employs – such problems are perhaps mitigated when this sequence is viewed in terms of its positioning in *Spring and All* as a whole: that is, directly following a semi-satirical passage which once again both mocks and engages the language of mass publicity.

The preceding segment showcases a number of local leisure activities for families to enjoy (including attendance at a ball game) before making way for Williams's tonal and formal mimicry of modern advertisements – translating the multimedia features of one promotion into print format, and then transcribing a series of soundbites from another:

THE HORSES	black
	&
PRANCED	white

Outings in New York City

Ho for the open country

Don't stay shut up in hot rooms  
Go to one of the Great Parks  
Pelham Bay for example

It's on Long Island Sound  
with bathing, boating  
tennis, baseball, golf, etc.

(*CP I 232*)

The significance of this section is in the critical connection it draws between the hokum-like exhortations of mass culture, which Williams parodies, and the atmosphere of placid uniformity that suffuses the crowd at the baseball game in the following poem. In this

context, Williams's perception of the pre-categorised spectators' willing surrender to “a spirit of uselessness” is arguably deployed as a critique (rather than a reiteration) of the banality of mass existence, especially in a society that appears to be built on structures of pacification and control, like advertising itself (*CP I* 233). “Everything is for 'generosity' and 'honor'”, Williams notes elsewhere of the dominant public discourses of his time, adding that “*it has to be* for us to get away with it” – to get away, that is, with organising American society according to “the force of enterprise”, by which money is made and goods are bought or sold (*LAG* 177-8). The result of which, Williams observes, is that the American working classes seem like “Empty men with shell-thin bodies” (*CP I* 29), while on city-streets “people pass totally blank, not even possessed by minds not their own – a mindlessness, a blank” (*EK* 114) – just as the crowd in the baseball stadium appear to be.

The radicalism of Williams's ball game sequence thus lies in its simultaneous invocation and subversion of the impotence of the modern crowd. The poem pivots on the initially incongruous relation Williams establishes between the passivity of the spectators as a mass and the political potential they harbour – political potential, it should be noted, which supplies the aesthetic “beauty” Williams so values in the scene evoked:

It is the Inquisition, the  
Revolution

It is beauty itself  
that lives

day by day in them  
idly –

This is  
the power of their faces

It is summer, it is the solstice

the crowd is

cheering...

(*CP I 234*)

The political force that modern culture removes from the mass of the population by means such as advertising – by the proliferation, that is, of a language that is both politically mollifying and commercially manipulative – Williams restores as an undergirding calculus of possibility in his poem. Significantly, for Williams such a method is not just a question of liberating the idiom and syntax of his verse from stultifying conventions – although this is of course an important aspect of the poem's appeal – but also signals an efficacy of political critique. What Williams is saying of the American crowd in political terms is similar to the general declaration he makes elsewhere about the natural world:

That which was large but  
seemed spent of  
power to fill the world with  
its wave of splendor is  
overflowing again into every  
corner –

(*CP I 328*)

The living reality of the masses fills the poem like a risen tide – a flood of inspiration that recurs “permanently, seriously / without thought” (*CP I 234*). For Williams, the crowd at the ball game thus signifies a revolutionary form of shared potential, just waiting to be acknowledged or catalysed into action (*CP I 234*). Williams perceives a renovative cultural force in the masses themselves, as well as in a poetry that can recognise and celebrate the radical materiality of ordinary people – people whose physical presence in the poem transcends those categorisations of class and conformity which they are also

marked by.

Of the antagonistic reality of such social identities and relationships, Williams elsewhere leaves us in no doubt, professing his antipathy not just for the “TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM” dominating the American academy (*CP I* 185), but also for the “New England aristocracy” and their ilk (*CP I* 271). Similarly, in response to the wrongful condemnation to death of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, by “a judge too old to sit / on the bench” and a jury of “men already rewarded for / their services” to polite society, Williams is explicit in calling out the arbitrary exclusions and injustices on which that society rests:

Why didn't they choose at least one decent  
Jew or some fair-minded Negro or anybody  
but such a triumvirate of inversion...

(*CP I* 270-71)

“[T]he rich”, Williams writes in a similar mode the following year, “are beggars,

what in the world to do but to give money to hospitals, to colleges, to laboratories,  
to discover the cure for beri-beri... What the poor wish they could steal from them.  
But they are really, if they knew it, stealing just that *from the poor*. From African tribes,  
from miserable half-castes. Brazilian Indians. London kikes.

(*EK* 28)

It is perhaps in the context of Williams's disdain for established social institutions and mores, then, that the poetic advertisement of poor or working-class figures in his poems can be read as a premonition of political power – an exhilarated recognition of material force – rather than solely a concession to the alienating social and linguistic standards of his culture. Interpreted in this way, Williams's famous image of the “proletarian” woman, who stands in the street with her shoe in hand and “pulls out the paper insole / to find the

nail // That has been hurting her”, becomes less an exercise in evocative description than a parabolic envisioning of things to come (*CP I* 384). As Milton A. Cohen has observed: “Direct action is the theme here; if a nail – or a boss – is hurting you, confront the problem directly, even if you must violate public decorum.”<sup>125</sup> The political resonance of the poem is partly confirmed in a commentary of Williams's own, when he suggests that its “particular meaning is complex. It takes up the whole philosophical, ethical, economic complexion of the day. A day like no other day.”<sup>126</sup>

Similarly, Williams's poem “The Sun Bathers” – another piece that counterpoises the pictures found in contemporary advertising campaigns with the stark reality of life experienced on America's streets – seems less a depiction of impotence and deprivation than an almost imagistic promise of political awakening. The poem hums with the physicality of its subjects, its succinct line-breaks quickening the strum of tension between the weather enjoyed and the circumstances endured by the poem's characters – giving life to James Laughlin's contention, for example, that Williams is “the best / Line-breaker of his time”.<sup>127</sup> In its entirety, “The Sun Bathers” reads:

A tramp thawing out  
on a doorstep  
against an east wall  
Nov. 1, 1933:

a young man begrimed  
and in an old  
army coat  
wriggling and scratching

while a fat negress

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<sup>125</sup> Milton A. Cohen, “Williams and Politics”, ed., MacGowan, *The Cambridge Companion to William Carlos Williams* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 74.

<sup>126</sup> cit. Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene*, p. 119.

<sup>127</sup> cit., Peter Halter, “The Poem on the Page, or The Visual Poetics of William Carlos Williams”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 32 Nos 1-2 (2015), p. 104.

in a yellow-house window  
nearby  
leans out and yawns

into the fine weather

(*CP I 371*)

As is the case of the homeless army veteran here, or of the “poor old woman” in another poem, “munching a plum / on the street” (*CP I 383*), Williams arguably approaches his subjects less as objects of pity (though they remain objectified) than as figures who are representative of a material neglect at the heart of American culture – a neglect, in Williams's view, that demands redress. Williams suggests as much in prose when recording a visit he makes to Newark to see Kenneth Burke: “It must have been the lowdown district”, Williams writes, “for we ran into 5 Sunday afternoon bums really hurt... I can't take it. What in hell is one to do? [...] God damn it. It distresses me more and more” (*WCW / LZ 411*).

Understood in such terms, the vivid faces that populate Williams's early poetry serve a similar purpose to that which he imagines for the convicted radical John Coffey in 1935: “Let him be / a factory whistle”, Williams writes,

That keeps blaring –  
Sense, sense, sense!  
So long as there's  
A mind to remember  
and a voice to  
carry it on –

(*CP I 378*)

Referring to the activist's decision “to steal goods from department stores” in order “to help the poor” (an action for which he is incarcerated) Williams also defends Coffey in a

contemporaneous article published in *The Freeman* in June 1920, claiming that “[w]hat Coffey was after was definition, a light in the dark, a diagnosis, without which no advance of knowledge is possible” (*CP I* 536-537) – a summary that speaks as much to Williams's own concerns in this period as to Coffey's motivations .

The analogy is suggestive, for it implies that Williams's poems of parabolic social reportage are not only culturally diagnostic in intent, but also relate to the general “advance of knowledge” of the times. Williams's poetic documenting of daily life, as well as his forthright championing of social activists like Coffey, in other words, are both expressions of his belief in the progress of rationality – and not necessarily symptoms of aesthetic confusion or erraticism they are sometimes portrayed to be.<sup>128</sup> The poems above may be seen to attend to the texture of poverty – and the materiality of mass experience in America – not just as a means of offering literary sanctuary to traditionally excluded subjects, but for the concomitant purpose of bringing the implicit political power of such figures (and crowds) to the forefront of cultural consciousness. Encountering this power diffused among the “distracting circumstances” of his daily round (*CP I* 186), Williams sets himself the task of crafting “a voice to / carry it on” (*CP I* 378).

As we have seen, however, the universality of Williams's poetic voice – identifying and speaking for the lives of his lower-class co-citizens – can by no means be simply assumed or accepted uncritically. If Williams's marketing of certain forms of material hardship in his work is intended for the betterment of American culture in general, his defiant urge to put himself on the side of poor and working-class figures arguably does little either to

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<sup>128</sup> See, for example, Johnson's discussion of the supposedly “striking and incongruous” vacillations of Williams's political writings in the 1930s; Johnson, “A Whole Synthesis of His Time”, *American Quarterly*, 179-215.



recognise their identities or to grant their voices a hearing – and in any case, often plays out along problematic lines of racial, gendered and class bias. The next portion of this discussion will attempt to clarify this issue further, and specifically through the lens of race – demonstrating the complex mechanisms by which racial prejudice and social critique interact in Williams's work.

## 2.6 “*The cap on his head is red and blue*”: Williams, Race, and Social Criticism

In his poem “January Suite”, Williams's question concerning his craft – “what good is it to me / if you can't understand it?” (*CP I* 103) – is both a comment on the desired clarity of language used in his poem and an affirmation of the social “good” which his new emphasis (focusing on the downtrodden denizens of America's streets) is meant to provide (*CP I* 101). And yet in the context that this question creates, the image of a “circle of dirt-colored men” in the same piece stands not merely as an acknowledgement of local, street-level poverty, but as racially charged remark: a discursive derogation that links persons of colour to the dirt, and in a manner that the old woman to whom the final question is addressed – perhaps modeled on Williams's own mother – is supposed to understand. The point arguably clarifies Williams's modernism in unsettling ways – and offers a particularised example of Howard Winant's more general theory that “modernity [is] a culturally based racial project as much [as] an economically or politically based one”, while “[to] identify human beings, to *inscribe* race upon their bodies” is “to locate them, to subject them” in an “emerging [social] order.”<sup>129</sup>

Whether deployed satirically or otherwise, it is almost impossible to ignore the fact that

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<sup>129</sup> Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since WWII* (New York, 2001), p. 30.

Williams's sympathies for his often impoverished subjects – as well as his radical programme for a speakable, representatively American poetry – frequently are hampered by open concessions to racial and gendered stereotypes, and to the vulgarisms of his day: from his references to “London kikes” in the preceding portion of this chapter (*EK* 28), to his description of a local man, “Abner”, as “a poor old white-haired nigger” (*CP I* 157). Williams's usage of such offensive terms is perhaps most jolting, however, when the tone or perspective of the particular poem seems on the whole more humane than such categorisations imply. Williams's “Canthara” may be relevant here. The poem begins:

The old black-man showed me  
how he had been shocked  
in his youth  
by six women, dancing  
a set-dance, stark naked below  
the skirts raised round  
their breasts:  
          bellies flung forward  
knees flying!

(*CP I* 78).

The old man's performance of this distant and by now almost fantastical memory of sexual arousal is both poignant and amusing. And yet the racial frame Williams places around the man, and around the scene itself, complicates its emotional current. Published in 1917, Williams effectively reinforces what W.E.B. Du Bois terms “the color-line” in American culture and society, inscribing conventions of racial alterity and racial performativity into what would otherwise appear to be an affectionate portrait of a lively elder figure.<sup>130</sup> Lynn Dumenil's notes on the period may offer a contextual grounding to Williams's writing here:

... if class conflict for the most part was muted, ethnic and racial tensions came roiling to the surface. Race riots in Chicago and other cities in 1919 signified new

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<sup>130</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1993/1903), p. 5.

dynamics in urban areas that had experienced significant African American migration during the war years. Migration to the North as well as wartime military service helped to create a militant spirit among African Americans. Both the artistic movement termed the Harlem Renaissance and the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association symbolized what was popularly called the New Negro. Empowering for African Americans, the new spirit was unsettling to whites who wished to maintain a repressive racial order.<sup>131</sup>

If Williams can hardly be accused of seeking to maintain such a racial order, by designating his subject in the poem above as a “black-man”, he nonetheless casts this character's somewhat comic “gestures” that sway “with ecstasy to / the familiar music of / his old emotion” firmly in a tradition of black (and black-face) pastiche – one founded on the normalisation of social difference on the basis of skin colour, and the depiction of both individuals and communities according to racist criteria.

Furthermore, as Aldon Lynn Nielson has noted of the work of Williams and other modernists, in linguistic and cultural terms the process of normalising racism is enabled by the casual use of words – to use some examples from Williams's poetry – like “negress” (*CP I* 371), “nigger” (*CP I* 157), and “black-man” (*CP I* 78). Importantly, Williams himself indicates an awareness of the politics of such racialised signification – on one occasion recalling an incident from his youth when his father reprimanded the family's housekeeper, Georgie, in racist language: “[t]hat word out of my father's mouth surprised me”, Williams writes, “it hurt, but it was meant to.... It had surprised *him*” (*YMW* 10). As Nielson asserts of the same vocabulary (and the racial systems and attitudes it perpetuates):

The signifier of the racial discourse has no referent in the material world. It arises within whiteness as an attempt to sustain wholly artificial limitations, thus it gestures vaguely toward the real world without ever touching upon it, though the material

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<sup>131</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York, 1995), p. 8.

effects of its manipulation are undeniable.<sup>132</sup>

In this sense, and despite his apparent sensitivity to his father's problematic use of similar language before, the designation of “black-man” in Williams's poetry may be one of the most pernicious in legitimating discourses and structures of racial oppression, even noting the protean malignance of a signifier such as “nigger”. As Audre Lorde observes, “African-Americans” seem forever condemned to “suffer the rootlessness of a 'hyphenated' people” –<sup>133</sup> a theme also addressed by Nikhil Pal Singh, who elaborates:

We might think of race, racism, and fictive ethnicity as mysteries lodged within the 'hyphen' joining the nation and the state, society and the market, liberalism and democracy. For what is the hyphen but the place of what is occluded from view, or ancillary to politics, and yet also what allows us to assemble these unstable conjunctions?<sup>134</sup>

In some ways, Singh's point is curiously akin to Williams's perception of the political valency of poetic speech – his conception of poetry, that is, as a liberatory field of communication and creativity. “On the poet devolves the most vital function of society”, Williams writes, as we have seen, “to recreate it – the collective world – in time of stress, in a new mode, fresh in every part, and so set the world working or dancing or muddering each other again, as it may be” (*SE* 103). Williams suggests that in poetry the conflicts and commonalities embedded in language at large become legible and active – and so hold out the possibility of a recreated “collective world” (*SE* 103). Singh's argument, in turn, is that as a result, language – whether as spoken communication, or as a series of verbal arrangements on the page – can function as a mechanism of political regimentation or control, particularly when discourses of race are concerned.

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<sup>132</sup> Aldon Lynn Nielson, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (Athens, 1988), pp. 5-6.

<sup>133</sup> Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (London, 1988), p. 36.

<sup>134</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country* (Boston, 2004), p. 37.

In his repetition of such discourses at the level of vocabulary and tone in his poems, of course, Williams strengthens the plausibility of Singh's claims. So in his short story, "The Colored Girls of Passenack, Old and New", we find Williams's chosen subjects alternately tolerated, admired, dismissed, or simply made *other* because of their skin colour. The housemaid – also named "Georgie" – is described as:

[a] vile cook and a sloppy washwoman but I imagine even my parents rather forgave her her worthlessness for the sheer vitality and animal attractiveness there was in her.

(TFD 52)

It is perhaps with such episodes in mind that Nielson can argue that "Williams shared with Pound the tendency to employ blacks as objects of local color, as he shared with Stein and so many other modernists an intense and highly romanticized interest in the purported sexuality of black people".<sup>135</sup> "You to come with me / poking into negro houses / with their gloom and smell!", Williams writes in 1917, "Mimicking / onto the lawns of the rich!" (CPI 64)

None of which is not to accuse Williams of insincerity when he declares that he believes in "equality for the negro" as a central part of the "PLATFORM" he advances in his poetry (CPI 333-34), or when he claims that the "colored men and women whom I know intimately add a quality, that is delightful, to the life about me" (LAG 208). Rather, the purpose of such an analysis is to isolate the actual implications of Williams's literary works from the intentions he professes to hold for them. As David Kadlec suggests:

Pitched against the widespread scientific racism that divided 'the races of Europe,' Williams's brand of nativism was certainly more 'forward looking' than brands based on claims of 'Nordic supremacy.' At the same time, however, Williams's challenge to Anglo-Saxon racialist premises appears to have rested on the assumption that blackness

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<sup>135</sup> Nielson, p. 72.

was a true measure of American difference.<sup>136</sup>

Such an interpretation of Williams's racial attitudes is convincing. “All the races of the earth mingled in the West Indies”, Williams records of his mother's upbringing, “There were the Luchetties, the Gordons, the Wingwoods, the Bryans, the Monsantos, the Kruegers, the Hurrards, the Hazels” – a list that indicates Williams's meaning: that it was in fact the Caucasian emigrants from Europe (only) that “mingled” there on equal terms (*YMW* 35). Further addressing his family heritage, Williams notes that “since they still owned slaves in Puerto Rico – I feel more southern than the southerners, and by virtue of my father, who was born in England, as northern as if I had come from Maine” (*YMW* 29): a statement that testifies in concrete terms to the astuteness of Kadlec's conclusion above.

Williams's practice of rejecting racial supremacist assumptions while also aestheticising blackness per se arguably reaches its apex (or nadir) in his descriptions of the character “Beautiful Thing” in the late poem *Paterson*. Notoriously, “Beautiful Thing”, a woman of colour who has been “maled / and femaled” by a street-gang (*P* 128), is both debased and venerated over the course of the poem's giddy assault on academic verse conventions: “your / vulgarity of beauty surpasses [...] all perfections / – it leaps from a varnish pot and we see / it pass – in flames” (*P* 120). *Paterson*, and its celebratory objectification of “Beautiful Thing”, is discussed in more detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis, but suffice it to say here that Williams's often insensitive treatment of racial identity in that poem is very much a continuation of attitudes apparent throughout his work.

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<sup>136</sup> Kadlec, *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture* (Baltimore, 2000), p. 245.

All of this being said, it would be misleading to suggest that Williams is only and always a proponent of racist identifications in his poetry. Part of the peculiar force of Williams as a poet, indeed, is his capacity to unravel almost every Gordian knot of social bias that he elsewhere seems to strengthen. “The artist”, Williams asserts in 1933, “is a man with a skin the color of the rainbow – with black added”, in the same way that “[n]o Communist” (perhaps a telling point of comparison) “should care for the color of the skins of his comrades” (*ARI* 80-81). Likewise, in *The Descent of Winter* (1928) Williams’s initially problematic portrait of “a little blackboy” – problematic, that is, in its creation of a compound noun that standardises notions of racial difference – nevertheless mounts a scathing critique of material inequality, as well as socially and racially induced aphasia in America. Williams, in other words, assumes not just a radical, but an an intersectional perspective on the question of race in America. As with earlier pieces, the segment combines descriptive accuracy with symbolic force, reading in full:

and there's a little blackboy  
in a doorway  
scratching his wrists

The cap on his head  
is red and blue  
with a broad peak to it

and his mouth  
is open, his tongue  
between his teeth –

(*CP I* 292-3)

The poem may in one sense be understood as a welcome retort to William Blake’s canonically acclaimed “The Little Black Boy”, which urges its subject to cultivate spiritual understanding and patience in the face of racial discrimination in England. If Blake imagines the persecuting English child who is “White as an angel” growing silver-

haired and eventually affectionate with time towards the “Little Black Boy” by divine guidance, Williams sees no such resolutions in the situation he describes. Instead, Williams invokes the uneasy, grating strain of racial persecution that hangs over even the smallest of the boy's movements: standing “in a doorway / scratching his wrists” (*CP I* 292).

In the same spirit, a chromatic reading of this poem instantly draws attention to Williams's pointed (and thrilling) distortion of the American flag's red, white, and blue colors – the child's blackness both revising and challenging the symbolic validity of America's culture of white privilege, including the privilege of public speech. “There was little consensus understanding of race”, Roediger observes of the 1920s and the burgeoning New Deal era, “beyond the near certainty among whites that African Americans were at or near the bottom of any racial hierarchy and that Asian exclusion was unassailable as public policy” – a “near certainty” which, here and in a number of his poems (as we have seen), Williams does much to complicate and challenge.<sup>137</sup> So, in the piece above, the boy's physically pressurised silence (his mouth open, “his tongue / between his teeth”) appears as a symptom of his material and racial situation – and indeed of those literary and cultural conventions which Williams so frequently attacks for their exclusiveness. This last context to the boy's writhing speechlessness is made all the more visceral (and all the more politically incisive) by Williams's almost contemporaneous definition of a poet as

a man  
whose words will  
bite

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<sup>137</sup> Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York, 2005), p. 60.



home –                    their way

(*CP I 339*)

By the logic of Williams's metaphor, if a “blackboy” is to speak as a poet in America – if he is to grow into “a man / whose words will /        bite” their way to reality – then he will have to commit an act of literal and poetic self-immolation, cutting his way through the “tongue / between his teeth” (*CP I 293*).

Williams's begins the piece with a similar evocation of self-harm; in fact the only sound uttered in the poem is the boy's initial “scratching [of] his wrists” (*CP I 292*): a sonic image which supplies a jarring counterpoint to the child's subsequent inability to speak and be heard. It is exactly this physical tension in the poem, moreover, that renders the “blackboy” emblematic of social and racial inequities in American society in general – his state of inarticulacy and constriction gesturing towards that same politics of materiality which Williams elsewhere diagnoses and attempts, in part, to redress. “To set race within social formations is absolutely necessary”, Roediger argues elsewhere: a critical perspective which, in this instance, Williams appears also to advance.<sup>138</sup> The “stained wrists” of the poor (*CP I 279*), for example, and the “delicate wrists” of “a / man unused to / manual labor” featured in *Pictures from Brueghel* (*CP II, 385*), serve as visual echoes of the boy's arms here, and so help to locate his experience in class terms – his state of discomfort embodying the scale of social hardships and constrictions by which, Williams implies, his life is defined.

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<sup>138</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991), p. 8.

It may be worth pausing to note that while the material politics of Williams's poems may hypostasize the discourses and conflicts of American society at large, in doing so they are not thereby constrained by or reducible to the sense experience of Williams himself. If this scarcely seems to require commentary, such a view nevertheless revises critical work that interprets Williams's poems primarily in light of its perceptual and sensuous qualities – as typified by Roy Harvey Pearce's commentary, for example, which suggests that “[Williams] must feel himself into the things of his world; for he is as dependent on them as occasions to be himself – as poet”.<sup>139</sup> Such a strain of criticism certainly has its place, but the key point to bear in mind is that if Williams can declare his intention of “lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses” (*SE* 11), as critics we must understand such an emphasis as an expansive and politically implicating one, rather than in creatively circumscribing terms.

This last element of Williams's poetics is perhaps made clearer by his remark a decade later, when he asserts that art “must have no other purpose than the roundness and the color and the repetition of grapes in a bunch, such grapes as those of Juan Gris *which are related more to a ship at sea than to the human tongue*” (*SE* 99; emphasis mine). The symbol of a ship at sea of course famously has been adopted by critic Paul Gilroy to reframe critical conceptions of American race, nationhood, and identity formation in a transatlantic context. Without wishing to pose an exact analogy between Williams's theorisation of poetic meaning and the critical viewpoint of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, it is surely notable that each author proposes a relational, materially inflected understanding of American art and American history in his work. Just as Gilroy seeks to facilitate the

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<sup>139</sup> Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, 1961), p. 339.

realisation of a critical space where “lived crisis and systemic crisis come together” and are made transparent, so Williams suggests that the objects of his poetic attention – akin to Cubist painter Juan Gris's “grapes in a bunch” – not only activate the sense perceptions of the viewer, but also emblematised the networks of trade and atrocity, exploitation and exchange, which “a ship at sea” represents in a modern, and specifically American, context.<sup>140</sup> Lisa Siraganian touches on this aesthetic doubleness in Williams's work – whereby poetic meaning is rooted in the conditions of its immediate beholding, while also implying, at the level of its own form, the much broader social and material forces that frame these conditions. In Williams's writing, Siraganian suggests, “the art object is paradoxically part of but in other ways shielded from the world”, so that he can seem to refuse “ideological critique while simultaneously claiming that art exemplifies a political relation.” Siraganian concludes: “[it] is in use and concrete relation that [Williams's] politics emerge, not in ideological analysis or theory.”<sup>141</sup>

It's a suggestive thesis: for if Williams is a proponent of the local, the perceptible, and the particular in art, he remains as much a poet of transit and inference as he is of static situation – an essential quality of his work, and one which makes the political basis of his poetics clear. Williams's literary attentions are thus not only directed to the particular “body” of the world before him now – to adapt a formulation from Claudia Rankine's searing reflections on race in America – but tilted to “recall the Atlantic ocean breaking on our heads”, a literary adage, which in Rankine's *Citizen* is reinforced by her final inclusion of a reproduction of J. M. W. Turner's horrifying painting, *The Slave Ship*.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London, 1996/1993), p. 40.

<sup>141</sup> Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work* (Oxford, 2012), p. 19.

<sup>142</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London, 2015), p. 73. Turner's painting is reproduced on p. 160.

Similarly, in Williams's practice, historical relations inflect and frame the poem itself, as well as the objects on which it initially lights. Williams's "Dedication for a Plot of Ground" serves as a compelling constellation of all of these elements, bringing the politics of materiality (and material relations) discussed above into fluent praxis.

An elegy for his grandmother, the poem begins by announcing that the "plot of ground" in question is "dedicated to [her] living presence" – the poem's central subject implicating, and drawing its own poetic significance from, the material experiences and formations that shaped his grandmother's life previously, even when these are imperceptible to the speaker himself. She was "born in England", Williams writes, "lost her husband and with / her five year old son / sailed for New York in a two-master; / was driven to the Azores" (*CP I* 104). Cataloguing her many transatlantic and trans-American journeys, Williams invests the grave-site with the tensions and hardships (some political and man-made, some natural) endured by his grandmother: she "defended herself here", Williams writes, "against / storms, sun, fire",

against the weakness of her own hands,  
against the growing strength of  
the boys, against wind, against  
the stones, against trespassers,  
against rents, against her own mind.

(*CP I* 106)

"If you can bring nothing to this place / but your carcass", Williams memorably concludes, "keep out" (*CP I* 106). Likewise in literary terms: if you can bring nothing to the poem but your own bodily senses, absent a broader vision of the world – a wider *sense of things* – Williams's advice seems to be, "keep out" (*CP I* 106).

This, at least, is one of the implicit arguments of Williams's poem about the “little blackboy” above. For in that piece, it is not just the perceived physical appearance or supposed racial identity of the child, but his implied poverty that frames the gestural unease (and the verbal tension) conveyed. The boy is “little”, after all, but this may be as much a sign of malnutrition than of youth – a possibility that Blake's antecedent piece signally fails to take into account. For all the condescending conventionality of Williams's views of “colored” communities expressed elsewhere, he nevertheless engages a nuanced and politically exploratory understanding of race here. Because “white men can't / police their imagination / black men are dying”, Rankine later laments – a cultural insight which, in this instance at least, Williams's poetic practice partially anticipates and seeks to remedy.<sup>143</sup>

The force and multivalent character of Williams's social critique above is a feature of his poetry in general in this period – which often posits an interrelationship between race, class, and political expression in its exposé of different structures of oppression in American society. Reviewing the work of farm-hand poet H. H. Lewis in 1937, for example – in what Cary Nelson has termed the “single best essay on Lewis's work” to date – Williams praises that writer's condemnation of working-class poverty (and his espousal of Communist sympathies), and does so primarily for the insight Lewis offers into the economic divisions and social injustices of American life.<sup>144</sup> “There is a lock, stock, and barrel identity”, Williams writes,

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<sup>143</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 135.

<sup>144</sup> Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (London, 1989), p. 49.

between Lewis today, fighting to free himself from a class enslavement which torments his body with lice and cow dung, and the persecuted colonist of early American tradition. It doesn't matter that Lewis comes out openly, passionately, for Russia. When he speaks of Russia, it is precisely then that he is most American....

(SS 77)

Such remarks – and the very fact of Williams's identification with Lewis – attest to Mark Steven's claim that “the Russian Revolution and the USSR actively shaped [Williams's] thinking about class in the USA”, even if his political commitments often diverge from those of many avowed communists in his time.<sup>145</sup> Something similar may be said of Williams's attitude to poet Norman McLeod. Professing that he “was never in favor of the [Communist] Party” himself, Williams admits to being “very much in sympathy with Norman [and] his social attitudes to the poor”, and even claims to have felt “that the revolution was coming [which] would bring down the socialites and give the poor people a chance” (*CPI* 542).

Perhaps surprisingly, such a pugnacious (and increasingly heretical) appreciation for the merits of class revolution is a recurring concern of Williams's poetry after 1917 – a factor, indeed, that has proven both a divisive issue and a plain befuddlement for later scholars. Milton A. Cohen, for one, proposes that Williams “did not believe in communism theoretically, or in the practical likelihood of a communist revolution in America, or in proletarian literature that promoted the revolution to the exclusion of aesthetic considerations”.<sup>146</sup> As Williams's remarks above suggest, Cohen's conclusion may be only partially accurate, and in any case is potentially misleading. As Cohen points out in his

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<sup>145</sup> Mark Steven, *Red Modernism: American poetry and the spirit of communism* (Baltimore, 2017), p. 7.

<sup>146</sup> Cohen, “Stumbling into the Crossfire: William Carlos Williams, *Partisan Review* and the Left in the 1930s”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 32 Issue 2 (Winter, 2009), p. 145.

discussion, Williams does indeed declare “the American tradition” he values to be “completely opposed to Marxism” (*SL* 157); yet critics should be cautious in letting this proclaimed hostility to Marxist dogma, and the actuality of the communist project in Russia, to obscure Williams's abiding and politically incendiary sense of common cause with labourers and radicals – in Russia and America alike. “Wherein is Moscow's dignity / more than Passaic's dignity?”, Williams writes in “The Men”,

The river is the same  
the bridges are the same  
there is the same to be discovered  
of the sun –

(*CP I* 278)

Likewise, when speaking of the necessity for social credit reform in 1936, Williams notably radicalises the scope and focus of his subject, stating frankly that “[a] labor revolution by a society seeking to be in fact classless is both great and traditionally American in its appeal” (*SL* 115). Such a sentiment of course appears to contradict his almost contemporaneous dismissal of Marxism as “a static philosophy” ill-suited to the trials and demands of the American scene. Yet even in this last point, and taking into account the frequent sharpness of his political criticism, Williams's perspective is remarkably similar to that of historian Paul Buhle, who argues in his definitive study of Marxism in America:

Marxist doctrine in its internationalist abstraction has run up against a vast tide of complex group loyalties and vernaculars... [whose] ideologies often seemed crankish, outmoded, irrational, at times hostile to class forces or even xenophobic, but they could appeal beyond the limits of class and ethnicity-bound Marxism, beyond *homo economus*, to a recurrently troubled national conscience and democratic discourse that Marxist theoreticians failed to comprehend.<sup>147</sup>

Such troubled discourses are exactly those to which Williams often, and sometimes

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<sup>147</sup> Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* (New York, 2013/1987), pp. 13-14.

brilliantly, devotes his literary and critical energies. “There is no communistic writing. There is only writing”, Williams asserts in his first editorial for the short-lived magazine, *BLAST*, in 1933 – a recognition that apparently complements his equally emphatic statement of editorial commitment, in the same piece, “to writing [...] in the service of the proletariat”: “I will write exclusively, consciously and with a purpose to be understood by – and to instruct in the objectives of my craft – those avowed Communists who need what I can give” (*ARI* 75).

If Williams seems to maintain an understanding of the writer as specialist, in a position of aesthetic elevation to the community he professes to serve, then in the long view, as per Buhle's remarks above, his ambivalent attitude to the politics of communism in America may nevertheless prove more astute, and possibly more radical, than has generally been acknowledged. Douglas Wixson perhaps comes closest to the mark when he casts Williams as “[w]arm to the aims of the Communist party regarding social justice”, although he “nonetheless distrusted the party's covert functioning and dogmatic pronouncements.”<sup>148</sup> As late as 1948, in fact, pointedly observing that in “order to serve the cause of the proletariat [the writer] must not under any circumstances debase his art to any purpose”, Williams can nonetheless be found arguing that “there is much justice in the insistency by Communism upon a literature based upon a 'peoples' good” (*ARI* 75; 184).

Although Williams remains sceptical of formal communism in his personal life, his

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<sup>148</sup> Wixson, “In Search of the Low-Down Americano: H. H. Lewis, William Carlos Williams, and the Politics of Literary Reception, 1930-1950”, *Williams Carlos Williams Review*, Vol 26, No1 (Spring, 2006), p. 84.



Russian-themed writings arguably indicate in microcosm the complex and instinctively critical outlook on issues such as poverty and class that he cultivates in his work. Hence, in a poem also included in *The Descent of Winter*, “A Morning Imagination of Russia”, we encounter Williams linking the form of physical (and existential) discomfort experienced by the “little blackboy” earlier in the book directly to the issue of wealth distribution in American society:

Scattered wealth was close to his heart  
he felt it uncertainly beating at  
that moment in his wrists, scattered  
wealth –

(*CP I* 304)

For Williams here, material inequality is a pulsing, embodied state of individual existence, but also one that ties in directly with questions of collective (social and economic) organisation.<sup>149</sup>

Williams's approach to Russia is a theme to which later sections of this study will return. For present purposes, however, we can conclude by noting that even Williams's most contestatory poetic engagements with global politics in his early years are often not so much statements of personal affiliation as such than appeals for human solidarity and sympathy. “Russia is every country”, Williams insists, observing of the poet figure: “here he must live, this for that, loss for gain” (*CP I* 306). Or as a later poem has it: “We forget sometimes that no matter what / our quarrels we are the same brotherhood” (*CP II* 198).

In a similar mode, the poem referenced above elaborates the close connection that recurs

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<sup>149</sup> See again Patrick Redding's remarks in “Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912-1931”, *New Literary History*, Vol 41 No 3 (Spring, 2010).

across Williams's work between his political internationalism, on the one hand, and the progressive localism of his poetics, on the other. Hence, when celebrating “Moscow's dignity” in 1928, Williams reiterates his much-touted belief that art must be built up from the sources of speech and meaning that are immediately to hand. The “local”, Williams asserts, is a universal in itself:

in a full sense [it] *is* the freeing agency to all thought, in that it is everywhere accessible to all: not in the temple, of a class, but for every place where men have eyes, brains, vigor, and the desire to partake with others of that same variant in other *places* which unites us all...

(EK 23)

Likewise in “The Men”, Williams posits an equivalence of creative potential between the “cold, steelgrey” vista above the “waters of the Passaic” and the “bulbous towers” that “kiss the sky just so sternly” in Moscow, and concludes that “there is the same to be discovered” in each (*CP I* 278-9). Such a concern is one of the defining themes of Williams's work, as the final section of this chapter demonstrates.

### 2.7 Conclusion: the Poetry of Facts

As the preceding comments suggest, the global consciousness and the local attentions of Williams's work share a source in common: namely, his desire to create a poetry based on an “intense vision of the facts” – facts that will define the life of a given community regardless of the geographical location of that community (*CP I* 312). “Everything we know is a local virtue – if we know it at all”, Williams contends, an apothegm his early poems evolve into a defining credo of their creative practice (*SL* 130). It is in this spirit, indeed – with a similar emphasis (if in a different mode) to his poem “The Men” above – that Williams offers in section “XI” of *Spring and All* his entranced account of local

sights and figures on his drive to work, images that (but for the poem itself) would be “auratic and unrepeatabe”, as Jon Chatlos has suggested.<sup>150</sup> Affirming “the supreme importance / of this nameless spectacle” of ordinary suburban life the poet passes in his car, the sequence thereby functions as a statement of artistic purpose – a knowing celebration of the universality of a life perceived in its particulars:

Why bother where I went?  
for I went spinning on the

four wheels of my car  
along the wet road until

I saw a girl with one leg  
over the rail of a balcony

(*CP I 206*)

“Why bother where I went?”, Williams queries, replacing navigational specificity with a vivid rendition of life at its most incidental. In doing so, Peter Monacell suggests, Williams establishes a “fantasy of suburban identity in which individuality can thrive” – an observation that distills the blend of strangeness and authenticity the poet invests in the vistas he discerns.<sup>151</sup> The piece confirms the direction and intent of his poetics as a whole – akin to the flexing of a lens, an act of attentive visual engagement with “the facts” that breathe life into a place, rather than with the cartographical details that may demarcate it. Wallace Stevens, of all people, picks up on this quality of Williams's work, suggesting that “Williams is a writer to whom writing is the grinding of a glass, the polishing of a lense by means of which he hopes to be able to see clearly”.<sup>152</sup> Or as Williams himself suggests: “[f]irst we have to see. Or first we have to be taught to see. We have to be

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<sup>150</sup> Jon Chatlos, “Lyric Automobility: The Mobile Gaze in William Carlos Williams's 'The Right of Way'” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 30 No. 1 (Fall, 2006), p. 162.

<sup>151</sup> Peter Monacell, “In the American Grid: Modern Poetry and the Suburbs”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 35 Issue 1 (Fall, 2011), p. 125.

<sup>152</sup> cit. Monique Claire Vescia, *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in...* (London, 2006), p. 99.

taught to see here, because here is everywhere, related to everywhere else...”.<sup>153</sup>

Here is everywhere: perhaps the unacknowledged mantra of Williams's early poetry. Ironically, indeed, it is his expansive belief in the perception of a place in motion – of the residues and most basic interactions of daily life – as being of universal aesthetic value that often renders literalistic readings (or re-enactments) of Williams's poems so insufficient. The decision of some critics to interpret Williams's famous segment “XXII” from *Spring and All*, for example, by reference to the exact house and backyard in Rutherford in which it is presumed to be set can very easily result, after lengthy divagations, in a quizzical inability to see what all the fuss is about. William Logan falls into this critical man-hole at one point in his otherwise spirited commentary on Williams's poem, evoking various features of the address 9 Ridge Road before asking (somewhat desperately): “Did Williams realize its importance in some blinding flash, like Saul on the road to Damascus, or was the significance more gradually revealed?”<sup>154</sup>

Principally, Williams's “red wheel / barrow” serves to manifest in poetic terms his assertion that the local is “related to everywhere else”; so it appears in *Spring and All*, as one beautifully discrete part of a “world detached from the necessity of recording it” – and yet a world which, in Williams's view, is comprised of “bitter and delicious relations” (*CP I* 207).<sup>155</sup> Such an interpretation adds a broad social aspect to Jessica Prinz's understanding of the poem in which the barrow appears as being akin to “Marcel

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<sup>153</sup> William Carlos Williams, “Sermon With a Camera”, *New Republic*, Oct 11, 1938 (<https://newrepublic.com/article/78785/sermon-camera>; accessed 25/07/18).

<sup>154</sup> William Logan, “The Red Wheelbarrow” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*. 2015, Vol. 34 Issue 1/2, p. 228.

<sup>155</sup> This perhaps accounts for Sergio Rizzo's identification of the poem as a “threshold work” between “the young 'imagist' Williams” and “the mature Williams of objectivism and *Paterson*”; Rizzo, “Remembering Race: Extra-Poetical Contexts and the Racial Other in 'The Red Wheelbarrow’”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 29. No.1 (Fall, 2005), p. 37.

Duchamp's Readymades”, testing “art/life distinctions” and exploring “how blurred or how confused those distinctions may be.”<sup>156</sup> Each “thing” Williams's poetic eye lights on may be “sufficient to itself”, “complete” (*CP I* 207), even to the extent that “the speaker vanishes as an interpretative intelligence”, and yet an intrinsic aspect of this completeness is the material object's implied status as a nodal point of congregated residues and ongoing material “relations” – as we have also seen in “Dedication for a Plot of Ground”, and other poems discussed above.<sup>157</sup> In this, I differ once again from J. Hillis Miller, whose analysis only emphasises the wheelbarrow's self-sufficiency, ignoring its representatively relational character: “[t]he wheelbarrow”, he writes, “does not stand for anything or mean anything. It is an object in space dissociated from the objects around it, without reference beyond itself”.<sup>158</sup>

I argue the opposite. In standing both for itself and “beside the white / chickens”, Williams's “red wheel / barrow” is like the rain that glazes it – one of life's most basic and familiar specificities, suddenly becoming general; the relational nature of things and instruments, and all that “depends / upon” them, made clear by the poet's glancing view (*CP I* 224). As Charles Altieri suggests in relation to modernism in general (although he does make specific reference to Williams, too), creative “[p]erspiciousness” becomes less a matter “of stunning particular insights than of sharpening our awareness of the intricate relations that give phenomena density.”<sup>159</sup> In this way, Mark Hama contends, Williams

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<sup>156</sup> Jessica Prinz, “Betwixt and Between: Duchamp and Williams on Words and Things”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 28 Nos 1-2 (Spring/Fall, 2008), p. 81.

<sup>157</sup> Theda Wrede, “A New Beginning: William Carlos Williams's Cubist Technique in *Spring and All*”, *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, Vol. 22 Issue 2 (Fall, 2005), p. 46.

<sup>158</sup> Miller, “William Carlos Williams”, eds., Steven Gould Axelrod, Helen Deese, *Critical Essays on WCW* (New York, 1995), p. 95.

<sup>159</sup> Charles Altieri, “How the New Modernist Studies Fails the Old Modernism”, *Textual Practice*, Vol. 26 Issue 4 (August, 2012), p. 766,

“turns [his] readers into collaborators” in the poem's visual process.<sup>160</sup>

Williams's famous “wheel / barrow” exists in multiple forms simultaneously: as a thing, a symbol, and a literary experiment – and one in which Williams's readers are actively involved. In similar fashion, the *redness* of Williams's poem-object – the tint of a static, invented thing, long in use but now vividly perceived afresh – fills in for all the colour and vibrancy of the world at large, as the “yellow, yellow, yellow!” does in Williams's poem “Primrose” (*CP I* 161). “It is not a color”, Williams declares in that piece, suggesting instead that it represents the flash and flow of perceptible life itself, the poet's words assuming “the form / of motion” (*CP I* 161): “It is summer! / It is the wind on a willow...”

It is a piece of blue paper  
in the grass or a threecluster of  
green walnuts swaying, children  
playing croquet or one boy  
fishing, a man  
swinging his pink fists  
as he walks –  
It is ladythumb, forget-me-nots  
in the ditch, moss under  
the flange of the carrail...

(*CP I* 161)

Both poems enact what Williams calls “the emplacement of knowledge into a living current” (*CP I* 225), and in this precise sense are calibrated to sustain both a local vision and a universal aesthetic charge. Such a dynamic is encapsulated not just in Williams's nuanced understanding of place (and what the process of creative “emplacement” entails), but also in his adumbration of that poetics of materiality we have seen emerging across

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<sup>160</sup> Hama, “Blue Under-Shirts Upon a Line’: Orrick Johns and the Genesis of William Carlos Williams's ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’”, *College Literature*, Vol. 37 Issue 3 (2010), p. 179.

his work in this period. Such a poetics, indeed, is first formulated explicitly in the proto-epic “Paterson” (1927), in which the adage at the beginning of the poem, “Say it, no ideas but in things”, shapeshifts over its course into the politically resonant variation: “no ideas beside the facts” (*CP I* 264-67).<sup>161</sup>

This last maxim topologically echoes Williams's “wheel / barrow” standing “beside the white / chickens” (*CP I* 224), but it also serves to focus the force of Williams's materialist view of poetry, social life, and the relations between the two. For if Williams's language of “things” leads at times to a problematic objectification of working-class figures and experience, his emphasis on the “facts” of poetry – and the facts with which individual poems must contend – arguably offers an alternative discourse of creative and political engagement. Facts, after all, unlike “things” are rarely depersonalised – as Williams's poem “The Dead Baby” suggests. “Sweep the house clean”, Williams writes,

here is one who has gone up  
    (though problematically)  
to heaven, blindly  
    by force of the facts –  
a clean sweep  
    is one way of expressing it –

(*CP I* 268)

Williams's aphorism, “no ideas beside the facts”, may harbour a declaration of artistic intent – to place abstract poetic values in their proper, particulate contexts. But it is also, as the poem above implies, an acknowledgement of the pain (even the ineffability) of factual experience, in which babies die and bodies – as we've already seen – may be

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<sup>161</sup> As James Edward Smethurst observes, Williams's credo and example here are formative for a notably diverse array of younger poetic path-breakers, including Amiri Baraka, for instance, who asserts (following Williams) that poems “are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step”; cit., Smethurst, *the black arts movement: literary nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 2005), pp. 94-5.

“Broken, // beaten, desolate, reaching [to] be taken up” (*CP I* 389), perhaps “problematically [...] to heaven” (*CP I* 268).

The same may be said of Williams's unrestrained condemnation of judge, jury, and general public in the Sacco and Vanzetti case of 1927. Railing against the “arbitrary statutes” and the “pimps to tradition” governing American society, Williams is keen in the poem to highlight what is in this instance a fatal divorce between the concerns of the latter and the realities of life on the ground: all this injustice, Williams writes, “for the glory of the state / and the perpetuation of abstract justice”, all this “in the face of the facts” (*CP I* 270-271). As Warren I. Susman notes of the significance of the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti for modern artists: “[from the 1930s onwards] civilization itself – in its urban-industrial form – seemed increasingly the enemy. It stood for the electricity that was used to destroy Sacco and Vanzetti”.<sup>162</sup> The comment is telling – and certainly falls in step with Williams's statement of aesthetic purpose above, which aligns his poetry with the actuality of material conditions in America, assuming its power of critique by admitting the potentially decisive resistance these pose to received notions of “justice” .

Implicitly or otherwise, then, Williams's local things are also material processes – with these frequently reflecting (or recurring in) politically circumscribed environments and scenarios. Williams's eclectic constellation of everyday sights (from wheelbarrows to garden allotments) often deliberately highlights patterns of need or deprivation that frame the scenes in question, not to mention the regulative structures of ownership, social division, and wealth disparity that invariably underwrite them. In one poem, Williams's

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<sup>162</sup> Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1973/2003), pp. 156-57.



sparse, apparently undemonstrative portrayal of a “sewing machine / whirling // in the next room” comes to emblemise both the financial want and the practical industriousness of an entire household – as nearby the “men at the bar” are “talking of the strike / and cash” (*CP I* 299). Similarly in his piece, “Morning”, Williams manages to delineate a complex system of property rights and contrasting entitlements by the mere cataloguing of incidental details, perceived in a conventional American locale. The poem envisions a line of “truncated poplars / that having served for shade / served also later for fire” (*CP I* 459-60), before tracing the social contours of the surrounding area:

Down-hill  
in the small, separate (Keep out  
you) bare fruit trees and among tangled  
cords of unpruned grapevines low houses  
showered by unobstructed light.

(*CP I* 459-60)

The friction between the sunlit, ostensibly “unobstructed” tranquility of the scene and the system of legalistic material divisions underlying it injects a compulsive energy into Williams's lines here: “(Keep out / you)” a social imperative the poem exposes, and partly derides. As such, Williams once again stands in tacit divergence from a number of his contemporaries, not least Wallace Stevens – whose sense of poetry's public situation is concerned, as Joseph Harrington tactfully summarises, “less [with] the right to free speech than with the much older rights to privacy and to property and with the separation of spheres that undergirds those rights”: a “separation of spheres” that Williams, as we have seen, recognises as real and seeks to subvert.<sup>163</sup>

In its playful dissection of the rules and significance of private property in America,

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<sup>163</sup> Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown, 2001), p. 83.

“Morning” may serve as both an echo and antiphon to Williams's “Portrait of a Woman in Bed”, published twenty years beforehand. In the earlier poem, the titular character mounts a concise rebuttal to the reverence for private ownership, as well as the abiding moralism, to be found among middle-class society. “I won't work / and I've got no cash”, the woman snaps, “What are you going to do / about it?” –

This house is empty  
isn't it?  
Then it's mine  
because I need it.  
Oh, I won't starve  
while there's the Bible  
to make them feed me.

(*CP* 187-88)

As Paul Cappucci summarises: “[n]ot only does she refuse to work and make money, she issues a challenge to the landlord [and] claims possession of the house”.<sup>164</sup> Williams's seemingly effortless marriage of material consciousness and idiomatic speech here is representative of the aim and emphasis of his work throughout these years. The poem's tone is also instructive (in every sense) – with each line-break helping to inter-weave the old woman's conviction with the listener's anticipated delight at her fluent, expressive force. “Then it's mine / because I need it” is ideologically incisive as argument, but is made all the moreso for the plainness of its articulation and the clarity of its appearance on the page – which are functions of Williams's poetics as much as they are of the old woman's world-view as such.

There is a gendered edge to Williams's critique of private property rights in America here: the poet delights not just in the woman's efficient exposé of social hypocrisies, but also in

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<sup>164</sup> Paul Capucci, “‘And Everyone and I Stopped Breathing’: William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara, and the News of the Day in Verse”, *Papers on Language*, Vol. 39 Issue 4 (Fall, 2003), p. 378.

the fact that it is a woman who has done so. “The house is yours / to wander in as you please”, Williams suggests in another piece, “Your breakfasts will be kept / ready for you until // you choose to arise!” (*CP I* 340) – an offer with a presumed male recipient, for women (in the society depicted in Williams's early poems, at least) are rarely the possessors of such property or privileges. Such a circumstance is laid out plainly in Williams's early “The Young Housewife”, discussed above, in which the central figure is both constricted and made mysterious by the visual veil of “her husband's house” (*CP I* 57). In the piece above, however, Williams is unambiguously deferential to the woman and her rights – her rights to property, that is, and to speech. “[Y]ou / can go to hell”, she concludes by saying:

You could have closed the door  
when you came in;  
do it when you go out.  
I'm tired.

(*CP I* 88)

The poem's plainspokenness marks a double achievement: that of realising a recognisably American idiom on the page, but also of revising social (including Williams's own) assumptions of private right and poetic articulacy. The woman herself has the last word, and the house consequently remains – or perhaps becomes – her own.

In this respect, “Portrait of a Woman in Bed” performs the task which Williams's early poetics as a whole invite. Williams may think of his poems as being only “notes jotted down in the midst of the action”, stray sparks from the wheel of that politics of materiality he interprets and transmits with such vividness. Yet we can be assured nevertheless that Williams's “notes” both imitate and partake in such “action” (*CP I* 186),

that they posit against “the in-driving force of a crudely repressive environment” a flexible and clear-sighted rendition of living speech – a process which is as politically implicating as it is poetically innovative. As Josh Wallaert memorably observes, “if *text* is the postmodern problem, Williams would have us believe that it is also the solution”.<sup>165</sup>

Crucially for Williams, however, such “*text*” advances a relational understanding of materiality . If Williams writes in order to hold “against waste, waste and life's / coldness” a “fury of labor”, then for him this programme requires a constant attentiveness to the physicality, the social relations, and the political discourses surrounding such “labor” in American society – as well a vibrant conception of the form his attentions might take on the printed page (*CP I* 392). Williams's poetics of materiality, his poetry grounded in the American grain, may therefore be understood without complication as a project of political expression as much as it is an experiment in literary practice – each process deepening and sharpening the effect of the other, in the local environments in which he works. As Williams himself puts it, writing to Norman MacLeod in 1935: the modern “revolution” will be accomplished when “noble has been / changed to no bull”, for:

You can do lots  
if you know  
what's around you  
No bull

(*CP I* 401)

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<sup>165</sup> Wallaert, “The Eco-poetics of Perfection: William Carlos Williams and Nature in *Spring and All*”, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 12.1 (Winter, 2005), p. 80.

### 3. “Such war, as the arts live and breathe by, is continuous”: 1939-1963

#### 3.1 Introduction

As indicated in the preceding chapter, Williams's efforts to revolutionise poetic speech are enfolded with (and often catalysed by) the evolving politics of his social, perceptual, and medical observations. If he attends to daily objects and local figures as a matter of course in his work, for Williams the poem's function as a *made thing* emerges as that of encapsulating the material relations of the environment to which it refers. To the artist, “[e]very work of art is a microcosm of the world”, Williams writes in 1952, “[e]very fiber of his poem is to him a total of his world” (*ARI* 228). As we have seen, this understanding of aesthetic purpose in Williams's poetry demands both a sensuous responsiveness to material experience and an exploratory understanding of political and social relationships – one that extends, indeed, beyond the poet's field of perceptions . If he seeks to forge an “American idiom” in verse – a poetry accessible to ordinary people, because drawn from the language and circumstances of their lives – this sense of creative mission nonetheless pits Williams, more often than not, against the institutions and *mores* of American society. As Cary Nelson observes, the experience of reading Williams is very often defined by the growing intuition that “artistic innovation and radical politics” are closely – perhaps even necessarily – related projects.<sup>166</sup> The descriptive approach and democratic emphasis of Williams's poems, in any case, are calibrated to combine formal innovation with social representation – each enhancing the effect of the other. Such social representation, moreover, frequently functions as itself a form of political implication and critique. Art, Williams declares, “can be made of anything, provided it be seen, smelt, touched,

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<sup>166</sup> Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory*, p. 153.

apprehended and understood to be what it is – the flesh of a constantly repeated permanence” (*SL* 130) – and yet the politics of this condition are such, for him, that the poem becomes “a social instrument”, as we have seen, enabling what he terms “the lifting of an environment to expression” (*SL* 286).

As discussed, for Williams in his early years the poem serves as a record of lived, perceptible experience, but one which also probes the material circumstances of the place and society in which this experience (and these perceptions) occur – from the gleaming suburbs to the impoverished tenements of his own native New Jersey. “Someone should summarize these things / in the interest of local / government” (*CP I* 310), Williams observes, as he wanders “among the side streets” and homes of “the sick” (*CP I* 456), finding “things [that] astonish” him “beyond words!” (*CP I* 43). Williams's early aesthetics thus tend to hold a politically diagnostic charge, his work not only imitating the language and speech rhythms of daily life, but also thereby bringing the dramas and predicaments of ordinary people to light – rendering these as integral, indeed, to the cultural meaning of the poem. “I go back to people”, Williams notes elsewhere, “[for they] are the origin of every bit of life that can possibly inhabit any structure, house, poem or novel of conceivable human interest” (*SE* 178).

In varying styles and across a range of thematic areas, then, Williams sets out to meet what he views as the elitist, outdated poetic traditions and the inegalitarian social conventions of his day with his own distinctive brand of poetic plainsong, as visceral as it is vernacular – the task being, as he puts it, to change “noble” to “no bull” (*CP I* 401). This trend continues in Williams's later work, as he opposes to the political and literary

status quo, as he understands it, the images (and accents) of his local surroundings. “The young men who are students of literature today in our universities”, Williams protests in 1955, “do not believe in seeking within the literary forms, the lines, the foot, the way in which to expand their efforts to know the universe”; rather, he writes, they “are content to follow the theologians and Mr. Eliot” (*LoG* 25). It is precisely this cultural condition that Williams is committed to challenging in his later years. “No ideas / but in things”, Williams affirms in 1944, insisting that the “song” of the times be “made of / particulars” (*CP II* 5), its general meaning deriving from local objects and familiar places. “New York”, Williams writes, “is built [of] grass and weeds”

a museum of looks  
across a breakfast  
table; subways of dreams;  
towers of divisions  
from thin pay envelopes.  
What else is it? And what  
else can it be?

(*CP II* 164-5)

In Williams's view, “New York” is the sum of the particulate life it contains; the vast, overlapping ordinarinesses that constitute it, from “grass and weeds” to the “towers of divisions” of its streets and office-ledgers. In his first collection, *Empty Mirror*, Allen Ginsberg would adapt such an outlook and stylistic concision to his own purposes, depicting in “A Poem on America”, for example, “the alleys, the dye works / Mill Street in the smoke / melancholy of the bars / the sadness of the long highways”.<sup>167</sup> Williams's influence is clear, for as he observes in 1944: “[i]t is in the wide range of the local only that the general can be tested for its one unique quality, its universality” (*SL* 225) – a

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<sup>167</sup> cit., Mark Hillringhouse, “Allen Ginsberg and William Carlos Williams”, *Paterson Literary Review*, Issue 35 (2006), p. 36.

theme Williams himself elaborates in creatively fruitful and, as this chapter will show, politically combative ways post-1939.

Williams's dedication to “the local” is in many respects the creative wellspring from which his later work draws its power – or what Seamus Heaney has termed, its “clarity and articulation”.<sup>168</sup> Such an understanding, at least, is one of the guiding assumptions of this chapter, which examines the development of Williams's home-grown poetics in light of his later engagements with subjects as wide-ranging as atomic warfare, mid-century Anglo-American modernism, indigenous poverty and discrimination, as well as broader issues of race, nationalism, and violence in American and transatlantic contexts. As before, in all these areas my discussion will attempt to expose and challenge some of Williams's aesthetic assumptions, while also gauging the extent to which his work evolves new capacities for both self-critique and a general criticism of his society. In almost every case, this chapter takes Williams's intense awareness of local circumstances as providing a formative backdrop to the poems discussed.

Literary and retrospective as it is, the connection with Heaney – who has acknowledged “a short William Carlos Williamsy line in his ear” while writing his third collection, *Wintering Out* (1972) – is an illuminating one in this last regard. For both he and Williams write poetic reflections on P. V. Glob's images of the preserved, pre-Christian bog body discovered in Denmark in 1950, known as the Tollund Man: Williams in “A Smiling Dane” (1955) and Heaney in “The Tollund Man” (1972). For each poet, the pictures of the recovered burial victim jolt an aesthetic response that combines ethical enquiry with

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<sup>168</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 349.



an effort at physical and psychological self-grounding – the body, an icon of ancient atrocity and almost miraculous abundance simultaneously, evoking in each writer a sensation of alienation mixed with understanding. Most vitally, of course, for both poets the image of the bog man stimulates a need to acknowledge – and, in part, to politicise – the enduring relatability and resonance of local conditions. Although “Not knowing their tongue”, Heaney famously concludes that as a poet familiar with the sectarian conflict of Northern Ireland, “Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost / Unhappy, and at home.”<sup>169</sup> Williams, similarly attuned to the abiding intimacy of such violence (although without the same Anglo-Irish context in mind) queries:

And what if  
the image of his frightened executioners  
is not recorded?  
Do we not know  
their features  
as if  
it had occurred  
today?  
We can still see in his smile  
their grimaces.

(*CP II 307*)

In 1955, a year of brutal racist lynchings in the United States – including, notoriously, the murder of fourteen year-old Emmett Till – Williams's depiction of the exhumed body “with a rope... intact / round the neck”, along with his grimly ironic imagination of the pre-Christian, tribal executioners by way of the “features” and “grimaces” of his fellow citizens, may very well hold a political relatability beyond what he necessarily intends for it (*CP II 306-7*).<sup>170</sup> Even without the cadence of ethical interrogation typified in Heaney's

<sup>169</sup> Seamus Heaney, “The Tollund Man”, *New Selected Poems: 1966-1987* (London, 1990/1988), p. 31.

<sup>170</sup> To be clear: I do not have archival evidence that links the composition of Williams's poem to the pictures of Emmet Till's body; rather, I am proposing the Till murder (and the photograph from his open-coffin funeral) as a possible context in which the poem may be discussed, particularly given the nation-wide publicity accorded to the case.

approach, however, Williams's portrait of the "Smiling Dane" serves as a nuanced affirmation of his adage that "Place is the only universal" (*ARI* 175): that the specificities of a given scene, in other words, generate the frame through which its general meaning may billow and enter. "His stomach", Williams writes,

its contents examined  
    shows him  
        before he died  
to have had  
    a meal  
        consisting of local grains  
swallowed whole  
    which he probably enjoyed  
        though he did not  
much as we do  
    chew them.

(*CP II* 307)

For Williams, the image of the Tollund man attains its currency as much through his individuation and defining difference from the present – his swallowing of "local grains" whole, without chewing them, for example – as through the unsettling familiarity of his features and fate. Significantly, Heaney's poem has been criticised in exactly these terms – for its presumption, that is, of a direct or natural intercourse between the circumstances of the Tollund Man's murder and the complexities of political violence in late-twentieth-century Northern Ireland. As Ciaran Carson has noted, "[i]t is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happened now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution".<sup>171</sup> As we see above, Williams's piece by contrast is as attuned to what might be called the tension of difference (between his world and the Tollund Man's) as he is to the possibility of

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<sup>171</sup> For this and other criticism of Heaney's ethical stance in the poem, see Jonathan Hufstader's "'Coming to Consciousness by Jumping in Graves': Heaney's Bog Poems and the Politics of *North*" in *Irish University Review* Vol. 26 No. 1 (1996): 61-74.

resemblance. As Williams writes elsewhere, by “being so particularly of that place” the peculiarities of a given environment become “universal”, which “[p]ermits us to some extent to deal with all places” (*ARI* 136). What matters most to Williams is the mode of open attentiveness and inquiry with which the artist approaches that environment – as his later poems constantly attest.

Of course, Williams's most ambitious and challenging exploration of this credo – his belief that “the local *is* the universal” (*ARI* 143; emphasis mine) – is arguably to be found in his long poem, *Paterson*, the five books of which Williams composes and collates in earnest from the late 1940s onwards. The work, Williams writes, is based on the understanding that “the various aspects of a city may embody – if imaginatively conceived – any city” (*P* xiv). *Paterson's* form-fluent, kaleidoscopic vision of the history, spaces, and fault-lines of the titular New Jersey town is the subject of a chapter-length discussion at a later point in this thesis – a structural necessity of this study with some critical advantages attached, but which nonetheless should not be allowed to occlude the close association between the long poem and Williams's thoughts on poetic form discussed below. Despite their separation, my hope is that the arguments and insights of each chapter will complement the other, without critical antagonism or confusion.

As the case of *Paterson* partly suggests, in the same way that Williams's fascination with the material conditions of place continues after 1939, in his later years he persists in using such a perspective to highlight and refashion traditional poetic genres, including the epic and (as before) the pastoral. “Empty pockets / make empty heads”, Williams can thus declaim in a post-New Deal ditty that calmly excoriates the myth (literary and political)

of rural prosperity: “Cure it / if you can...

... but do not believe  
that we can live today  
in the country  
for the country will bring us  
no peace.

(*CP II* 18)

As in his earlier work, Williams here acknowledges that the attempt to alleviate the deprivations he so often catalogues as a writer may be less a matter of medical remedy than of political and cultural awakening – a task facing “the collective world”, which the poem therefore seeks to activate “in a new mode, fresh in every part” (*SE* 103).

If the mutually enriching relationship between poetic style and political intent abides in Williams's poetry from 1939 onwards, the later poems are nevertheless distinguishable on a number of grounds. In the first instance, it is only in his later years that Williams develops his much-touted ideas about verse into a consistent poetic praxis – by way of his theorisation of what he terms *the variable foot*, and in the flexible triadic stanzas he adopts in his 1950s work. As Williams explains, in the indented triads he deploys and tests in his collections *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955), each line corresponds to “a single beat”, so that:

over the whole poem it gives a pattern to the meter that can be felt as a new measure. It gives resources to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day.

(*SL* 327)

Such a concern is hardly new in Williams's work, although the same cannot be said of its formulation here – the language of the poem not just incorporating the idiom of its

environment, but also providing an identifiable and adaptable prosody in its own right.

Williams's lifelong urge to create a speakable poetry, in short, is distilled in these years into a supple, but consistent metric system. As Williams observes in 1958, one result of “the foot itself” becoming “variable” is that “it allows order in so-called free verse. Thus the verse becomes not free at all but just simply variable, as all things in life properly are” (*IWWP* 82). In formal terms, then, the lineation of a late piece such as “To Daphne and Virginia” may be understood as actively imitating and reinforcing the theme it explores – namely, poetry's suitability to the times:

Be patient that I address you in a poem,  
                  there is no other  
                                  fit medium.

(*CP II* 246)

Significantly, it is this heightened (and more programmatic) prosodic awareness Williams cultivates in his later work that earns him the praise and reverence of later radical versifiers. Placing Williams in a tradition including Whitman, Pound, Olson and Kerouac, for example, Allen Ginsberg writes of the modernity and radicalism of the “improvised prosodies” these writers helped to forge – as distinct from what he terms “Williams's” earlier “imagist preoccupations” – observing how these seemed

[to echo] our actual speech our stutters our jazz our blue bop our body chant the tone leading of our vowels or whatever mystic zap-talk that came natural. 'I'll kick yeh eye,' William Carlos Williams quoted from New Jersey town streets, as an example of musical phrasing which did not fit the metric system described [by] the Secretary of the New England Association of Teachers of English as 'particularly well adapted to the needs of English poetry... definite rules, which have been carefully observed by all great poets from Homer to Tennyson and Longfellow.'<sup>172</sup>

If Williams consistently bends the “definite rules” of the “great poets” of the past to his

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<sup>172</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Confrontation with Louis Ginsberg's Poems”, *Deliberate Prose* (London, 2000), p. 216.

own purposes – to reflect the “actual speech” and “zap-talk that came natural” in his time and place – after his *Collected Poems* of 1938 he begins to codify and refine the procedures involved in this process. Hence, writing to Henry Wells in 1951, Williams can be found urging his correspondent to “take into consideration my role as a theorist”, a new title he claims for himself, adding with pragmatic force: “For I think that only by an understanding of my 'theory of the poem' will you be able to reconcile my patent failures with whatever I have done that seems worthwhile” (*SL* 186).

Williams's insistence on evolving an alternative “democracy of form” to the elitism of feeling that pervades the American scene in these years also involves an extension of that transcriptive poetics hinted at in his early work – a poetics assimilating local speech, and not just learning from the rhythms on which it rests. His poem, “Detail”, reads:

Doc, I bin lookin' for you  
I owe you two bucks.

How you doin'?

Fine. When I get it  
I'll bring it up to you.

(*CP II* 20-21)

Even in its intensified application, Williams's “theory of the poem” retains an imitative (and quotative) relation to the materials to which it is applied – rather than merely transmuting these into literary form. The poem thus remains a part of the greater environment it seeks to crystallise (and sometimes, to critique) on the printed page. Tagged as “overheard by [...] William Carlos Williams”, a poem called “The Fight” reads:

I don't  
mind a shiner but look

at this here. I showed  
it to my wife when  
I got home and she says,

Those are tooth marks!  
Then it started to  
swell on me, right down

to the ankle....

(CP II 29)

If standard critical narratives have been keen to emphasise the close connection between Williams's medical experience and his developing poetic concerns, his later poems indicate something of the tonal range of the diagnostic literary praxis that results – a spectrum spanning from the concentrated social consciousness of a piece like “Proletarian Portrait” to the light-hearted pleasure in the *found speech* of his surroundings expressed in the two extracts from his later work above.

Having said this, one of the most striking aspects of Williams's literary development after 1939 is how closely his consolidation of earlier stylistic tendencies is matched by – and I argue, formally related to – a new concern in his work with the unprecedented gravity of the political problems that define his society and era, specifically in the shadow of total warfare of the 1940s. Writing to literary columnist Harvey Breit in 1940, Williams articulates his unease with the times in exactly these terms. “Whether or not”, Williams writes,

the fiery demon that possesses the world is going to destroy us or give us a new birth I cannot say. All we know is that only a few years ago we were too smug in our beliefs touching the ultimate triumph of man's coming humanity to man.... We were too glib, too sanguine, too languid in what we thought and said... too doctrinaire in our praise and service.

(SL 189)

Williams's acknowledgement that “we were” (perhaps to be read, *I was*) “too smug in our beliefs” here is noteworthy – and indicative, once again, of a shift in his literary-political attitudes during the wartime and post-war years. It is in this quite precise context that Williams's later poetry takes its urgency and form, aiming “not only to disengage the elements” of traditional verse but “to seek a new measure” – “a new way of measuring” the poetic line, he writes in 1948, “that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past” (*SE* 283). The implication being that if the assimilation of material experience is a perennial concern of Williams's work (including in his early years) this project assumes fresh intensity from 1939 onwards – as his medical and domestic life are focused by the second world war, and his sense of creative purpose is sharpened by the emerging political order at home and abroad. “The war is the first and only thing in the world today”, Williams famously argues, adding that the poetry “*is* the war or part of it, merely a different sector of the field” (*CP II* 53).

Rousing as they are, such statements from Williams cannot be taken as wholehearted declarations of patriotic allegiance to the American war effort, and certainly not to the American political system in general. Signing an artists' manifesto urging America's abstention from the war in 1939, in the years that follow we find Williams sustaining a passionate scepticism towards the “new scene in world history” being hailed by American political and business leaders – but which, to Williams and others, seems unavoidably marked by inequality and material deprivation.<sup>173</sup> Viewed “[u]p from the gutter”, Williams contends, there is a cultural and social violence endemic in the structure of American society, primarily targetting “the poor” – of whom too little mention is made by its

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<sup>173</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow and Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 335-6.



politicians and poets (*CP II* 54; 110). “[The] mattresses of the poor / remain hard, hard as / the pavements of a cathedral”, Williams observes in 1947, hearing in “the wail of a child lost” the sound of “the poor denied” (*CP II* 109-110).

With the escalation of military production and patriotic energies in America during the second world war, Williams's sense of the daily hardships experienced by many poor and working-class communities intensifies – a symptom of his literary concerns in any case, but in this instance related to his own increased contact with such communities (as a medical practitioner) in these years. In 1943, Williams notes in his private correspondence that “[with] four of the younger medicos in the [armed] services, the rest of us in the community have had to double up on the work with the result that it's seven days a week of it and from twelve to sixteen hours on many days” (*SL* 211). From the wartime years until his retirement in 1951, indeed, the struggles of his impoverished patients strike Williams with a particular force – reflecting, for him, the troubled society that the war mobilisation has ostensibly been galvanised to protect. His piece, “A Cold Front”, is exemplary in this regard – describing an encounter with one exhausted patient, a “woman with a dead face” who “wants pills // for an abortion”:

... she says, looking at me  
quietly, I won't have any more.  
In a case like this I know  
quick action is the main thing.

(*CP II* 92-3)

“Such war, as the arts live and breathe by”, Williams asserts, “is continuous” (*CP II* 55). Or as Muriel Rukeyser writes: “We are against war and the sources of war [...] We are for poetry and the sources of poetry [...] They are everyday, these sources, as the sources of

peace are everyday” – an anthem-like affirmation of daily life and struggle on Rukeyser's part, which also speaks clearly to Williams's concern above, and indeed to the propulsive poems of social observation and political critique he produces in these years.<sup>174</sup>

Significantly, as the post-war climate gives way to a culture of nuclear paranoia and mounting anti-Red hysteria, Williams is forthright not only in addressing these themes in his work, but also in praising (and counting himself among) the “Pink Church” of artists, radicals, and outcasts throughout history – from “drunks, prostitutes, / Surrealists” to “Milton, the unrhymer, [...] singing among /    the rest... //    like a Communist” (*CP II* 180). Echoing Shelley's association of Milton's republicanism with his poetic attainments a century previously, Williams posits (with boisterous satisfaction) a connection between the literary provocation of Milton's unrhyming verse and the contemporary spectre of communism in America. Williams's yoking of Milton's stature as a writer to his anti-establishmentarian political inclinations is of course typical of his own emphasis in these years. For, as Williams learns first-hand, amid the political fervour sweeping through the civic and institutional life of this period the politics of being Red, or even “Pink”, become increasingly embattled. “I am boiling mad”, Williams exclaims in a letter to John Crowe Ransom in 1949 (as we have seen),

with the tyrannical ukase I received in this morning's mail from the American Medical Association, which, in the name of 'democracy' orders me to pay \$25 into their treasury to fight 'socialized medicine,' like it or not. This represents what we are up against in our times. Our writing also affects it.

(*CP II* 273)

The culture of professional self-interest and vivid anti-socialism Williams identifies here

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<sup>174</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, “The Life of Poetry”, ed., Jan Heller Levi, *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader* (New York, 1994), p. 182.

certainly affects *him* as a writer in this period. Indeed, as Pound continues to produce work from his confinement in a mental asylum and Wallace Stevens settles into a late style of largely insulated speculation on poetry's many seasons,<sup>175</sup> Williams finds himself increasingly to be “singing among /            the rest... // like a Communist” (*CP II* 180). The analogy is self-consciously asserted by Williams – a circumstance not unrelated to his own targeting, in this period, by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and other outlets for his alleged communist sympathies, being accused as he is of affiliating with organisations known for “peddling Moscow propaganda in the U.S. for 25 years”.<sup>176</sup> In a much-discussed development, as the 1950s open Williams's appointment as poetry consultant to the library of congress is revoked – and he himself is investigated by the FBI, as a result of such allegations.

As the first segment of the discussion below indicates, Williams does indeed invoke communist ideas and images of Russia throughout his later work. Far from “peddling Moscow propaganda”, however, Williams's Russian-themed poems are as politically contestatory as they are poetically assured – very often advancing Williams's conception of the *locality* of art in a transnational context, as well as clarifying, on occasion, Williams's understanding of poetry's relationship to the media and political discourses of his day.

### 3.2 *Williams and Russia: Getting the Measure of It*

Although Williams's appointment as poetry consultant to the library of congress is later

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<sup>175</sup> Leading Joshua Kotin to suggest of Stevens's later work, that “if the poem makes something happen, it happens for Stevens alone”; Kotin, “Wallace Stevens's Point of View”, *PMLA*, Vol. 130 Issue 1 (January, 2015), p. 65.

<sup>176</sup> cit. Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (San Antonio; 1981/1990), p. 652

restored, its initial cancellation, along with the experience of being smeared and scrutinised for his political beliefs in public, weighs on his mind – and filters into his poems of political provocation and protest in these years. The “newspapers with their story”, Williams writes, “[have] blocked me from my job in Washington”, and – coming in the wake of a physical stroke he suffers in August, 1951 – have “completed the wreck.”<sup>177</sup> Yet on the actual accusations – of an affiliation with and sympathy for the Soviet Union – Williams is characteristically emphatic: “I have always hated today's version of communism”, he declares in a late interview, “I was approached years ago, before communism was known to have its current frightening connotations... even then I said this is not for me” (*IWWP* 78). As noted in the previous chapter, Williams never formally associates himself with the communist party of America, and even in his more radical phases is staunch in his opposition to the idea that the artist should “subordinate *himself* to the party”, left-wing or otherwise: “[t]o me there is only one answer possible”, Williams writes, “[w]e are first, last and always artists and can never be compelled by the state” (*ARI* 75-77).

Without excusing the political baiting of Williams by journalists and the FBI, it's important to acknowledge the ways in which his dismissal of communist thinking above, while biographically accurate, may be artistically misrepresentative – to acknowledge, that is, the affirmation of communal and materially based understandings of society, and the warm depiction of Soviet Russia, that recurs in the work itself. If anything, indeed, the spirit of passionate individualism with which Williams rejects his McCarthyite critics in the early 1950s is the same as that which leads him to a sense of fraternity with the

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<sup>177</sup> Mariani, *New World Naked*, p. 655.

Russian people – and to an at least rhetorical identification with revolutionary politics – as the discussion below makes plain.

If Williams's individualism is at the root of his distrust for both corporate and communist statism, it is also the source of some of the most radical beliefs he professes in these years. Instinctively provocative in his political expression as in his poetics, Williams engages and explores radical principles throughout his work – suggesting, for example, that American society would benefit from a “labor revolution” (*ARI* 115) and a “cooperative division of effort” on the Soviet model (*SL* 147). For Williams, such a vision in fact taps into the meaning of American democracy, as he understands it – representing for him the wrenching reinvention of traditional forms of experience, in history and literature alike. “To violently effect”, Williams contends,

the ejection of an inhuman and anti-social domination by those who have an effective control over the means of our common livelihood for their private gain – would appeal to the American character if once put into motion.

(*ARI* 115)

To a commentator who believes society should be organised on the basis of private enterprise, class-divisive competition, and the eradication of dissent – as Williams's anti-Communist critics do in this period – such language no doubt signals cause for alarm. To Williams, however, his attitude is firmly within “the American grain”, defined as it is by that self-possession and free thinking which, as he sees it, “the American tradition” at its best exemplifies (*SL* 157). As Douglas Wixon observes, if “Lewis pinned his hopes on a workers' democracy, a just order that erases class distinctions and economic disparities”, for Williams “Lewis's work” therefore “represented a new poetry for the times”, and as

such should be treated as culturally valuable.<sup>178</sup> By being “what he is where he is”, Lewis serves (in Williams's view) as “an instigator to thought about what poetry can and cannot do to us today” (*SS* 72; 77).

As Williams's remarks partly imply, in American society the very concept of *Russia* – as a global power, as a geographical region, and as a site of political activity and organisation – is refracted through a range of politicised discourses, which both enhance and complicate the critical position that his Russian-themed poems therefore occupy in cultural terms. Williams's poem, “Heel and Toe to the End”, may be understood as a case in point. Composed the morning after Yuri Gagarin's successful space flight, “Heel and Toe to the End” testifies to Williams's perennial (if often vexed) hope for a fraternity in Russo-American relations, while also demonstrating a fascinating link between Williams's poetics and the print media of his day.

Williams's wife, Florence, has identified the report of Yuri Gagarin's flight in *The New York Times* published the same morning (April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1961) as the immediate inspiration for the poem – a circumstance acknowledged in MacGowan's annotated edition of Williams's poems, and yet one which has received scant commentary by Williams scholars. A curious critical oversight – especially as, on comparison of the two pieces, Williams's poem seems largely to stand as a compressed quotation from the article in question: splicing its content into breath-sized lines and arranging these in tercets, but otherwise retaining the vocabulary and descriptive emphasis of the newspaper report. In this respect, indeed, the poem stands as testament to Douglas Mao's and Rebecca

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<sup>178</sup> Douglas Wixon, “In Search of the Low-Down Americano”, p. 86.

Walkowitz's summary interpretation of modernism in general, which posits “the avalanche of reportage [...] the phenomenon as news” as the shaping “other” and embedded counter-discourse of “modernist art” .<sup>179</sup>

Entitled “‘I Could Have Gone on Forever’: Gagarin, in Ecstasy, Says he Floated, Ate and Sang”, the article in *The New York Times* features a photograph of Gagarin smiling and walking on a runway after landing; while the report itself opens with a quotation from him declaring, “I could have gone on flying through space forever... Legs and arms weighed nothing. Objects were swimming in the cabin... I did not sit in the chair as before but was suspended in midair.”<sup>180</sup> The poem, in similar fashion, begins:

Gagarin says, in ecstasy,  
he could have  
gone on forever

he floated  
ate and sang  
and when he emerged from that

one hundred eight minutes off  
the surface of  
the earth he was smiling

(*CP II* 436)

If Williams cultivates a poetics of transcription with regard to the speech and living conditions of his New Jersey patients, then as we see here, he also on occasion indulges a directly appropriative – if not outright plagiaristic – attitude towards the public and print discourses of his day. The politics of such an approach are of course illuminating. For if Williams envisages his task as a poet as putting “pressure on the blackguards who compel

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<sup>179</sup> Douglas Mao, Rebecca Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies”, *PMLA*, Vol. 123 No. 3 (May, 2008), p. 745.

<sup>180</sup> Reuters, “I could have gone on forever”, *The New York Times* (1961, Apr 14), accessed 06/07/18.

servitude” in his society (A 341), rethinking the existing cultural assumptions of American life in light of the often harrowing material circumstances of his own locale, then such a project is arguably hindered by his simultaneous willingness to incorporate the perspective – in fact, the very language – of *The New York Times*, particularly on a subject as politically sensitive as Russia's first manned space-flight. Such a practice would appear to lend credence to Milton A. Cohen's observation that for all his (occasionally bombastic) leftism, Williams throughout “his life remained [a] liberal, a small-d democrat” – a description which could easily describe the traditional readership of *The New York Times* itself.<sup>181</sup>

Quoting from Yuri Gagarin's own account of his journey, the *New York Times* report continues: “[t]he shores of the continents, [the] wrinkles and localities [of the earth] were clearly distinguishable... [as were the Soviet] collective farms. It was possible to distinguish between ploughed land and grass land”. The journalist then goes on to explain, how

Major Gagarin, as he whirled in orbit, was meeting centrifugal force. While this force pushed him into space, the force of gravity drew him toward earth. The two forces balanced out and, as a result, he was weightless.<sup>182</sup>

Williams's poetic treatment of Gagarin's flight is clearly dependent on such descriptive and contextual details – a dependency reflected, as we have seen, in the language Williams uses. In a curious fashion, however, rather than forming a critical or political lacuna at the poem's centre, this dependency may be part of Williams's point. The poem, after all, registers the ways in which the buoyant grace of Gagarin's experience expresses, and in several respects is reliant upon, a complex series of material allocations and

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<sup>181</sup> Milton A. Cohen, “Williams and politics”, ed. MacGowan, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 66.

<sup>182</sup> *Idem*.



scientific attainments in the human world – a relationship that is clearly akin to Williams's relational understanding of poetic purpose, whereby the poem on the page reflects and arises out of a nexus of intricate social relations in reality. “What shall we say more of the verse that is to be left behind by the age we live in”, Williams writes to John Holmes in May, 1952, “if it does not have some of the marks the age has made upon us, its poets?” (SL 315). “Heel and Toe” arguably illustrates the workings of such a materially inflected and discursively engaged creative practice in microcosm.

The poem of course also evidences the energetic (and admirable) contemporaneity of Williams's literary concerns – his abiding sensitivity, even at the close of his own life, to the transitions and advances of the globally conscious moment in which he is writing. If Stevens proposes to “see the earth again” through the powers of an imagined “angel of reality”, a “figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man / of the mind”, Williams by contrast posits the literal new sight of earth (and the living feat) of Gagarin's space-flight as the ground of his imaginative vision.<sup>183</sup> Louis Zukofsky in fact pays tribute to exactly this quality of Williams as a poet in his serial work, “A”, referencing “Floats eats and / sings Gagarin” and proposing (with Williams's work in view) “that “*the best / in life ends / with a song*”.<sup>184</sup> Williams “would / miss / living thru the / assassination” of President John F. Kennedy, Zukofsky reminisces after the elder poet's death, but had so historic and shocking a public event been “forecast to him / the dying face / would look quizzical” – a speculative assertion, but one that serves as testament nonetheless to the engaged and questioning approach to his times that Williams maintains in his later life

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<sup>183</sup> Stevens, *Collected Poetry & Prose*, p. 423.

<sup>184</sup> Zukofsky, “A” (Berkeley, 1978), p. 346.

and work.<sup>185</sup>

On which note, it may be instructive to recall that “Heel and Toe to the End” implicitly shares a number of the political and poetic concerns Williams elaborates elsewhere – which in some cases belie Cohen's categorisation above. In prosodic terms, for instance, the piece is as formally concise as Williams's most fully achieved poems in the American idiom – the speakable verse-line he pilots in his early years. So “Heel and Toe” continues:

Then he returned  
to take his place  
among the rest of us

from all that division and  
subtraction a measure  
toe and heel

heel and toe he felt  
as if he had  
been dancing

(*CP II* 436)

As such, “[t]he poem”, suggests Denise Levertov, who first publishes it in *The Nation* in 1961, “is surely a paradigm of [Williams's] own experience in a life of poetry” (*DL / WCW* 115*n*) – an interpretation that the reference here to “all that division and / subtraction” out of which Gagarin discovers a new “measure” of experience arguably affirms.

In drawing out the analogy between his own experiments in poetic measure and the scientific achievements (including the literal calculations) which Gagarin's story partly emblematises, Williams is articulating in detail what is in fact a recurring theme of his

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

later poetic work. In an essay on Whitman published in 1955, for example, Williams proposes the same correspondence – between science, broadly conceived, and poetry – as a dynamic force for the artist to contend with, asserting the mutual advances of both cultural fields in the modern era:

We have to acknowledge at once in seeking a meaning involving the complex concerns of the world that the philosophic, the aesthetic, and the mechanical are likely to stem in their development from the same root. One may be much in advance of the other in its discoveries, but in the end a great equalizing process is involved so that the discovery of the advance in the structure of the poetic line is equated by an advance in the conception of physical facts all along the line.

(*LoG* 30)

As Donald Wellman notes, “[a]nalogies between scientific and poetic ways of knowing” proliferate throughout Williams's literary and critical writings –<sup>186</sup> in this case, the physical and mathematical measures implied by Gagarin's celebrated ballet through space standing, in a sense, as both a signal and a catalyst of Williams's desired progress “in the structure of the poetic line” (*LoG* 30). Vitaly, the poem's use of mathematical vocabulary invokes the logistics of the space flight and the synecdochical divisions of the earth visible from Gagarin's shuttle – analogies that are given life by a line “structure” (as the format of Williams's poem suggests) demonstrably different from, and arguably more legible than, the blocs of newspaper copy from which it draws its material facts. As Wittgenstein observes in another context, “the poem, although it [may be] composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information”, adhering instead to its own aesthetic functions and demands.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Donald Wellman, “Notebooks: Césaire, Williams”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall, 2014), p. 107.

<sup>187</sup> cit., Marjorie Perloff, “The Aura of Modernism”, *Modernist Cultures*, Vol. 1 Issue 1 (Summer, 2005), p. 10.

As Gagarin's recollection above suggests – that “the localities” of the earth “were clearly distinguishable” from space – the poem's “division and / subtraction” may also be understood in a specifically geopolitical sense. This theme, indeed, dynamises the poem's principal parabolic element – its narrative arc, that is, which moves from Gagarin's feeling of an “ecstasy” in which “he floated / ate and sang” to the implicitly contrasting experience of his return to the world, “to take his place / among the rest of us” (*CP II* 436) – a phrase of Williams's own, not drawn from *The New York Times* report. If Williams offers a kind of poetic applause for the universal human achievement symbolised by Gagarin's space-flight, his quiet celebration of such a subject in the poem remains attuned, also, to the forms of conflict and disharmony which Gagarin's status as an officer of the Russian army partly implies.

This last issue – namely, America's economic and political rivalry with Russia – is one to which Williams frequently returns in his later poetic work. His piece “Song”, for example, combines an almost festive whimsicality with a tone of muted premonition to convey exactly that sense of international tension which “Heel and Toe” (albeit obliquely) forebodes. For all its apparent nonchalance, “Song” is predicated on an acute understanding of the implications of Russian and American diplomatic relations. “Russia! Russia! You might say / and furrow the brow”, Williams writes:

but I say: There are flowers upon  
the R.R. Embankment  
woven by growing in and out among  
the rusted guard cables  
lying there in the grass, flowers  
daisy shaped, pink  
and white in this September glare.  
Count upon it there

will be soon a further revolution.

(*CP II* 198)

The final two lines may seem almost blithely *red* (in the political sense), yet Williams's prediction is arguably more exhortatory than politically ominous, suggesting that the collective shift in critical thinking – which he views as necessary to attaining a better world – is partially assured by the conditions the poem describes. The “revolution” for Williams is to be one of consciousness, by which “Russia” is understood not as a source of political concern, but as a place as intimately specific as his own New Jersey locality – in which “flowers” grow “in and out among / the rusted guard cables” of the railway tracks (*CP II* 198). “Count upon it”, Williams asserts (once again making reference to the measure and emphasis of his own verse-line): with such a perspectival shift, and by the very process of expressive outwardness which the poem itself enacts, “there / will be soon a further revolution” (*CP II* 198).

Of course, Williams is not always so sanguine in his understanding of the future of Russia and America as competing world powers. In contrast to “Song” above, for example, his poem “Russia” relates the particulate topography of his familiar New Jersey environment not to a spirit of common purpose and cooperation – which Russians and Americans can theoretically share – but to a powerful dread at the prospect of their annihilation by global warfare in the post-war (and post-nuclear) era. First published in 1946, the poem is resurrected by hostile critics in the early 1950s during the library of congress controversy, with one commentator quoting it in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in October, 1952, in order to accuse Williams as being “the very voice of communism” (*CP II* 473*n*). Given the thematic progression of the poem, and as the comments below suggest, such a charge is

ironic in the extreme.

Addressing both “Russia!” and the “Russians!” themselves, Williams invokes “the spirit of Walt Whitman's earliest poem” and urges: “let us loaf at our ease – a moment / on the edge of destruction” (*CP II* 145). “This also / I place in your hands”, Williams writes to Russia, referring to the texture of his own local life in the form of a nearby “Zionist Church (colored)”,

the dwarf campanile piled up, improvised  
of blue cinder-blocks, badly aligned  
(except for the incentive)

unvarnished,  
the cross at the top slapped together  
(in this lumber shortage) of sticks from  
an old barrel top, I think

before asking: “do you understand me?” (*CP II* 144). The implied answer, in the poem, is negative. For in spite of its consistent exclamatory force, the piece ultimately acknowledges the isolation in which Williams's fraternal instincts leave him, not just among his American co-citizens, but also in relation to his Russian audience. “I dream! and my dream is folly”, he concedes, continuing:

Inspired by my dream I do not call upon  
a party to save me, nor a government  
of whatever sort.

“Folly!”, Williams writes with bitterness, “I call on folly to save us” (*CP II* 144-45). As here, throughout the poem the avowedly Whitmanesque spirit of camaraderie and mutual understanding Williams desires is simultaneously exposed in its naivety and sharpened in its urgency by the “edge of destruction” to which Russian-American relations seem to be leading. Williams hints that no matter how legitimate it may be, a creed – be it political,

poetic, or as in Williams's case, a combination of both – that renounces the two dominant forces of the Communist “party” and the American “government” is bound in many ways to “folly”. “Here I am, a dreamer”, Williams reiterates:

[...] Among many others, undistinguished,  
of no moment – I am the background  
upon which you will build your empire.

(*CP II 147*)

Significantly, in this case it is Williams's perception of the destructive force of both nations as imperial powers that is revealed (rather than tempered) by his celebration of the local spaces which Russia and America alike contain. As Williams himself observes, the poem

ends on the note of empire in an ironic sense, bitterly. Russia whose avowed intent has been to free the world from capitalism (for which we tentatively praised her) has turned out to be an empire seeker of the most reactionary sort. It will be her downfall BUT in the meantime we shall all of us suffer.

(*CP II 473n*)

The poem activates the local as a potential source of sympathy between Russia and America, but also as a value intimately vulnerable to the “obliterating blow [...] that shall flatten everything”, and to which the political relationship between the two powers in the post-war years seems increasingly to tend. Williams's artistic credo is both affirmed and threatened in its very repetition – a fact which only deepens the critique of global imperialism the poem articulates.

Nevertheless, in its “dream” of “kinships” and its dogged hope that Russia will understand his pleasure in the “blue cinder-blocks, badly aligned” of the “Williams Avenue Zionist Church” (*CP II 144-5*), “Russia” may be taken as something of an *ars*

*poetica* on Williams's part. Williams in fact notes in the poem – still addressing his audience of Russia and its people – how he “saw today in a poor kitchen” a copy of “Leonardo's Last Supper”, “a small print”:

Russia!  
for the first time in my life, I noticed  
this famous picture not because  
of the subject matter but because  
of the severity and simplicity  
of the background!

(CP II 146)

Williams here literalises his contention that the universal has only the meaning it draws from the local, that art's power lies in the material conditions from which it springs. In doing so, moreover, Williams lends credence to Walter Benjamin's near-contemporaneous claim that the “mechanical reproduction” of a painting “emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual”, a circumstance which signals for Benjamin the potentially revolutionary process of what he terms “the adjustment of reality to the masses”.<sup>188</sup> So here, Williams refigures the meaning of Leonardo's Renaissance masterpiece as an effect of its new surroundings, in “a poor kitchen” in New Jersey. Such an understanding of artistic meaning is of course, in Williams's case, not just an abstract theme, but rooted in his own biographical experience. As Williams notes elsewhere, through his work as a “physician” he “often comes upon delightful *objets d'art* inauspiciously lighting the days and years of some obscure household in almost any suburban town – anywhere, everywhere on [my] rounds” (*ARI* 129).

The analogy is a clarifying one. For just as Benjamin discerns how technical

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<sup>188</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, ed., Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations* (London, 1970/1992), pp. 217-18.



“reproduction” – for him a marker of modernity – “can put the copy of the original [painting] into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself”, thus “enabling the original to meet the beholder halfway”, so Williams suggests that the general beauty of the scene portrayed within the picture is primarily an effect of the particularities of the setting in which the painting itself is encountered:

Oh there was  
the passion of the scene, of course,  
generally. But particularly,  
ignoring the subject, I fell upon  
the perpendiculars of the paneled  
woodwork standing there, submissive,  
in exaggerated perspective.

“There you have it”, Williams concludes, “It's the background / from which my dreams have sprung” (*CP II* 146). The literal poverty of the local (as experienced in Williams's America, and then transmitted imaginatively by him to Russia) serves as an abundant creative source – the background to the artistic imagining and the potential political concord Williams desires.

As discussed, however, there is a conscious irony in Williams's decision to address his views of art and meaning to Russia in the poem, a foreign “empire” (*CP II* 147). For if, as such, Williams implicitly acknowledges “the current frightening connotations” of “communism” as a world power (*IWWP* 78), the poem also thereby signals Williams's equally unsettled sense of being an exile at home – “a dreamer”, politically and poetically. A similar constellation of themes may be discerned in a second piece called “Song”, which Williams publishes in 1949. The poem reads:

Pluck the florets from  
a clover head  
and suck the honey, sweet.

The world  
will realign itself – ex-  
cluding Russia  
and the U.S.A. and planes  
run soon  
by atomic power defying  
gravity.  
Pluck the florets from  
a clover head  
and suck the honey, sweet.

(*CP II* 197-198)

In essence, Williams's vision here is of a world amenable to sustainable development. As Williams portrays it, nature's honey may be sucked and its energy resources marshalled for the purpose of transport and trade without too seismic a disalignment – or at least, this would be the case were it not for “Russia / and the U.S.A.”. The introduction of these agents into the poem, indeed, immediately conjures the spectre of global conflict, casting the “planes [run] by atomic power” less as a technological feat to be admired than as a militarised image, connotative of the historical atrocity of America's nuclear vaporising of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the potential devastation if such warfare were repeated elsewhere in the future – including in America itself. “What men want to learn from nature [today] is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men”, write Adorno and Horkheimer contemporaneously – a critical perspective on modern rationality and technological civilisation that Williams also advances, and in notably political terms.<sup>189</sup> “You Communists and Republicans!”, Williams declares, “The stars are about to melt / and fall on you in tears” (*CP II* 8). As the next segment of this chapter makes clear, Williams regularly broaches the topic of atomic warfare as both fact and possibility in his late poems, and very often as a means of engaging not just with issues of international

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<sup>189</sup> Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, trans., John Cumming, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1944), p. 4.

relations but also his own idiosyncratic conception of poetic meaning and measure.

### 3.3 *Atomic America: Writing the Bomb*

“Nuclear physics was unavoidable at mid-century”, Peter Middleton has observed, with “technologies associated with [physics] transforming everyday life” in America, and so helping to create a widespread “expectation that nuclear energy would soon provide universal power.”<sup>190</sup> Williams – as Middleton also notes, one of the few “scientifically trained” writers of the moment – is characteristically engaged by such concerns, his curiosity as to innovations in the nuclear sector reflecting his longstanding interest in the general advancement of knowledge and rationality, and in this respect shedding light on his view of the artist's role in modern society. After receiving an academic award from Buffalo university alongside “[Dr.] Bush, the head of the atomic bomb project”, among others, in 1946, Williams remarks to a correspondent, “[i]t is amazing what he and his associates have accomplished – looked at simply as work, as brains”, suggesting that:

[i]t is men who very literally and very uncertainly move the world. And they unconsciously perhaps but very really look to the artists and the thinkers to speak for them. The sense of the importance of the artists as a direct influence on men, men who actually carry the world in their hands, awoke in me on that platform.

(*SL* 247)

Williams's urgent and compelling sense of correlation between science and art is of course a consistent feature of his writing in general. “How can we accept Einstein's theory of relativity, affecting our very conception of the heavens about us”, Williams's asks rhetorically in 1948, “without incorporating its essential fact – the relativity of

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<sup>190</sup> Peter Middleton, “Poetry, Physics, and the Scientific Attitude at Mid-Century”, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 21 No. 1 (January, 2014), p. 149.

measurements – into our own category of activity: the poem” – thus positing his theorisation of “the variable foot” as directly related not just to the modern world, but to Einsteinian physics in particular, as a signal and symptom of modernity. As Williams writes retrospectively of Einstein's first visit to the United States in 1924: “Einstein has come by force of / complicated mathematics” to America, “bringing” a Spring of knowledge like “April in his head”, his theories a reminder to poets (and to all) that “flowers and men / were created / relatively equal” (*CP I* 414). It is a “valid juxtaposition”, Williams likewise asserts, to assume as “alternates [...] the cosine, the / cylinder and the rose” (*CP II* 72).

However, Williams's intense awareness that in the nuclear age men now have the capacity “very uncertainly [to] move the world” – indeed, that they “carry the world in their hands” – is not just a spur to his own creative innovations, but a source of recurring disquiet and cautionary contemplation of collective life in the modern era. “Dr. Williams”, the composer Steven Reich suggests, “was acutely aware of the bomb”,<sup>191</sup> to the extent that, as Ian Flanagan similarly observes, it “functions” for him “as an ultimate symbol of knowledge corrupted, of knowledge that has become destructive.”<sup>192</sup> The American detonation of nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 in particular comes to inflect and fixate Williams's politico-poetic consciousness thereafter – a reminder for him of the destructive capabilities of the modern age and the almost unthinkable endangered state which everything he celebrates in his poems (his fellow “flowers and men”) now occupies.

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<sup>191</sup> cit., Mark Rudman, “William Carlos Williams in America: Part II”, *The American Poetry Review*, Vol. 37 No. 3 (May/June, 2008), p. 33.

<sup>192</sup> Ian Flanagan, “Hearing the American Voice: Thomas Kinsella and William Carlos Williams”, *Irish Studies Review*, Vol. 16 No. 3 (August, 2008), p. 311.

In the post-war years, the bomb becomes the counterweight to almost every object of Williams's attention – a thematic weather that saturates and invades his field of reference. Having driven through a desolate New Jersey town in 1950, Williams writes to James Laughlin with uneasy awe: “witnessing what one small storm can do to a community in these parts I am awonder over the thought of what a single small atom bomb might not accomplish” (*WCW / JL*, 199). Similarly, referencing Gertrude Stein, Williams's creatively integral assertion that “[a] rose is a rose /                    and the poem equals it / if it be well made” (*CP II* 301) is given depth and context by his equally compulsive understanding:

  [...] that the bomb  
  also  
is a flower  
  dedicated  
  howbeit  
to our destruction.

(*CP II* 321)

As Tony Barnstone suggests, “Williams's contradictory figures cease to be contradictory when we think of him as a dialectical and not a binary thinker” – the figure of the flower, specifically, coming to represent “a thing of beauty” and “a thing of use”, including destructive use.<sup>193</sup> So, in the piece above, even if the poem can match the form of a rose, and therein partake of the world's material process, for Williams such an aspiration is both shadowed and sharpened by the atomic reality of the post-war world .

Ironically, perhaps, from its very ubiquity and magnitude in modern life the bomb

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<sup>193</sup> Tony Barnstone, “Ivory Towers and War Machines: William Carlos Williams and the Humanities Under Fire”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 31 No. 1 (Spring, 2014), pp. 43-44.

emerges as a trope in Williams's thought and work in this period that seems to be as flippantly deployed as it is universally implicating – as a symbol of mass destruction. In this respect, Williams's poems – although often absent from critical discussions of America's “poetry of the bomb” –<sup>194</sup> arguably stand alongside those of Robinson Jeffers, for example, whose forthright condemnation of nuclear weapons is matched by an uncompromising pessimism as to the fate and importance of the human species. “So the thing will kill cities”, Jeffers declares, “[w]e shall be well without them”, elsewhere concluding that “Humanity [is] the atom to be split” – his blend of emphatic clarity and easy dismissal an approach that has been deemed problematic, if not morally callous.<sup>195</sup> As the discussion below indicates, similar issues pertain to Williams's literary work and attitude to atomic politics in the post-war period. Recalling the mood of the little magazine scene of the 1920s in his *Autobiography* (1951), for example, Williams remarks:

... out of the blue *The Dial* brought out *The Waste Land* and all our hilarity ended. It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust... Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just as the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself – rooted in the locality which should give it fruit.

(A 174)

If Williams's equation of the publication of *The Waste Land* with a nuclear detonation seems to undermine his claim to understand either, the juxtaposition is nevertheless a telling one, and offers a concise indication of a number of the defining preoccupations of his later work. In itself, there is of course a disarming ease and more than a whiff of sententious self-regard in Williams's decision to compare *The Waste Land* to an “atom

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<sup>194</sup> See, for example, Paul Boyer's otherwise definitive *By the Bomb's Early Light* (Chapel Hill, 1985/94).

<sup>195</sup> cit., Scott McClintock, “The Poetics of Fission in Robinson Jeffers”, *Clio*, Vol. 37 Issue 2, p. 188.

bomb” here – an extreme instance of his constant credo that the work of poetry is as urgent and culturally impactful as the forces of political life. The main point, however, is that for Williams the atom bomb has assumed a unique symbolic resonance – and moreover, one that orders and infuses some of his most ambitious engagements in these years with subjects as all-encompassing as death, romantic intimacy, and poetic measure: three themes, incidentally, that tessellate in his late poem, “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”.

“Asphodel” evolves a holistic vision of imaginative and emotional renewal, a love poem that stands also as a far-ranging paean to earthly processes of loss and interconnection, regeneration and death. “It is all”, Williams writes, “a celebration of the light”, referring to both his memories of married life and his grappling with poetic conventions as a writer, as he revises a line from Spenser and Eliot in a new measure:

It is all  
a celebration of the light.  
All the pomp and ceremony  
of weddings,  
“Sweet Thames, run softly  
till I end  
my song,” –  
are of an equal sort.

(*CP II* 336)

There is of course a crispness to the apparent generosity of Williams's tone here, as he asserts an equality between the “world we enjoy” and the various forms of “Medieval pageantry” we inherit (which include, presumably, the poetry of Eliot and Spenser) while nevertheless writing in the “variable foot” to which he so often opposes these. Yet the primary tension that drives and animates the poem lies not in any discrepancy between

form and content. Rather, the abiding force of “Asphodel” (at once moral and material) consists in the fluent mode of celebration and acceptance of life that it seems to naturalise, and in its simultaneous divination of total, irreversible technological disaster. If everything is “a celebration of the light” the celebrating consciousness of the poem nonetheless remains shadowed by auguries of nuclear devastation:

The poem  
    if it reflects the sea  
            reflects only  
its dance  
    upon that profound depth  
            where  
it seems to triumph.  
    The bomb puts an end  
        to all that.

(*CP II* 321)

“Asphodel” acknowledges the threat of atomic warfare as an indelible force pervading the modern world and creative consciousness itself, and so extends what Barrett Watten refers to in another context as Williams's “anticipatory poetics of destruction.”<sup>196</sup> The critical voltage of Williams's acknowledgement in this case, of course, is such that even in its apparent arrest and derogation, poetry's capacity for critique and discursive intervention is expanded. Humankind now “expect that the world [will] be set on fire by a totality which they themselves are and over which they have no control”, observe Adorno and Horkheimer of the forms of “mythic terror” undergirding twentieth-century society –<sup>197</sup> an ethical outlook similarly engaged by Williams, whose “Asphodel” mounts a passionate condemnation of human violence, rapacity and prejudice in general. Of these, Williams suggests, “the bomb” is primarily a symptom, rather than cause:

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<sup>196</sup> Barrett Watten, “Destruction and Universals in William Carlos Williams's *The Wedge*”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Volume 32, Nos 1-2 (2015), p. 198.

<sup>197</sup> Adorno, Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 29.





Imagine you saw  
a field made up of women  
all silver-white.  
What should you do  
but love them?  
The storm bursts  
or fades! It is not  
the end of the world.  
Love is something else...

(*CP II 317*)

As the poem unfolds, Williams goes on to elaborate the analogy between the ways in which we conceptualise of personal harm and the manner in which we imagine more seismic forms of damage – interweaving the searing violence of atomic power with the often hidden violating capacities that define the life we share, at its most individual and intimate levels. “Approaching death”, Williams yearningly suggests, need not in itself constitute “the death of love”, though each may in some sense be predicated on the other – a paradox Williams explores further in his avowal that:

[it] is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.  
Hear me out  
for I too am concerned  
and every man  
who wants to die at peace in his bed  
besides.

(*CP II 318*)

The poem struggles to convey “the news” of the day; and yet the lines here nonetheless lend credence Williams's claim, elsewhere, that the poet stands as a particular kind of “social regenerator”, who articulates and makes visible the underlying conditions that create the peace and love, the misery and death, that “Asphodel” is so concerned to

address. The “facts”, Williams writes, “are enclosed in [the poet's] verses like a fly in amber” (*ARI* 109).

The diagnostic assertiveness of Williams's later statement that “we are sick to death / of the bomb” is very much in keeping with the complex interconnection adumbrated above – between a human history (and a human future) defined principally by the bomb's annihilating possibilities, and individual lives divorced from “love [...] which is a sea, / which is a garden” (*CP II* 322). Williams's sense of personal foreboding serves to probe and reveal the atomic culture of America itself. “The mere picture”, Williams asserts,

of the exploding bomb  
fascinates us  
so that we cannot wait  
to prostrate ourselves  
before it.

(*CP II* 321-22)

Williams's summary of the social manifestations of America's atomic obsession is remarkably astute. For as his “picture / of the exploding bomb” suggests, and as Jennifer Fay has shown in a critical context, the discourse of nuclear warfare permeates the popular imaginary in the USA post-1945, reaching an initial peak in the first live televised broadcast of an atomic detonation in April, 1952 – “the bomb” thenceforward coming to haunt almost every aspect of ordinary life for millions of Americans. “After Hiroshima”, Fay writes, “and as World War II gave way to the geopolitics of Mutually Assured Destruction, anyone in a major city, especially, lived with the knowledge of their vulnerability to nuclear annihilation.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Jennifer Fay, “Atomic Screen Test”, *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2016), pp. 611-614.

Importantly, such a national atmosphere is in many respects a continuation of the domestic dynamics of total warfare experienced in the lead-up to 1945 – the climate, that is, of tensed attention to the possibility of destruction at home, to which Williams himself bears ample testament in his poems and correspondence. In 1942, for example, we find Williams offering the following account of weekend activities to his son Bill:

[I went with] Mother to the ball field, it being Sunday afternoon, to see a demonstration of defense measures against incendiary bombing by experts.... They showed us how magnesium, phosphorus, sodium and several other types of bombs burned, showing us the effects of water as a spray, as a stream, etc.

What Fay terms “The Atomic Everyday” in American culture, in short, is an extension (if also an escalation) of exactly the kind of routinisation of potential atrocity which Williams describes here. As Fay shows, however, the imagination (and image-making) of nuclear capabilities hinted at in Williams's poem above is also one part of much wider cultural phenomenon, whereby state-sponsored films of atomic tests are screened for American audiences across the nation (from 1945 onwards), normalising ideas of “[a]tomic explosions without thermonuclear war”,

[of] targeting without malice, repetition for the sake of demonstrating repeatability... [they] may well have traumatized those who looked upon the irradiated desert with a different set of expectations or who were caught unaware. But as scheduled and predictable events, the tests thematized and aestheticized as non-traumatic the repetition of controlled catastrophe.<sup>200</sup>

As Fay suggests, during the postwar era the existence of nuclear weapons creates in American (technically, the aggressor) society a culture acclimatised to the idea of its own destruction – an idea very often given substance by actual film footage designed to naturalise the reality of atomic blasts. This, of course, may plausibly explain one of the

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 615.

most striking features of Williams's approach to “the bomb” in his poetry: namely, his conflation of the effects of a potential detonation with its seductiveness as a media event. “The mere picture” of the exploding bomb, Williams perceives, “fascinates us” (*CP II* 322). Nuclear warfare in Williams's work, is as much an imaginative trope to be assimilated as it is a material or military reality to be faced. Hence, in “To a Dog Injured in the Street”, Williams reflects (once again in the rhythmically variable triadics typical of his later work):

It is myself,  
                  not the poor beast lying there  
                                  yelping with pain  
that brings me to myself with a start –  
                  as at the explosion  
                                  of a bomb, a bomb that has laid  
all the world waste.  
                  I can do nothing  
                                  but sing about it  
and so I am assuaged  
                                  from my pain.  
  
(*CP II* 255)

The poem's persona speaks from the limbo that exists between the almost unreachable imagination of the bomb and the excoriating pain it causes – projecting an image of “the explosion” that, by being divorced from the reality of its effects as such, creates a new psychological reality out of which the poet must work. In this sense, Williams's poem arguably expresses a thematic tension to be found animating the postwar imagination of the bomb in general. As Paul Boyer succinctly observes: “[o]verwhelming as the bomb was, except for a few scientists and several hundred thousand Japanese, it was not lived experience”.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p. 250.

Significantly, Williams's admission of poetic powerlessness paradoxically serves at the same time to alleviate, if not the material “waste” and destruction the bomb has caused, then at least the dread and unease which atomic discourses have injected into the daily life of his society. To express that life may seem a hopeless task, but for Williams such expression remains poetry's redeeming purpose. “When a man makes a poem”, Williams contends, he offers

an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn't what he *says* that counts... it's what he makes, with such intensity of perception it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity.

(CP II 54)

As Williams sees it, by rendering the tenor and texture of everyday life communicable – even if that life is defined by the prospect of destruction – the poem makes legible that which otherwise is inclined only to vanish. So, just as “men die miserably” from what “the news” very often lacks, for Williams “the bomb” as a motif permeates modern culture with a mechanistic, life-depriving dread – a dread the poem may not negate, but can nevertheless assimilate into a wider vista of human relations.

As ever, Williams elaborates such a perspective with jolting precision and a noticeably political emphasis. As Sarah Posman has noted, the composition of “Asphodel” coincides with the FBI investigation of Williams as a communist sympathiser, with the poem's general urge “to relate the life of poetry to the work of love and the imagination” similarly “going against' the political climate” of its moment.<sup>202</sup> “There is no power [...] so great as love”, Williams writes:

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<sup>202</sup> Sarah Posman, “Williams, Nostalgia, and Modernity”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 33 Nos 1-2 (2016), p. 143.

Few men believe that  
    nor in the games of children.  
        They believe rather  
in the bomb  
    and shall die by  
        the bomb.  
Compare Darwin's voyage of the *Beagle*,  
    a voyage of discovery if ever there was one  
        to the death  
incommunicado  
    in the electric chair  
        of the Rosenbergs.  
It is the mark of the times  
    that though we condemn  
        what they stood for  
we admire their fortitude.

(*CP II 323*)

Williams's comparison of Darwin's "voyage of discovery" with the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg – for their alleged conspiracy to funnel nuclear codes to the Soviet Union – is an unlikely one. If anything, indeed, Williams's juxtaposition seems to strain under both the casualness of his tone and the disparity of obvious connections between the two events described. Yet the sequence may be taken as characteristic of Williams's abiding fascination with the question of nuclear warfare and its many implications for the modern world – a motif, as noted, that is also a conditioning circumstance inflecting and recurring throughout "Asphodel".

The comparison also points once again to the significance Williams accords to the symbolic events which we consume as "news", first, and which are then accepted as "facts" – a process paralleling that broader cultural trend that so compels Williams here, towards both destruction and discovery. "But Darwin", Williams writes,

opened our eyes

to the gardens of the word,  
as *they* closed them.

(*CP II 323*)

Williams's sympathy for the Rosenbergs may seem either thoroughly dubious or hopelessly short-fused – a perplexing blend of patriotic acceptance of the injustice they suffered with half-hearted admiration for their resilience in the face of it. Yet as is perhaps suggested in the segment above, Williams's reference to the Rosenbergs' trial is in the first instance an attempt to emphasise a symbolic and discursive concern of his time – acknowledging the trial as what Michael Thurston calls a “mediated and Media-tied” reflection of the wider modernity that the poem sets out to understand and engage in poetic terms.<sup>203</sup> For Williams, the execution of the Rosenbergs is indicative of that narrowing of aesthetic experience which the culture of “the bomb”, closing “our eyes / to the gardens of the word”, has wreaked on individual and collective life in America – the dual mixture of condemnation and sympathy elicited by their execution a testament to the terrifying intimacy of atomic discourse in the society Williams seeks to catalogue and represent.

As Boyer's study testifies, such effects as Williams diagnoses and records here are in fact widely evident throughout the postwar American scene – dominating governmental affairs and popular culture alike – so that “the bomb” in many ways establishes a new discursive climate. By Valentine's Day, 1946, Boyer observes, radio host Bob Hope can be heard joking on air:

Have you noticed the modern trend in verses this year.... No more of this 'Roses are red, violets are blue.' I picked up one [card] and it showed an atom bomb exploding, and under it a verse that read: 'Will you be my little geranium, until we

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<sup>203</sup> Michael Thurston, *Modernism, Inc.: Body, Memory, Capital* (New York, 2001), p. 4.



are both blown up by uranium?<sup>204</sup>

It is notable that Williams himself depicts the significance of atomic culture and the necessity for a new, rectifying poetic measure in exactly this fashion. Positing “the bomb” as “a flower /        dedicated [...] to our destruction”, Williams also portrays his own marriage as “a life filled, /    if you will, / with flowers” (*CP II* 310) – a figuration clearly more ambivalent than its initial appearance in the poem might suggest.

Similarly, Williams's subtle hints at self-rebuke – suggesting an analogy between the physical and cultural damage exacted by nuclear technology and the quieter, but nevertheless enduring havocs of private life – encompass even the creative process, that symbol-making impulse in which he is engaged as a poet. After addressing his “flowerlike” wife, Williams adds:

[...] I quickly  
                                 correct myself  
for you were a woman  
                                 and no flower  
                                 and had to face  
the problems which confront a woman.

(*CP II* 332)

Beginning with the cult of panic and degradation signified by nuclear technology, and stretching to the indignities and betrayals of Williams's personal life, “Asphodel” seeks to expose and mitigate a range of violences in contemporary culture. Here, however, Williams renders the socially diagnostic element in the poem explicit, with a particular emphasis on the singularity and representativeness of women's experience .

As the discussion below (and in other segments of this thesis) suggests, such a self-

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<sup>204</sup> cit., Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p. 21.



engagement with “East Coker” seems merely to be an attempt to concretise its motifs and contextualise its conclusions. Eliot's poem enacts a compelling meditation on themes of mortality and meaning, poetic ritual and psychic self-intimacy – describing an experiential state in which “the darkness [can] be the light, and the stillness the dancing”, akin, he observes, to the self-awareness experienced when “an underground train [...] stops too long between stations” and “you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen / leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about”.<sup>205</sup>

Williams constructs a similar counterpoint: between mute, nullifying stillness on the one hand, and transcendent understanding on the other. Unlike Eliot in 1940, however, Williams in 1946 posits atomic warfare as the “superhuman” source of such existential unease – rather than the “mental emptiness” of mass existence itself. “The innocent locomotive”, Williams writes,

laboring against the grade  
streams its cloud of smoke  
above the fallen snow.

Its labors are human to  
the superhuman dread that  
fastens every mind upon  
the coming blast of bombs.

(*CP II* 106)

Recalling his much-quoted definition of “the poem” as “a small (or large) machine made out of words” (*CP II* 54), Williams should be understood here as replacing Eliot's concern with “Adam's curse” and mortality itself with a more probing interrogation of the “innocence” of “human” things in general – not to mention poetry's complex role as both object and instrument in this process. Indeed by suggesting a form of collective imagining

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<sup>205</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London, 1978/1944), pp. 19-21.

of the bomb, one which “fastens every mind upon” its own devastating possibilities, Williams depicts the act of ideation itself as a kind of labor, comparable to other (more manual) forms of construction and innovation – the fastening together of atomic fears a process as universal and eerily implicating as the industrialised building of the bombs themselves.

Similarly – and in step with Eliot's claim that “[i]n my beginning is my end” –<sup>206</sup> Williams opens and closes his poem with the train itself, converting Eliot's fleeting analogue into a central and illustrative point of fact. Unlike the “bombs” of the second stanza, Williams's locomotive is innocent, in etymological terms, because it has not been created to cause harm – while the poem bears witness to both the incommensurable obliterative potential of modern military technology and the elusive, but much-needed mending capacities of its own craft. Although modernity's means of (and appetite for) destruction may be “superhuman”, Williams can still contend that “nothing can

stop the truth of it art is all we

can say to reverse  
the chain of events and make a pileup  
of passion to match the stars

(*CP II 377*)

If Williams's poem pointedly revises the dichotomies and emphases of Eliot's “East Coker”, then, it is important to note that his poem elevates such a critical valency above the level of poetic rivalry with Eliot . Hence Williams acknowledges in the poem (atypically, it must be said) the atmosphere of “dread” created by the coming, collective “blast of bombs” as one that overshadows, in material terms, the respective differences

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<sup>206</sup> Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 15.

between the two poets in their work.

Peacefully we quarrel  
over the doctrinal wage-rate,  
build the cathedral, split  
hairs in internecine wars.

And we too shall die  
among the rest and the brave  
locomotive stand falling apart  
untended for a thousand years.

(*CP II* 106)

Although the disharmony he intuits between Eliot and himself may be profound, Williams suggests that these are of secondary importance when viewed among the common human “labors” to which they both contribute, and which stand so universally threatened by the violence of atomic warfare.

The braveness and “untended” state of the locomotive in the poem's final stanza, of course, resonates not merely as a sign of fortitude in the face of fearful isolation, but also (and perhaps more importantly) as a projection of a society no longer civilised. Both through its origins in the Spanish *bravo*, meaning *savage*, and through its specifically American usage with regard to native tribal warriors, the word *brave* connotes exactly that wildness to which the “cathedral” of the church and the “wage-rate” of the state have been persistently opposed – particularly in an American context. As this may suggest, and as the next segment of this thesis will demonstrate, Williams's critique of modernity's violence, his sense of the forms of carnage that frame and determine American life, is not only projective – diagnosing the cultural contagion of the present in light of “the coming blast of bombs” (*CP II* 106). Rather, Williams's thorough-going exploration of the poem as a mode of cultural analysis also demands a finely tuned historical consciousness. In his

later poems, moreover, Williams can be found re-framing traditional national narratives in terms of the still palpitating violence that typifies the experience of Native American communities specifically – a procedure which proves at times to be as critically vexing as it is politically engaged.

### 3.4 *Savage Flowers: Symbolising Native America*

As this segment of the discussion will illustrate, in his late poetic efforts to address the discursive, historical, and material discriminations experienced by Native Americans, Williams displays a double-edged talent for exposing the hypocrisies of his nation and era. If his poems serve as defiant rebuttals to traditional myths of manifest destiny and democratic inclusiveness in America, Williams also treats of Native American figures as internal outsiders to be totemised rather than people to be learned from or listened to. In this respect, Williams perhaps reiterates the relatively progressive, but ultimately alienating paternalism of dominant 'Indian policy' in the United States from the 1930s to the 1960s. Writing of the ground-breaking Indian Reorganisation Act of 1934, which established “federally supported tribal governments and [marked] an effort to resuscitate reservation economies”,<sup>207</sup> Stephen Cornell concludes:

The irony [of the IRA] is that despite [some] advances, the basic assumption of Indian policy was little changed. Neither the IRA nor the Indian New Deal challenged the fundamental belief that Indians would, and probably should, be assimilated ultimately by the society around them.<sup>208</sup>

If such an energetic ambivalence towards Native American rights and culture is apparent in the policies of the American federal government in this period, it is also arguably a feature of Williams's own approach at a poetic level. Conscious of what Dee Brown

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<sup>207</sup> Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native* (New York, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

summarises as “the poverty, the squalor and the hopelessness of the modern Indian” experience, Williams similarly relates these conditions to a larger narrative of colonisation and racial violence against Native American tribes; and yet even as he attends to such historical continuities in his work, Williams betrays a superficial (and racially charged) conception of Native Americans as such, who appear in the poems more as iconographic compositions than as articulate agents.<sup>209</sup>

It should be acknowledged, of course, that one of the most striking aspects of Williams's exploration of issues of Native American identity in his poetry is his effort to do so in the first place – an impulse largely absent from the work of his high modernist contemporaries.<sup>210</sup> Williams's awareness of the continually violated and suppressed importance of Native American cultures in American life in fact has deep roots. “History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery”, he observes with evident anger in 1925, “we are not Indians, but we are men of their world [...] Fierce and implacable we kill them, but their spirit is master” (*IAG* 39-40). In a similar mode, and partly in response to seeing first-hand the living conditions in certain reservation areas over the course of a road trip he takes in 1947, in the collection *The Clouds* (1948) Williams issues a number of politically searing evocations of indigenous hardship, which draw a line of association between contemporary Native American deprivation and the systematic crimes committed against such communities in the past. In addressing the forms of indigence and constraint that define Native American experience in the present day, moreover, Williams highlights the complex politics of description in which he

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<sup>209</sup> Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (London, 1970), p. xvi.

<sup>210</sup> D. H Lawrence may be the most obvious exception here; see Phyllis Deery Stanton, “Processing the Native American Through Western Consciousness: D. H. Lawrence and the Red Indians of the Americas”, *Wicazo Sa Review*, Vol 12 No 2 (1997), pp. 59-84.

himself is involved as a writer. As Stephen Park has argued, Williams's art is “less concerned with study” of native America “than with provocation, a method less interested in championing the 'virile' culture of the North than in shining a light on its decay”.<sup>211</sup>

This is certainly true of the poem “Navajo”, in which Williams's image of a Native American woman walking the desert serves not just as an exposure of the injustices and harsh conditions with which his chosen figure must grapple, but also as an interrogation of the poem's own position amid the discourses of church, state, and national imagining that frame her. From the outset, Williams inscribes the poem's descriptive concerns with a self-searching reflexivity, including an admonitory apostrophe to himself and his reading audience in parenthesis:

(Keep Christ out  
of this – and  
his mountains:  
Sangre de Cristo  
red rocks that make  
the water run  
blood-red)

(CP II 150-51)

As Williams's dismissal of “Christ” and “his mountains” suggests, even the geographical language available to situate the experience of the Navajo woman is, in a sense, a falsity and imposition – a residue of that “blood-red” history of religious and ecological colonisation that forms so central a concern of his earlier book, *In the American Grain*. As Williams notes in that work, and as his impassioned apostrophe above implies, America was “thickly populated with a peaceful folk when Christ-over found them. But the orgy of blood which followed, no man has written. We are the slaughterers. It is the

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<sup>211</sup> Stephen M. Park, “Mesoamerican Modernism: William Carlos Williams and the Archaeological Imagination”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 34 No. 4 (Summer, 2011), p. 26.



tortured soul of our world” (*LAG* 41). Although potentially ineffable, Williams by contrast takes it upon himself, as a matter of literary necessity, to write what “no man has written”, the excised chapters of his nation's history – and to some controversy. “I feel sure that one of the things I ought not to do”, Wallace Stevens confides to Marianne Moore in 1925, “is to review Williams's book [*In the American Grain*]. What Columbus discovered is nothing to what Williams is looking for.”<sup>212</sup>

From the perspective of present scholarship, Williams's poem also impels an acknowledgement of contemporaneous issues, including the military and industrial despoliation of Navajo tribal lands throughout the second half of the twentieth century (and currently). As a recent *New York Times* report observes, “from the days of the cold war” onwards “hundreds of uranium mines dotted the vast tribal land known as Navajo Nation”, with “some four million tons of uranium ore” extracted over six decades – “much of it used by the United States government to make weapons.”<sup>213</sup> The legacy of such practices (dating from the late 1940s, when Williams is writing), the article continues, has been “long and painful”, with a steady increase in “radiation-related illnesses” and deaths among the local (Native) population. Indeed, a similarly pertinent report issued by the *Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency* in early 2018 suggests that the depth and extent of health issues caused by such mining practices remains largely undocumented, and stresses the “need for [...] studies of the effects on the environmental and human health of exposure to uranium mines” and an assessment of the “potential impacts and risks of new uranium development” – which, it seems, has not yet

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<sup>212</sup> cit., Martha Helen Strom, “The Uneasy Friendship of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 11 No. 2 (July 1984), p. 293.

<sup>213</sup> Dan Frosch, “Uranium Contamination Haunts Navajo Country”, *The New York Times* (July 26, 2009): <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/27/us/27navajo.html> (accessed 14/07/18).

been outlawed.<sup>214</sup> The poem above invites a consideration of such facts and contexts – and particularly in light of Williams's intense awareness of America's burgeoning nuclear capabilities in the period in which it is written.

Of course, the religious, colonial, and perhaps industrial cartography that help to frame “Navajo” cannot entirely distract from (or dispel) the apparent heavy-handedness of Williams's poetic approach. The overall tendency in the piece, after all, is to interpret the material features of the poem's subject and setting solely in terms of the aesthetic resonance that Williams himself wishes to extract from them. Hence, Williams describes and salutes the woman in simplified language, as a “squaw in red ” who walks

paralleling  
the highway . . .  
– head mobbled  
red, red  
to the ground –

(*CP II* 151)

The “red woman” and “the / desert animating” her appear as mutual, near-symbiotic elements of the overall picture – and yet the picture itself seems designed to convey an image not just of deprivation, but of primitiveness itself. The “red woman” moves through the poem with silent intent, her “fixed sight / stalking / the gray brush” that stretches from the roadside where Williams is driving (*CP II* 151). If the piece appears to fulfil his understanding of “the poem [as] the lifting of an environment to expression” (*SL* 286), Williams nevertheless posits the woman as a generic category, trading on essentialist and reductive tropes of Native American identity to bring the historical and material environment in question into view. “Red woman”, Williams writes,

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<sup>214</sup> Diné Uranium Remediation Advisory Commission, *2018 First Quarter Report* (Window Rock, 2018), p. 2.

[I see you] walking  
erect, the  
desert animating  
the blood to walk  
erect by choice  
through  
the pale green  
of the starveling sage

(*CP II* 151)

Williams focuses on the Navajo woman through a lens of problematic assumptions, invoking images of indigenous dignity/savagery that are as mystifying as they are prejudicial – and which may constitute, in the words of Bradley Reed Howard, “a political act of alienation” that arguably represents “the construction of [an] object, rather than the apprehension of the Other”.<sup>215</sup> By Williams's circular symbolic logic, the woman is representative of Navajo experience because she is a “red squaw”, her supposed redness both an inescapable fact, for Williams, and an elusive poetic truth.

Such an alienating conception of the woman's experience conjures notions of ethnic difference that are all too familiar from late nineteenth and early twentieth century cultural discourse in America, verging on racialism. As Patricia Nelson Limerick has argued, such notions are a feature of American settler colonial thinking in general, which stretches to the beginning of the nineteenth century at least. “Euro-American ways of thinking”, Limerick writes,

were dominated by the ideas of civilization and savagery. Carrying associations of both nobility and violence, savagery was mankind's childhood, a starting stage in which society drew its shape and order from nature. Savagery meant hunting and gathering, not agriculture; common ownership, not individual property owning; pagan superstition, not Christianity; spoken language, not literacy; emotion, not reason. Savagery had its charms but was fated to yield before the higher stage of civilization

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<sup>215</sup> Bradley Reed Howard, *Indigenous Peoples and the State* (DeKalb, 2003), p. 12.

represented by white Americans.<sup>216</sup>

Williams's depiction of the woman's dignified wildness above may be intended as a gesture of understanding, yet such a formulation at least partly reinforces the cultural logic Limerick identifies here – a logic undergirding the programme of dispossession and ethnic supremacy in American history that Williams attempts to critique. Williams's sympathy for the Navajo woman is instinctive, but also highly sensationalised – a factor perhaps explaining the tension that persists in the poem between the cultural assumptions it activates and the material perceptions it conveys.

A similar quality is evidenced throughout Williams's later work that treats of Native American themes. In the poem “Io Baccho!”, for example, Williams strives to lay waste to moralistic views of alcohol consumption in society, but in-so-doing reinforces that society's stereotypes of indigenous alcoholism . “God created alcohol to release and engulf us”, Williams writes, “It is for Mrs. Reiter / who is bored with having children”:

God created alcohol!  
– if it weren't for that I'd say  
there wasn't Any –  
thinking of Mrs R. who is  
one eighth American Indian  
and what with the pain in her guts  
stands like an Indian  
“If I had the strength”...

(*CP II 227*)

The poem's compulsive gaiety stems from its success in disarranging conventional moral standards, as well as its concomitant evocation of the (only semi-comic) implications of its own celebratory impulse – an exhausted mother with a “pain in her guts” (*CP II 227*). Yet Williams achieves this effect by explicit reference to the woman's ethnic ancestry and

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<sup>216</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York, 1987), p. 190.

supposed racial traits: for all the tedium of her situation, the fact of being “one eighth American Indian”, the poem nudgingly suggests, ensures alcohol's capacity “to release / and engulf” Mrs. Reiter in particular (*CP II* 227).

As is clear, Williams's deployment of racist thinking – of ideas, in brief, which posit racial classifications and distinctions as legitimate categories, as well as decisive elements of the critique they facilitate – is closely connected to an equally disconcerting tendency to mystify or misconstrue the experience of women as such. As Kate Schnur has noted, the more intensely Williams attempts “to *thing-ize* the female body” in his poems, the more the woman herself becomes “dematerialized, illuminated, and idealized” – a tendency exacerbated in Williams's work by his concomitant and often tribulating understanding of race and social alterity.<sup>217</sup> In “Io Baccho!”, of course, it is Williams's consciousness of the woman's social circumstances that occasions the poem's essential current of sympathy and critique – suggesting as he does that as “alcohol” is “the only evidence of God / in [her] environment”, it provides a much needed “release” from her constraining circumstances, and one that society at large has failed to provide. Yet as several segments of this discussion indicate, Williams's sympathetic stance toward the women he encounters (and seeks to praise) in his poems is by no means immune from critical scrutiny.

In “Navajo”, for example, and the same is true of Williams's “Asphodel”, the symbolic configuration surrounding the female figure described is underwritten by a complex sexual dynamic, encompassing images of desire and domination. Williams's descriptive

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<sup>217</sup> Kate Schnur, “‘I found another to admire’: The Thing of the Female Body in William Carlos Williams's Medical Narratives”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 33, Nos 1-2 (2016), pp. 174-75.

method in the poem has an undeniable onanistic charge, as he envisions the woman as an “erect” physical presence, through whom “the blood [is] walking” (*CP II* 151). Such a feature may lend credence to Cristina Giorcelli's understanding that “Williams's view of woman” is generally “patriarchal, essentialist, and conflictual (if not frankly sexist)”.<sup>218</sup> More precisely, such a frame and motif suggest that Williams's inability to pay sufficient or appropriate poetic tribute to the Navajo figure of the poem's title may be linked not just to the discourse and intricate history of racial persecution which divides them, but also to the registers of gendered oppression in which Williams's approach remains enmeshed. Williams may rightly question the validity (and expose the problematic framing function) of the religious-colonial topography in which he encounters the Navajo woman, but his somewhat witless objectification (and sexualisation) of her experience presents an equally decisive discursive gulf to the poem's intended praise and portraiture. So, Linda A. Kinnahan observes of Williams's *In the American Grain*:

The cluster of meanings that develop around Native American figures on the one hand romanticize and idealize this group; simultaneously, through the Indian, [Williams's writing] links the status of subordinated groups to patriarchal myths of mastery that, to maintain their power, necessitate the ideological 'mashing' of 'Indian [and] matron into one *safe* mold'....<sup>219</sup>

What Kinnahan neglects to clarify is that when viewed as a whole – poetry and prose – Williams's work can be seen to reproduce such patriarchal categorisations and distortions of Native American experience, thus complicating the critique he levels against church and state. If Williams adopts a revisionary attitude to American history and geography, his approach is often burdened by a failure to surmount his received views of women. In this respect, Williams's writing perhaps confirms what Adrienne Rich has argued in another

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<sup>218</sup> Cristina Giorcelli, “*Pictures from Breughel: looking backward, pointing forward*”, ed., MacGowan, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 120.

<sup>219</sup> Linda Kinnahan, *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in WCW, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 77.

context, that “[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”.<sup>220</sup>

Curiously, in this case Williams appears to be conscious to some degree of the contradictions inherent in his aesthetic method. Indeed the poem may even be read as an exercise in self-investigation and -rebuke on this score. Hence, if he seems to insist on imagining the woman in reductive terms, Williams nonetheless ends his initial description of this “squaw in red” on a note of self-accusation. “I suspected”, Williams writes, that

I should remember  
you this way:  
    walking the brain  
    eyes cast down  
    to escape ME!

(*CP II* 151)

In this light, rather than serving as a description of the Navajo woman herself, the poem can be understood as an exploration of the forms of complicity involved in Williams's own act of creative engagement with Native American experience – an act compromised, as we have seen, by the uneven racial and sexual relations presumed in his own approach. As the above extract implies, however, Williams is at least somewhat troubled by the conditioned, discursively damaging perspective he deploys in the poem, and seems aware of the implicated role he consequently occupies in the system of oppressive relations which render the woman's supposed “escape” into the desert so striking.

Williams in fact elaborates this gestalt of thematic tensions further in a second poem from

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<sup>220</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision”, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York, 1979/1995), p. 35.

the same collection, called “Graph”. Just as “Navajo” traces the interactions of race, gender, landscape, and language in an attempt to symbolise Native American identity in poetic terms, so “Graph” maps out the complex interconnection between the various power relations the poem makes visible and Williams's own authorial (and spectatorial) desires. In both their general theme and particular details, the poems stand in symbolic dialogue with one another. So in the first piece the Navajo woman walks the desert “paralleling the highway” with “eyes cast down / to escape ME!” (*CP II* 151), while in “Graph” Williams encounters a second woman, “a half-breed Cherokee”, waiting on the roadside. In contrast to the first Native American figure Williams describes, in “Graph” the woman stands in a position of implied sexual access, her gestures suggesting exactly that legibility of expression and contact which Williams has strained after and failed to attain in “Navajo”. Of the second woman, Williams writes that she

tried to thumb a ride  
out of Tulsa, standing there

with a bunch of wildflowers  
in her left hand  
pressed close  
just below the belly

(*CP II* 152)

Once again, Williams interprets the material experience of this Native American figure via his own supposedly “flower-like” (in reality, quite unsettling) pantomime of gender relations and sexualised desire. As ever in Williams's work, moreover, such a labyrinthine thematic web weaves suggestions of voyeuristic sexual desire and personal culpability into its larger understanding of the complex interconnections between racial, colonial, and gendered oppression – past and present. Williams's depiction of the woman as a “half-breed” trying “to thumb a ride”, with “her left hand / pressed close / just below the belly”,



succinctly invokes many of these elements in one stroke – conjuring that history of systemic racism and coercion which frames acts and discourses of miscegenation in general, as well as a sense of personal possessiveness and arousal on Williams's part.

In this last respect, the Navajo figure here is one example of what Williams earlier calls “[t]he pure products of America”: representative of a “marriage [with] a dash of Indian blood”, “a girl so desolate / so hemmed round / with disease or murder”, who in her sheer embodiment before the poet's eyes expresses “with broken // brain the truth about us” (*CP I* 218). Like “Elsie” of Williams's famous segment in *Spring and All*, in other words, the woman in “Graph” is presented not just as an embodied figure from Williams's life, but as a trope for the violence and persistence of American culture itself – which for Williams is a delectable, imagination-straining maelstrom of “promiscuity”, degradation, and “filth” (*CP I* 218-19). Without wishing to downplay the many objectifications undergirding the style of social portraiture in these pieces, it is nonetheless worth noting in a critical context how Williams's gleeful and insistent understanding of American identity as a “product” of multicultural flux and miscegenation marks a conscious retort to triumphalist, and certainly to white supremacist, versions of American history – including those formulated by Pound, for example. “Nothing is more damnably harmful to everyone, black and white than miscegenation”, Pound spews, suggesting that the government “ostracize 'em, surround 'em, cut 'em off” (presumably meaning “black” rather than “white” in this instance) – a view to which Williams is fundamentally opposed.<sup>221</sup> Such an emphasis, moreover, is a highly personal one for Williams, whose “mother” – as mentioned earlier in this discussion – “was half French”, while “the other

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<sup>221</sup> cit., Alex Houen, “Anti-Semitism”, ed., Ira B. Nadel, *Ezra Pound in Context* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 398.

half was a mixed breed”, as he writes in 1954. Significantly, this reference resurfaces with somewhat different (and more sinister) connotations in the reviews and correspondences of some of his contemporaries – Pound, for example, noting that

Carlos Williams has been determined to stand or sit as an American. Freud would probably say 'because his father was English' (in fact half English, half Danish).. [Yet] One might accuse him of being, blessedly, the observant foreigner, perceiving American vegetation and landscape quite directly, as something put there for him to look at.<sup>222</sup>

The remark is further clarified by Pound's earlier claim that while Williams demonstrates all “the naive credulity of a Co.Clare emigrant”, he himself can claim to have “the virus of the land in my blood, for nearly three bleating centuries” (*SE* 8). Somewhat perturbingly, such a theme also informs Wallace Stevens's private response to the retraction of Williams's appointment as poetry consultant to the library of congress, when he observes in 1953:

Williams is one of the few people in this country that really has been an active and constant interest in writing [but] I don't see how the government could be expected to countenance any man who is committed to throw bricks at it. Of all people, Williams would be the least justified in throwing bricks at [the government] anyhow because his case is typical of the philosophy with which America treats those who come to it from elsewhere. It is true that he was born in this country but neither one of his parents were....<sup>223</sup>

Like Pound above, Stevens praises Williams's achievement as a writer, but then goes on to cast him as a kind of unwitting outsider (or dissident), finally racialising that category in an attempt to explain the latter's targetting for his political beliefs: “he was born in this country but neither one of his parents were”.<sup>224</sup> If Williams himself can be seen to indulge in a form of presumptuous racialism that many readers understandably have found

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<sup>222</sup> Ezra Pound, “Dr. Williams's Position”, ed., T. S. Eliot, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York, 2009/1968), pp. 390-391.

<sup>223</sup> Wallace Stevens, ed., *Holly Stevens Letters* (London, 1966), p. 768.

<sup>224</sup> *Idem.*

objectionable, his democratic instinct and largely egalitarian intentions distinguish his work and outlook from those of his two peers here – whose racist thinking, for all its casualness, is very much a deep-seated affair.<sup>225</sup>

None of which changes the fact that in the poems discussed above, the Native American women Williams addresses are portrayed almost as natural decorations by the roadside, among the “wildflowers” that symbolise both their own spatial milieu and Williams's authorial and sexual desires. To quote Eavan Boland's observation (in another context): the “woman [is] a diagram. By the time the poem is over, she has become a dehumanized ornament.”<sup>226</sup> The agency, integrity, and identity of these “wildflowers”, in brief, Williams tends to elide – if not actively to debase, as we have seen. As Schnur remarks, Williams apparently “relies on these bodies' fragmentation, injury and pain in order to express their corporealization.”<sup>227</sup>

Such a problematic critique of material oppression is a frequent feature of Williams's later work, which engages prejudicial and essentialist discourses of race, gender, and social alterity, even when setting out to expose or dismantle exactly these – as the discussion above illustrates. Such a dynamic is neither clear-cut nor consistently negative in Williams's poems, however, which often indicate an impressive ability to acknowledge

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<sup>225</sup> As Adrienne Rich has noted of Stevens's work (which she admires): “Stevens's reliance on one-dimensional and abstract images of African-Americans is a watermark in his poetry. To understand how he places himself in relation to these and other dark-skinned figments of his mind – often Latin American and Caribbean lay figures – is to understand more clearly the meanings of North and South in Stevens's poetry, the riven self, the emotionally unhappy white man with a 'fairly substantial income,' the fugitive in the imagination who is repeatedly turned back by a wall of mirrors, whose immense poetic gift is thus compelled to frustrate itself.”; *What is found there: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York, 1993), pp. 204-5.

<sup>226</sup> Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (Manchester, 1995), p. 143.

<sup>227</sup> Schnur, p. 177.

their own thematic contradictions, as later portions of this analysis will show.

### 3.5 *A World of Two Shades: the Language of Racism*

As this segment suggests, Williams's portrayal of social alterity in his poetry can seem by turns misguided and offensive, by turns well intentioned and critically engaging. This tension in Williams's work may ultimately arise from his very presumption that social alterity exists as a valid classifying concept in the first place – allowing him to make aesthetically suggestive, if politically problematic (and ultimately arbitrary) distinctions between himself, his expected audience, and his poetic subjects. Throughout his later work, Williams thus makes reference both to race relations in America and to the supposedly inherent racial traits defining the characters he describes, almost as a rite of poetic passage. As his piece, “A Negro Woman”, makes plain, the referentiality of race in Williams's poems can often be as enervating in effect as it is energetic in tone. The poem begins with the following description of its titular character:

carrying a bunch of marigolds  
    wrapped  
                    in an old newspaper:  
She carries them upright,  
    bareheaded,  
                    the bulk  
of her thighs  
    causing her to waddle...

(*CP II 287*)

Like the Navajo and Cherokee figures discussed earlier, the “Negro Woman” here holds a vital, physically commanding presence for Williams, and yet at the same time seems curiously devoid of either speech or autonomy. Akin once again to “Elsie”, the woman “expresses” what Williams sees as the essence of a material scene – a street in a New

Jersey town – and yet her awareness of the facts that define her, her capacity for self-expression and advocacy in relation to those facts, is explicitly denied. Williams's racialised description casts the woman as “an ambassador” from “a world... of two shades”:

which she announces  
not knowing what she does  
other  
than walk the streets  
holding the flowers upright  
as a torch  
so early in the morning.

(*CP II 287*)

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others”, W. E. B. Du Bois observes, asserting that “[o]ne ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro [...] two warring ideals in one dark body”: a doubleness Williams's poem appears to grant, without acknowledging (in fact, refusing to recognise) her concomitant self-consciousness and agency.<sup>228</sup>

As before, if the woman and her flowers are indeed like “a torch” in daylight, the description may be understood as giving symbolic life to Williams's own observational capacities – signalling his skill in noticing and praising those details of his environment which ordinarily would be lost in their surroundings. As Jeffery Westover notes, for Williams in the poem, “what is necessary is to see, since knowledge” of the woman's experience is necessarily “limited.”<sup>229</sup> As such, the “bareheaded” appearance of the woman, “looking into the store window [as] she passes”, is primarily indicative of

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<sup>228</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 9.

<sup>229</sup> Jeffery Westover, “The Centrality of Seeing in *Journey to Love*”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 34 No. 1 (Spring, 2017), p. 33.

Williams's own ocular-poetic inclinations. The fact that the “Negro Woman” is portrayed as being “bareheaded”, similarly, is not only a social presumption on which the poem depends – reflecting her added alterity as a working-class figure – but also a direct reference to Williams's earlier poem, “Proletarian Portrait” (1935), which features a “young, bareheaded woman” as its subject (*CP I* 384). The point being that if, as Williams himself contends, “[the] artist is always and forever painting only one thing: a self-portrait” (*ARI* 184), then perhaps the voyeur in his poems is only ever describing one thing, too: himself – or specifically, that mode of attention his subjects inspire in him. As John Berger has suggested in another context, “[e]very image embodies a way of seeing.... The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper.”<sup>230</sup> The same may be said of Williams the writer – this “way of seeing” becoming a decisive and motivating concern of his poetry, and of his social portraits in particular.

As such an interpretation may suggest, cataloguing the provenance and ramifications of the various descriptive motifs and procedures which “Negro Woman” deploys can seem a dispiriting exercise. Not only are Williams's terms of reference laden with problematic connotations of racial, gendered, and class difference, but many of these resonate with Williams's corpus as a whole – implying a general failing rather than an isolated fault. As Jason Barr observes:

Though he obviously admires and seeks to understand the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, Williams himself often falls victim to patriarchal attitudes and language that often clouds his admiration [for them].<sup>231</sup>

In thematic terms, Williams's many descriptions of women can seem to blur into one –

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<sup>230</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1973), p. 10.

<sup>231</sup> Jason Barr, “Viewing Toni Morrison's *Paradise* as a Response to William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*”, *African American Review*, Vol. 44 Issue 3 (2011), p. 424.

featuring “flowerlike” imagery, using objectifying or prejudicial descriptive frames, and then making a compulsive identification of femininity with that curious blend (seen above) of self-possession and self-ignorance. As Toni Morrison observes in her study of “the fabrication of an Africanist persona” in literature, “the subject of the dream” is very often “the dreamer”, and as such can serve equally (in an American context) as a “revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity” – a tangle of emotions that seems perfectly expressive of Williams's literary attitude here.<sup>232</sup> On occasion, indeed, Williams courts both racism and sexism outright – as in “The Gentle Negress”. The poem reads:

No other such luxuriance: the  
elephant among bending trees,  
the grass parting and  
a horned head through! Small  
yellow-hearted flowers trampled,  
the tree broken that sends out  
six new heads come night-fall.

(*CP II 47*)

Williams's use of animalistic and sexualised images of jungle life to create a symbolic portrait of the poem's female subject is dehumanising at best. Engaging tropes of savage alterity and evoking images of sexual arousal and domination, the poem's method seems to be that of naturalising the prejudicial categories and discourses which its title engages. Going on to invoke “the shriek of monkeys that hides / a deeper tone”, the poem elaborates the analogy between Williams's encounter with the woman, a patient, and the exotic wildness which her skin-colour supposedly signifies. “Strong / in the leg, soft voiced”, Williams writes, insinuating a latent connection between the uncultivated environment described above and the woman's present feverish condition:

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<sup>232</sup> Toni Morrison, *playing in the dark* (Harvard UP, 1990), p. 17.

... Hiding  
and waiting; a luxuriance,  
a prominence. Unresistant to go  
down quietly, in a violence of  
half spoken words! Lillian!  
Lillian!

(*CP II 47*)

If Williams often frames his female subjects in socially biased and discursively debilitating terms, here this tendency is all the more deplorable for his association of the woman's skin colour with primitive exotica, to the extent that her only speech in the poem – “a violence of / half spoken words” – is portrayed as echoing and containing a distant “shriek of monkeys” (*CP II 47*). The racist overtones of such an identification are utterly unpalatable.

It should perhaps be noted that the piece is meant to stand as a rebuttal to the academic standards of poetry – and the elitist conventions of polite society – of Williams's place and time. As ever, Williams's intended provocation is to his poetry-reading audience, rather than to the people and communities he describes with such unheeding bias. With a professed affection for “the dirt men, the laborers who try to keep alive the *geist* [of the] poem”, Williams in fact identifies such perennial poetic targets directly: “the academy”, he writes, “the Eliots”, and “the hard students of literary history” (*SL 194*). Without excusing the racism of Williams's writing in this instance, we should remember that it is also in this last respect that he portrays the woman's “half spoken words” as a “violence” – her language and its incorporation into the poem serving as an authentic retort to what Williams views as the exclusive and outdated poetic institutions of his day. This point is perhaps illustrated in a sequel piece of the same name, published the following year in



Williams's collection *The Wedge* (1944). The later “Gentle Negress” reads as follows:

Wandering among the chimneys  
my love and I would meet  
I with a pale skin  
she as brown as peat

Her voice was low and gentle  
and full of surprise  
that I should find her lovely  
and would search her eyes

with a longing hard to fathom  
from what she said  
as I sat to comfort her  
lying in bed.

(*CP II 94*)

The piece revises W. B. Yeats's “Down by the Salley Gardens”, imitating its rhythm but replacing its imagery with features from the urban context in which Williams works as both poet and physician: “among the chimneys” of a city tenement, and by the sickbed of a woman for whom William feels unfathomable “love” and “longing” (*CP II 94*). While the poem may thus hold a certain intertextual and transatlantic interest, most vital to the discussion here is the fact that it shares with Williams's own antecedent piece a troubling willingness to portray the woman entirely through a racist prism – her status as a “negress” with skin “as brown as peat” inflecting every other descriptive detail, and serving, indeed, as the principal point of contrast with Yeats's snow-white muse.

Significantly, the second poem's emotional delicacy emerges from the same racial dynamic. Williams's desire “to comfort” the woman is matched by her own “surprise / that [he] should find her lovely” – the poem pacing the gap between physical intimacy and racial difference, and thus extending Yeats's theme of a lost love remembered into the

politically (and aesthetically) vexed sphere of American race relations . The critical effect of this emphasis in the poem is ultimately thwarted, however, by Williams's tendency to reiterate the divisions and discourses that entrench such relations, at the woman's expense – as indicated by the frame and tenor of both versions of the poem, as well as the blatant objectifications on which the first relies.

Although Williams seems never to escape (and indeed can appear, at times, actively committed to reinforcing) racist thinking in his poems, it is important also to recall the culturally diagnostic function which his poetry very often sets out to fulfil. As we see even with the two poems above, Williams frequently approaches his social portraits as both poet and clinician, examining his subjects with remedial intent and a sharp awareness of material context – with the result that even the seemingly incidental perceptions of poverty, inequality, and social tensions his poems include come to take on a central significance in his work. If such a salutary and motivating consciousness of social conditions in Williams's poetry does little to counteract the undeniable problems of the pieces above, it does occasionally allow scope for the interrogation of the physical and political manifestations of racism (and race thinking) in American life.

The late poem, “An Exercise”, may be taken as a case in point. “Sick as I am”, Williams the ageing and ailing doctor-poet writes in 1962, “I saw // a huge Negro”,

a dirty collar  
about his

enormous neck  
appeared to be  
choking

him

(*CP II 428*)

The image serves as both a literalistic rendition of the scene in question and a powerful metaphor for the material politics inscribing it. The poem becomes all the more evocative on both counts, indeed, when read through Williams's opening admission of ill health, suggesting as it does the pervasive and infectious nature of the political condition he goes on to relate. The poem continues:

... how  
shall we  
escape this modern

age  
and learn  
to breathe again

(*CP II 428*)

Branching out from his portrayal of the discomfort of the individual man, Williams's assertion of racial asphyxiation as a direct and systemic effect of “this // modern age” is both politically astute and immediately resonant. It is precisely this crime and condition, indeed, which has supplied one of the principal rallying cries of the recent #BlackLivesMatter movement in America, whose activists for racial and economic justice continue to chant the dying words of Eric Garner, repeated eleven times as he was being choked by law enforcement officers, “I can't breathe”. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has argued, “[a]ddressing institutional racism” of the kind that Garner's death represents “would require a full accounting of the myriad ways that racist discrimination factors in and shapes the daily lives of African Americans”, as well as a “redistribution of wealth and resources to undo the continuing damage.”<sup>233</sup> Williams's poem can hardly be said to

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<sup>233</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (New York, 2016), p. 108.

match such a societal critique in either its intensity or depth, but we should nonetheless appreciate the mutually imbricated understandings of race, poverty, and modernity that he advances in the poem – and the critical astuteness of such a concern.

If the footage (and the very fact) of Eric Garner's murder by police point to the searing, pervasive force of racism in America, the depiction of racial oppression in Williams's poem is primarily a propositional gesture. This is partly due to the obvious differences in kind between a video recording of a racially framed murder by agents of the law and a poem that is both an exercise in diaristic description and a largely speculative diagnosis of political malaise. Yet the comparison remains a useful one – not just for its indication of the acuity of Williams's political instincts, but also for highlighting the nature (and possible limitations) of his aesthetic approach. One of the messages of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, of course, is that racism doesn't need to be exposed – it's plain to see – but challenged and changed. Williams, by contrast, adopts an ethics of in-/visibility as a formative principle of his own analysis. Hence, of the “huge Negro” who “appeared to be / choking”, Williams writes:

I did not know  
whether or not

he saw me though  
he was sitting  
directly

before me

(*CP II* 428)

If it provides a compelling example of politico-poetic seeing, Williams's poem nevertheless is mediated by a discourse of ocular occlusion: the speaker and the subject of the poem are incapable of recognising one another or understanding the situation they

share (admittedly from different physical and racial positions). Whether understood as a mode of compassionate observation or as a form of political critique, in short, it is important to acknowledge how the piece concerns itself as much with rectifying the sensory disjunctions it describes as with criticising the structures of racism it intuits. In this respect, the poem arguably reflects a concern of Williams's overall poetics: what Susan McCabe describes in another context as his “emphasis upon texture”, which “converts the visual into the tactile” – or at least sets itself this aesthetic task.<sup>234</sup> Louis Zukofsky, similarly, hints at Williams's sense of (and attentiveness to) the visual ideology of public space, remembering the older poet walking with him “thru the swinging / red leather doors / of the Institute” where he used to teach and remarking on “a small square pane / of glass in each of them”, a feature that enforces a physical “blindness” on students approaching from opposite directions, and put there, Williams suggests to Zukofsky, “to prevent [...] mutual faces”:

'I've walked thru  
some years now  
and never till you  
said saw these panes'  
[Williams] consoled with  
'mere chance  
that I looked'<sup>235</sup>

As with Williams's observation of such architectural features here, in the poem above his pained realisation that he and the “huge Negro” before him are denied “mutual faces” is diagnostic of deeper – and in this case, racially defined – societal divisions and controls. The political and aesthetic aims of the poem above are thus one and the same: to expose racial oppression, and specifically by realising that condition which poetry itself partly supplies. For Williams, this condition seems to be founded on an experience of mutual

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<sup>234</sup> Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism*, p. 131.

<sup>235</sup> Zukofsky, “A”, pp. 362-363.

visibility among strangers and a synchronous ease in breathing freely – both of which take on clearly political connotations in the race-critical context of this particular poem. “I am invisible”, the nameless narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1953) begins, “simply because people refuse to see me” – a colour-coded predicament that Williams's piece, in its way, attempts to resolve.

Of course, and as mentioned, Williams may be read not just as highlighting the material privations and divisions which modern American race relations entail, but also as commenting, once again, on poetry as a form of sensory access to the world. “The poem”, Williams writes, “is the assertion that we are alive as ourselves – as much of the environment as it can grasp” (SL 286). If this may seem more a circumscription than an asset in the poem's political analysis, it is nonetheless significant in illustrating the complex and demanding *vision* of poetry that Williams elaborates in his work – a topic examined in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

### 3.6 *Envisioning Violence: The Politics of Mourning*

As we have seen in earlier segments of this discussion, Williams's poetics both demand and enact a perceptual openness to the material world – emphasising the need to see ordinarily disregarded *things* (and, apparently, people) afresh, but in such a way as also explores the various processes and problematics of poetic perception. So in “The Girl With the Honey Colored Hair”, for example, Williams stages in microcosm what might be termed the visual culture of daily life – the physical and social forms of perception, interaction, and mutual revelation that frame the girl's entrance into a hospital room. “Everyone looked”, Williams writes in the poem, “and, passing, revealed / himself” (CP

*II* 221). One result is that the meticulous cataloguing of characters which follows – of “the haggard drunk / holding onto the backs of the seats” and “the savage-looking female wearing / a picture hat” – serves once more to highlight Williams's own spectatorial role and process in the scene described. For Williams as a poet, to make life visible is as much an act of self-revelation and sensuous self-intimacy as it is of outward description . Williams's meditation on Michelangelo's series of slave-themed sculptures, entitled “The Yellow Flower”, may be relevant here. “I have eyes”, Williams writes,

that are made to see and if  
 they see ruin for myself  
     and all that I hold  
         dear, they see  
 also  
     through the eyes  
         and through the lips  
 and tongue the power  
     to free myself  
         and speak of it, as  
 Michelangelo through his hands  
     had the same, if greater,  
         power.

(*CP II* 259)

Art, in short, and whether understood as sculpture or poetry, is at least partly an extension of the individual's physical and sensory capacities – and indeed depends for its realisation on the enhanced application of these. Such a theme is reiterated throughout Williams's work. As early as 1920, Williams suggests that the purpose of literary art is the “lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses” (*SE* 11), while his later famous adage, “Say it! No ideas but in things” (*P* 9), consciously associates verbal articulacy, mental imagination, and materiality itself as interlinked elements of the poetic process. As the poem above suggests, however, if there is a universality to be had in an art that draws its “power” from the “eyes”, “lips / and

tongue”, Williams is very much aware of the potential insularity of a creativity centred on the individual's sensate powers or self-perceptions alone. The ability to feel, perceive, and interact with the material world may provide a common ground of poetic meaning, which theoretically all people can access, yet such an emphasis also points to the material inequalities, including the experience of suffering, felt disproportionately by some such people over others. So “The Yellow Flower” continues:

Which leaves, to account for,  
    the tortured bodies  
        of  
the slaves themselves  
    and  
        the tortured body of my flower

*(CP II 259)*

An acknowledgement of the correlation between art and reality, between the poet and the world he describes, must encompass the “tortured bodies” which co-exist with the writer in that reality – inhabiting, indeed, the same scope of sensory perception and potential empathy in which the poem takes shape. For Williams, poetic symbols such as the “flower” above will thus always be “tortured” by dint of the violence on which (what he calls in “An Exercise) “this // modern age” rests, and which art itself partly expresses. To bring these elements to creative realisation, moreover, entails a declaration of political and poetic allegiance – as his 1949 poem, “Choral: The Pink Church” exemplifies, praising “the fool / the mentally deranged / the suicide”:

... beyond them all whine  
the slaughtered, the famished  
and the lonely –  
    the holy church of  
their minds singing madly  
    in tune, its stones  
sibilant and roaring –



(CP II 179)

In its transcendent catalogue and celebration of social, sexual, and poetic avant-gardes, “Choral: The Pink Church” stands as an uncompromising retort to the atmosphere of creative censure and political moralism of its time – and in this sense prefigures Alan Ginsberg's *Howl* (1955). If “this nightmare world explodes”, Ginsberg writes of postwar American society, “it will all have been a dream with latencies, symbols, daydreams clairvoyant, and tiny perfect poems... full of intuition and unconscious prophecy” – an eerily familiar dreamscape that “Choral: The Pink Church” intuits in its own mode of ludic protest.<sup>236</sup> To “scant the truth / of the light itself”, Williams similarly projects a decade later, the “Ginsberg / of *Kaddish* falls apart / violently to a peal of laughter” (CP II 377).

In “Choral”, Williams takes the opportunity to articulate his (by now hallmark) disdain for contemporary academic and literary standards, relating these to the culture of engineered elitism and inequality in contemporary American society he discerns above, and to which he is certain “Poe, Whitman, Baudelaire... the saints / of this calendar” would be opposed:

And there stand  
the-banded-together  
in the name of  
the Philosophy Dep'ts

wondering at the nature  
of the stuff  
poured into  
the urinals  
of custom . . .

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<sup>236</sup> Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose*, pp. 217-18.



nothing more to be desired! his state  
becomes like that told in the famous  
double sonnet – but without the  
sonnet's restrictions. Let him go look  
at the river flowing or the bank  
of late flowers, there will be one  
small fly still among the petals  
in whose gauzy wings raised above  
its back a rainbow shines. The world  
to him is radiant and even the fact  
of poverty is wholly without despair.

(*CP II* 159-60)

As Williams makes plain, the piece is both a reflection on the world and a revisionary engagement with poetic tradition . This is a poem which scrutinises the way in which poetry frames experience, and the forms it adopts to do so – the “restrictions” of the sonnet thus relating, for Williams, to the limitations of the worldview that conventional poetic modes propose. To “look / at the river flowing” or to observe a “small fly” with wings in which “a rainbow” shines may indeed provide a counterweight to “despair”, and a sense of wonder at the radiance of natural life – as advanced throughout the Romantic tradition (*CP II* 159-60). This poem, however, also serves a literary-critical function (suggesting, in essence, that there can be “no ideas / beside the facts”) by introducing “the fact / of poverty” into the picture of “radiant” self-satisfaction conveyed (*CP II* 159-60). Williams then goes on to develop this thematic stress into something of a critical crescendo. “So it seems”, Williams writes of the pastoral sentiment he has just expressed,

... until there rouse  
to him pictures of the systematically  
starved – for a purpose, at the mind's  
proposal. What good then the  
light winged fly, the flower or  
the river – too foul to drink of or  
even bathe in? The 90 story building  
beyond the ocean that a rocket  
will span for destruction in a matter

of minutes but will not  
bring him, in a century, food or  
relief of any sort from his suffering.

(*CP II* 160)

The poem eviscerates one of the key tropes of canonical Romantic literature – that the contemplative mind may find in the natural world a solace to hold against despondency and pain, thus repairing what Wordsworth prescribes as a kind of gash in modernity's collective psyche, whereby “Little we see in nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”: “So might I”, Wordsworth writes, “standing on this pleasant lea, / Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn.”<sup>238</sup> Williams, by contrast, posits such consolation itself as a kind of complicity, implying that the supposed pastoral comforts of poetry are contradicted by man's material relationship to the world, and indeed by “the mind's” own appetite for destruction and self-delusion. On closer inspection, Williams observes, “the river flowing” is in fact “too foul to drink of or / even bathe in”, while the apprehension of “poverty [...] without despair” is only possible by way of ignoring the “systematically / starved – for a purpose” of the human mind's devising (*CP II* 160). Poetic truth, Williams asserts, is a thoroughly ideological category. Openly referencing William Wordsworth's sonnet, “The World is Too Much With Us”, the poem concludes:

The world too much with us? Rot!  
the world is not half enough with us –  
the rot of a potato with  
a healthy skin, a rot that is  
never revealed till we are about to  
eat – and it revolts us. Beauty?  
Beauty should make us paupers,  
should blind us, rob us – for it  
does not feed the sufferer but makes

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<sup>238</sup> William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much With Us”, ed., Stephen Gill, *A William Wordsworth Reader* (Oxford, 2010), p. 237.

his suffering a fly-blown putrescence  
and ourselves decay – unless  
the ecstasy be general.

(*CP II* 160)

Williams's “fly [with] gauzy wings” through which “a rainbow shines” has become an incubus of “putrescence” – the poem's symbolism refigured as being itself a cause and symptom of that very misery from which the meditative mind purports to be escaping. “Beauty”, Williams declares, is only one of the mind's games designed to disregard (and even to perpetuate) human “suffering” – unless, that is, the transcendence attained is available to all: “Beauty should make us paupers... unless the ecstasy be general” (*CP II* 160).

The poem is a tour de force in ethical critique and aesthetic self-scrutiny – evincing the importance accorded to material consciousness in Williams's poetic thought and practice. For Williams, if poetry depends on an intensified awareness of one's own physical and perceptive experience, it also thereby gestures towards the material suffering to which such experience amounts for many. Lacking this, Williams suggests, the poem fails as a creative enterprise, being bound as it is to “rot” and “decay”. Significantly, the atrocity Williams holds up as emblematic of mankind's moral and aesthetic corruption here appears to be the Irish famine – “the rot of a potato with / a healthy skin” conjuring “pictures of the systematically starved” (*CP II* 160). If this is the case, Williams's reference is very much in step with his distrust of British imperialism and hierarchy, specifically – a distrust which his reference to William Wordsworth also relays in cultural terms, rendering “language” itself “a central site of struggle.”<sup>239</sup> As Alec Marsh

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<sup>239</sup> Elin Käck, “Linguistic Transformation as Counter-Hegemonic Operation in *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All*”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 33 Nos. 1-2 (2016), p. 89.

memorably observes, “[t]he resentment of the post-colonial writer is everywhere in Williams... when [he] speaks, as he frequently does, of 'setting words free' he means to free them from the dead hand of the English colonizer.”<sup>240</sup> Williams's disdain for the imperial history and what he views as the ingrained social inequities of British life is in fact evidenced in many of his later poems. And as Marsh implies, Williams's bias against England's empire and monarchy (not to mention, English poetry) is often as rhetorically bombastic as it is creatively directive.

For Williams, politics is an intensely personal affair; and yet this quality often raises as many issues as it resolves when transliterated into poetry, as his piece, “An Exultation”, makes clear. The poem begins:

England, confess your sins! Toward the poor,  
upon the body of my grandmother. Let the agents  
of destruction purify you with bombs, cleanse  
you of the profits of your iniquities to the last  
agony of relinquishment.

(CP II 42)

Written in the aftermath of the German bombing campaign against London and other British industrial centres in 1940, Williams's poem celebrates the ensuing carnage as a kind of karmic retort to the long-standing social injustices of British life. In Williams's view, English society is being punished for the “profits” its ruling classes have extracted from “the poor” throughout history, and indeed for the “sins” committed “upon the body of [his] grandmother” – whose reasons for emigrating from England, Williams suggests, are socially conditioned. As he remarks in a footnote accompanying the poem on first publication (in *Partisan Review*, July 1941):

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<sup>240</sup> Alec Marsh, “William Carlos Williams and the prose of pure experience”, ed., MacGowan, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 84.

My English grandmother... had been an orphan who was adopted by a 'rich' family of Godwins living in London. They brought her up. Something then happened, she always kept it a mystery, which caused her to leave them.... In any case she came to America with my father a five-year-old child... I have inherited her resentment against England, taking part with all those who have carried Empire on their shoulders and been given slums to live in for their pains.

(CP II 452)

“I have always hated the English ruling class”, Williams continues, adding that “whatever England gets now is a just retribution” (CP II 452). In the coarseness and dogged sincerity of its anti-imperialism, the poem stands as a deliberate provocation to received views of the war in Europe – subverting patriotic identifications with Britain by exposing what Williams sees as the corrupt organisation of British society, which such identifications would otherwise serve to legitimate. A representative article from the *New York Times* during the period of German bombing, for example, depicts the London cityscape in emotive terms: “Westminster Abbey”, the article reads, “heart and center of the Empire,

where every King except Edward V and Edward VIII had been crowned, gapes open to the sky.... Five hospitals were hit.... And mile after mile of houses and shops of poor and rich alike were blasted, burned or damaged.<sup>241</sup>

Williams, however, greets such news with celebration – a celebration intended to highlight the forms of social injustice undergirding those structures now ruined by the air raids. “Thanks!”, Williams writes after the German aerial bombardment operations,

for this light that comes as a blasting fire  
destroying the rottenness of your slums as well  
as your most noble and historic edifices, never  
to be replaced!

(CP II 42)

Williams's reaction to London's devastation seems to be both unnervingly detached from

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<sup>241</sup> Reuters, “Bombs Wreck Commons Chamber, Unroof Abbey, Hit British Museum...”, *The New York Times*, 12 May 1941, (accessed 15/07/18).

the human implications of the attacks and riotously enthused by the vista evoked. Given his persistent efforts to highlight and acknowledge the material experiences of poor and working-class communities in his poetry, indeed, it seems anachronistic for Williams to entertain so desensitised an understanding of wartime devastation here. And yet, writing in the magazine *Now* in the same year (1941), Williams elaborates exactly this point:

The doing away with the slum districts of London is an excellent thing. War has begun the demolition of the slum districts of London. But this is not an act to be credited to war as an agent but to the release of energies consequent upon war. The necessary destruction could have been better done, more economically, with less collateral waste through the agency of peace but only a violent peace dominated by revolution. The means were locked up in stupidity, war released them.

(SE 247)

Williams's conception of industrial warfare is in some ways engaging. War, Williams suggests, is merely an intensification of society's material capacities towards a common end, a destructive variant on that fundamentally creative process of change he terms "revolution" – razing existing conditions, and in this sense holding out the possibility of political regeneration and renewal. Additionally, the poem presents an understanding of the cultural life of London and the political traditions on which it rests as being mutually embedded forms of experience, with each – in Williams's view – in need of criticism and change.

In some ways, then, Williams's perspective is consistent with the political positions advanced throughout the edition of *Partisan Review* in which "An Exultation" is first published. Just as Williams's concern is to effect a radical critique of Britain's embedded infrastructures of oppression and hierarchy – rather than to deplore the immediate violence of the war – so Clement Greenberg and Dwight MacDonal argue in the same



pages:

[the] social system of Churchill and Roosevelt is so incompetent to plan large-scale production whether for war or peace, so lacking in appeal to the masses, that it is a weapon which is breaking in the hands of those who would turn it against Hitlerism... [the] only way this conflict can be won in the interests of mankind as a whole is by some method of warfare that will transfer the struggle from the flesh of humanity to its mind. Such a method is offered only by the cause of the socialist revolution.<sup>242</sup>

To the extent that he exposes the historical injustices and existing social hierarchies in Britain, Williams's obdurate celebration of their devastation is consistent with the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist analysis of the two critics above. In this precise sense, indeed, Williams may demonstrate a commendable skepticism toward the discourses of patriotic alliance and sacrifice of his day.

The issue, of course, is that Williams's poem articulates such a critique neither fully nor well. His urge to champion the plight of "the poor" and expose the "sins" of the British empire is in fact fundamentally at odds with his exultation at the "destruction" of English metropolitan centres (*CP II* 42). What could easily have been a persuasive articulation of anti-imperialist sentiments, akin in critical terms to that of Greenberg and MacDonald, seems instead to advertise an overblown pleasure at the supposed purification of a civilian-crowded city by bombs. The moral and political complications of such positions are clearly apparent, moreover, in the poem's description of Europe's fascist nations as having – although "rotten to the core" – a "sovereignty / they cannot comprehend", as they bring the "cleansing mystery" of their bombs to bear on the British capital (*CP II* 42).

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<sup>242</sup> Clement Greenberg, Dwight MacDonald, "10 Propositions on the War", *Partisan Review* (July-August, 1941), pp. 272-76.

Such a stance is obviously as problematic as it is provocative – confusing the turbid implications of militarised destruction for the tangible prospect of progressive social change – and is one for which Williams has justly received canonical censure in the guise of Michael Heffernan's “An Exculpation”. “The dear old woman was well gone by that time”, Heffernan writes with accusatory aplomb, and in reference to Williams's grandmother, “but T. S. Eliot was afoot in London”:

It seems you wanted him to produce a stench  
of human skin and hair left smoldering,  
because you did not like what he stood for.

Never mind the schoolboys to be burnt as well,  
pensioners, postulants, pipe-shop proprietors,  
old damsels stitching sonnets from garden paths.<sup>243</sup>

Heffernan's antiphon is astutely judged, as Williams's footnote to the poem in *Partisan Review* confirms. In it, Williams reiterates his ill feeling towards T. S. Eliot as a cultural figure, while advancing the multi-faceted (if, once again, narrowly focused) understanding of English traditions delineated above. “Perhaps it should be added”, Williams writes,

that my contempt for and distrust of T. S. Eliot and all he does and says comes from the feeling I have that he and others like him have allied themselves with that part of the English character which unless it is cleansed by an economic and therefore spiritual hurricane will destroy that which I, in a way very different from theirs, profoundly love.

(*CP II* 453)

As before, Williams's “economic [and] spiritual hurricane” here may signify either the destructive power of war or the promise of a socialist-style revolution – but in either case suggests a jarringly abstract understanding of the material upheavals involved. Heffernan, once again, taps into exactly this tension in his response, imagining Williams

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<sup>243</sup> Michael Heffernan, “An Exculpation”, eds., Sheila Coghill, Thoma Tammaro, *Visiting Dr. Williams* (Iowa, 2011), p. 67.

stretching back into your suburban easy chair  
to seete in spotless fury on your screened-in porch,  
with a sassy little Beaujolais after lunch.

I had not come to hate poets the way you did,  
enough to wish them broiled and their country charred,  
while every village screamed from blazing hell.<sup>244</sup>

While the royalism and Anglo-Catholicism to which T. S. Eliot professes his cultural allegiance may indeed have been used to inflict suffering on Williams's grandmother and others, nonetheless (as Heffernan's response suggests) it is Williams's political shortcomings, not Eliot's, that this poem does most to illuminate.

If “An Exultation” shows Williams adopting an uncharacteristically callous attitude to human suffering for historical (and, one suspects, for aesthetic) reasons, the poem is also significant for what it tells us – or rather, what it omits to tell – about Williams's sense of domestic politics. In contrast to Greenberg and MacDonald, for example, Williams offers no hint of criticism of the Roosevelt administration in either “An Exultation” or the prose statements that qualify it. Often referring to him as “the good President”, indeed, Williams's support for Roosevelt throughout his tenure in office arguably signals both the nature and the limitations of Williams's political worldview.<sup>245</sup>

If Roosevelt is famed for overseeing a range of “New Deal” economic and social reforms in the 1930s, the effectiveness of these in changing and challenging the structures of inequality in America has been the object of much critical debate – including contemporaneously in publications such as *Partisan Review*, as we have seen, and by members of Roosevelt's own administration. A decade after the stock market crash of

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<sup>244</sup> Heffernan, “An Exculpation”, *Visiting Dr. Williams*, p. 68.

<sup>245</sup> cit., Mariani, *New World Naked*, p. 337.

1929 and six years following Roosevelt's inauguration as President in 1933, for example, Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins can be found remarking on the state of nation: "With 12 millions unemployed, we are socially bankrupt and politically unstable."<sup>246</sup> Roosevelt's three-term administration is of course also remembered for ignoring and even on occasion actively deepening racist divisions in American society. As David Roediger has noted, Roosevelt's legacy in the realm of racial politics may be judged not only by his executive order to incarcerate 120,000 Japanese Americans in 1942, but also by the effects of the New Deal reform programme on communities already suffering racial segregation, particularly in the Southern States:

The seeds of colorblind inequality, of disunity between 'white ethnics' and workers of color, and of what Martin Luther King could call the 'tranquilizing drug of gradualism,' were present in the very foundations of the New Deal... New Deal liberalism not only failed to dismantle connections between government and white supremacy but also reforged those connections in new, modern, mass-based, and enduring forms.<sup>247</sup>

Despite his proximity to the left-wing and radical media of his day, Williams, it seems, holds no such qualms about Roosevelt's politics or legacy. As Paul Mariani notes, when hearing of the president's death, Williams finds himself "weeping for his lost leader", the "man", as far as he is concerned, "who had taken them through the Depression and seen them through the war".<sup>248</sup>

Perhaps in a similar fashion to Roosevelt himself, it is partly for this reason that Williams is often portrayed by literary critics as being more a beloved reformist than a believable revolutionary, expressing the contradictions and biases of well-to-do America, along with its broadly egalitarian instincts. Despite his rhetoric of passionate resistance to the

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<sup>246</sup> cit., William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (New York, 1961), p. 414.

<sup>247</sup> David Roediger, *How Race Survived US History* (New York, 2008), pp. 183-4.

<sup>248</sup> Mariani, p. 505.

traditions typified for him by both “England” and “Eliot”, in any case, Williams's politics are often more conventional than his pronouncements suggest – a fact to which his elegy for Roosevelt, for one, attests. Written in mourning for the deceased president in 1945, Williams's “Death by Radio” is thus as patriotically nostalgic as it is poetically hackneyed – and certainly falls short of a work such as Whitman's similarly admiring elegy for Abraham Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd”. Williams's poem reads:

Suddenly his virtues became universal  
We felt the force of his mind  
on all fronts, penetrant  
to the core of our beings  
Our ears struck us speechless  
while shameless tears sprang to our eyes  
through which we saw  
all mankind weeping

(*CP II* 106)

Much of the poem's phrasing is cumbersome or imaginatively flat – “his virtues became universal”, “the force of his mind”, “the core of our beings”, and “Our ears struck us speechless” either make too little effort or have too little imagistic sense to activate the intense understanding of FDR's death which they are supposed to convey. More suggestive for critical purposes, however, is Williams's satisfaction to state, rather than persuade of, the “virtues” and significance of FDR's presidency. If the poem evokes images of the world in a state of tribulation – the “force” of FDR resonating “on all fronts”, for “all mankind”, while the announcement by radio is deafening as it “[strikes] us speechless” – Williams seems to suggest that this is due less to the global conflict, than to the sadness the world should be feeling at the death of the American President. Williams, indeed, is self-avowedly “shameless” in projecting his own “tears” and political vision onto “all mankind” (*CP II* 106). The poem has not discovered a universal truth so

much as manufactured and exported it to all the globe (by sheer patriotic insistence): that the loss of FDR, along with the “virtues” of the politics he represents, is one for which humanity at large should mourn.

Ironically, perhaps, for so staunch a critic of British imperialism, Williams here seems to presume as valid an exceptionalism and even a civilising mission, not just to FDR, but to the United States itself. If such an attitude seems inconsistent with Williams's signing of an artist's manifesto against American entry into the war in 1939, it is undoubtedly in keeping with his later decision to dedicate his collection of short stories, *Make Light of It* (1950), to “our troops in Korea” (*WCW / LZ 443n*) – conflicting gestures which, taken together, illustrate something of the complicated fidelity Williams holds to the idea of America's dual role as empire and democracy.

Williams's apparently abiding sense of national feeling and purpose is perhaps clarified by a love poem from the same period, called “The United States”. An exercise in political self-imagining as much as it is an expression of amorous desire, the poem begins by frankly stating the relation between America and the world, which in “Death by Radio” is only implied:

The government of your body, sweet,  
shall be my model for the world.  
There is no desire in me to rule  
that world or to advise it. Look  
how it rouses with the sun, shuts  
with night and sleeps fringed by  
the slowly turning stars...

(*CP II* 111-12).

The poem revels in the knowledge that love is propagandistic – a play of shifting

entitlements and submissions, flatteries and possessions. Yet in exploring the analogy between the intimacies of love and geo-politics, Williams also reveals his personal conception of the nature of “The United States” as a political life-form. In the poem, American “government” functions as a “model for the world” – and by natural right rather than coercive ambition, with “no desire [to] rule” , but merely by waking “with the sun” and sleeping “fringed by / the slowly turning stars” (*CP II* 112). This combination of qualities, moreover, leads at the poem's finish to Williams's announcement that “to / the peaceful legislature of [your] seas” I therefore “yield my willing services” (*CP II* 112).

The poem self-consciously exposes the discourses of allegiance, desire, and natural necessity on which love and patriotism alike rely. Yet, as in “Death by Radio”, Williams's approach to these discourses nonetheless presumes some degree of accession as both inevitable and proper: the poet yields his “willing services” in the knowledge (or so he contends) that neither he nor the United States desires “to rule / the world or to advise it”, but merely to live in the full and “peaceful” freedoms it promises. In contrast to his work that addresses themes of British nationalism and empire, then, by writing in the mode of love poetry here Williams exposes, but also re-asserts the forms of affiliation on which “The United States” depends. As the next portion of this discussion will demonstrate, however, Williams's sense of the exceptionalism of American democracy is very much tempered by his awareness of (and his frequent poetic investigations into) the material impoverishments produced and maintained by the structures of American society – including during the post-New Deal era from the late 1930s onwards, when Roosevelt is still alive and in office.

### 3.7 Conclusion: Revising the Times

As mentioned above, although Williams does not openly criticise the Roosevelt administration in his work, and in fact comes close to adulating Roosevelt as a political figure, he still demonstrates a penetrating consciousness of social inequality in his poems, out of which such a criticism may be built. Though rarely acknowledged, such inequality lies at the heart of the pre-war and wartime American society Williams is concerned to engage in poetic terms. As Howard Zinn has observed:

When the New Deal was over, capitalism remained intact. The rich still controlled the nation's wealth, as well as its laws, courts, police, newspapers, churches, colleges. Enough help had been given to enough people to make Roosevelt a hero to millions, but the same system that had brought depression and crisis – the system of waste, of inequality, of concern for profit over human need, remained.<sup>249</sup>

If Roosevelt remains a hero of Williams's (and primarily for the reasons Zinn outlines above), the later poetry nevertheless bears testament to Zinn's claim – that the post-New Deal American society in which Williams lives and works is one based on excessive “waste”, “inequality” and a neglect of basic human needs. Williams's poem, “Election Day” (1941), for example, serves as a conscious counterweight to the discourse of complex national feeling that permeates the pieces discussed in the previous segment. The poem reads:

Warm sun, quiet air  
an old man sits

in the doorway of  
a broken house –

boards for windows  
plaster falling

from between the stones  
and strokes the head

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<sup>249</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (London, 2003/1980), p. 403-4.



of a spotted dog

(*CP II 25-6*)

The piece extends an internal tradition of Williams's work, in which the descriptive poem assumes parabolic resonance through its very literalness and individuation – or as Milton A. Cohen puts it, in which a “particular kind of political poem” takes shape by way of “closely observed details [that] reflect the time, but refuse to impose on it a trendy social message.”<sup>250</sup> While Cohen is in all likelihood correct that trendiness is not Williams's main motivation in writing such a poem, he perhaps overstates his case by denying to the work its “social message”, which in most cases flares beneath the surface of those details Williams selects so attentively from his environment. The “message” is manifest in the materiality of the scene, and the manner in which this is apprehended – meticulously, purposefully, and with an almost aching need to record and praise. A list of similar pieces from Williams's corpus might include critically suggestive poems such as “Proletarian Portrait” and “To a Poor Old Woman”, as well as some of the less obviously political snapshots of daily life, like “The Great Figure” or indeed “The Red Wheelbarrow”. In each poem, the method forms part of the meaning, as Williams records life at its most particulate, and yet also transcends this urge, accessing what he describes (quoting Dewey) as “the universal” in “the local”. Likewise, “Election Day” functions as a kind of kinetic palimpsest – the gradual encroachment of social decay, the “boards for windows / plaster falling”, underlaying the man's own physical presence and process, as he “strokes the head” of his (possibly ill) dog.

The poem is also instructive in indicating how the universality intuited by Williams is not

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<sup>250</sup> Milton A. Cohen, “Williams and politics”, ed., MacGowan, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 73.

in all cases a philosophical or sensuous category – a sense of shared humanity based on common physical or ideational capacities. Rather, as the poem's title suggests, the mode of general experience which Williams's poem activates and gestures towards is overtly political – concerning the organisation and electoral traditions of American society, as well as the forms of exclusion and affliction produced therein. The old man's “broken house” serves to reflect (if not to accuse directly) the greater house of American democracy, divided or otherwise as it may be – a sign once more of Williams's keen attention to the corruption and inequity on which his culture very often rests. As he puts it in another poem:

... The courts are  
overcrowded, fear obsesses all intimacies  
unless legalized – and money,  
articulated to government mounts still  
as wonder in the minds of the speculators,

to buy  
    (the ferment wedging their skulls  
ever wider)

to buy [...]

– to buy off.

(*CP II 69*)

When viewed against such a spectacle of materialism and venality, indeed, “Election Day” can be seen to contain an inside joke, whereby Williams wags the dog (in this case, a literal “spotted dog”), as if to distract attention from the political and social implications of the scene described. The result – quite deliberately on Williams's part – is the opposite. By virtue of its very marginality, the slow, permeating poverty of the old man's surroundings stands in a metonymic relation to American political society at large.

Williams is of course also offering a comment on descriptive verse itself, highlighting the material conditions which even the most seemingly self-enclosed of poetic images implies, and sometimes seeks to disguise. As Williams writes to Kenneth Burke in the late 1940s, “[m]y whole intent, in my life, has been [to] find a basis (in poetry, in my case) for the actual” (*SL* 257). So as Williams sees it, the creation and appreciation of poetry should not direct attention away from collective life, but rather constitute an active expression (and at times, exposure) of it.

If perhaps in a more expository mode, Williams makes a similar argument – or at least, raises similar questions – in his 1944 piece, “The Forgotten City”. The poem is an exercise in political self-accounting, which also has a number of aesthetic implications. Set during a “hurricane”, as Williams and his mother drive “from the country” home to Rutherford, the poem casts Williams's surrounding cityscape as being both poetically elusive and materially imposing. “Brown torrents” of rain, Williams writes,

gushed up through new sluices in the  
valley floor so that I had to take what road  
I could find bearing to the south and west,  
to get back to the city. I passed through  
extraordinary places, as vivid as any  
I ever saw where the storm had broken  
the barrier and let through  
a strange commonplace: Long deserted avenues  
with unrecognized names at the corners and  
drunken looking people with completely  
foreign manners. Monuments, institutions  
and in one place a large body of water....

(*CP II* 86-7)

The topography described has all the compelling presence and easy contradiction of a dream, as Williams encounters “[l]ong deserted avenues” on which “drunken looking

people” are nonetheless staggering, and indeed as he perceives an entire system of urban life where he had never thought to find one. Taking only “what road / I could find”, Williams gains access to the “extraordinary” and “vivid” energy, quite literally, of the “commonplace” (*CP II 87*).

The poem in some ways may be read as a riff on Robert Frost's “The Road Not Taken”, albeit with a thoroughly Williams-esque concern to connect the individualism of his poetic discoveries to the communal environment of modern (suburban) America. Frost's piece demonstrates and implicitly derides the temptation to attain to truths by self-deception – to declare “I took the [road] less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference”, despite the fact that the other road is “just as fair” and both paths, indeed, “equally lay” before him when he made this choice.<sup>251</sup> Williams, by contrast, seems intent to expose poetic solipsism as itself a kind of delusion. In contrast to Frost's almost cunning sense of both the persuasiveness and the illogic of poetic conviction, in Williams's poem aesthetic meaning and political purpose alike exist only by and through other people. I “promised myself”, Williams continues,

I would some day go back to study this  
curious and industrious people who lived  
in these apartments, at these sharp  
corners and turns of intersecting avenues  
with so little apparent communication  
with an outside world. How did they get  
cut off this way from representation in our  
newspapers and other means of publicity  
when so near the metropolis, so closely  
surrounded by the familiar and the famous?

(*CP II 87*)

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<sup>251</sup> Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”, eds., Richard Poirier, Mark Richardson, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays* (New York, 1995), p. 103.

Earlier in this discussion, we saw how readily Williams – somewhat troublingly, from a political perspective – can establish a transcriptive relationship between poetry and the news media of his day, adapting the content and emphasis of *New York Times* articles to his own poetic purposes. Here, however, Williams consciously emphasises in his critique of American society the “newspapers and other means of publicity” that exclude the daily round – and the people who live by it – from fame and familiarity, in the same way that the old man is implicitly excluded from fanfare and presumed benefits of American democracy in “Election Day”. The paradox of such a situation is that by denying the “industrious” (working) people of America their place on elitist grounds, the poetic and political establishments ensure that the lives lived by these do indeed take on an “extraordinary” power. As Williams memorably asserts elsewhere: to “speak, / euphemistically, of the anti-poetic” is “Garbage”, for it leaves “[h]alf the world ignored” – a circumstance which he seems intent on rectifying here (*CP II* 68).

If Williams in the poems above highlights the creative significance of the lived experience of overlooked American communities in a semi-allegorical mode, he also frequently clarifies this insight further by depicting the literal scenes and people of his own surroundings. His poem, “A Portrait of the Times”, for example, sheds all elements of dreamscape evoked in “The Forgotten City”, and instead roots the scene described in a late 1930s New Jersey town. “Two W. P. A. Men”, the poem reads,

stood in the new  
sluiceway

overlooking  
the river –  
One was pissing

while the other  
showed  
by his red

jagged face the  
immemorial tragedy  
of lack-love

while an old  
squint-eyed woman  
in a black

dress  
and clutching  
a bunch of

late chrysanthemums  
to her fatted  
bosoms

turned her back  
on them  
at the corner

(*CP II 9-10*)

The snapshot of the two men and the wincing woman celebrates (and also ironises) the installation of a local drainage system in light of its human process – and in this way chimes with Williams's association of poetic meaning with the capacity to record precisely the contours and tenor of one's material environment. Importantly, of course, the representativeness of the poem's situation as such – that which makes it “A Portrait of the Times” – stems primarily from the fact that the men are employed by the “W. P. A.”, or the Works Progress Administration: one among a number of far-reaching New Deal programmes providing paid work to exactly that class of citizens whose privations Williams portrays so often and so vividly, the proletarians, who appear in his earlier poetry especially as both dignified muses and unwitting emblems of modern American life. As before, the actual success of the W. P. A. in generating economic prosperity and

alleviating social hardships has been questioned by a number of historians and political commentators. As William Appleman Williams succinctly observes:

The New Deal saved the system. It did not change it... the main efforts of relief, rationalization, and reform actually occurred in a jumble rather than proceeding in any step-by-step order or neat plan of development. Pragmatic to the core, the New Deal was not so much misdirected as it was undirected.<sup>252</sup>

One result being the social bankruptcy and soaring levels of unemployment identified by Harry Hopkins in 1941.

Significantly, Williams's poem itself casts the effectiveness of the W. P. A. scheme in doubt, with its focus on the slapstick element of the labour involved, as well as on the “jagged” and “immemorial tragedy” of the worker's face – a guarded, but perspicacious retort to the supposed progress signalled by the Roosevelt administration's labour reforms. In this respect, the piece arguably merits comparison with Robert Frost's famous (and famously critical) New Deal-era poem, “Two Tramps in Mud Time” (1934). In the latter, the Frost-persona questions whether he should offer his wood-chopping work to two men who had been “sleeping God knows where last night, / But not long since in the lumber camps” – and ultimately rules against such a course of action, declaring that although “I had no right to play / With what was another man's work for gain”, his own situation, in which “love and need are one”, grants him more of a moral claim to the labour than the “two hulking tramps”.<sup>253</sup> Artful as it is, the poem in effect gives literary life to Frost's abiding complaint at the time, that “the lower classes” are now “to be completely taken care of by the upper classes”, as he writes in 1939.<sup>254</sup> Or as George Monteiro notes, “Two Tramps” records Frost's skepticism towards “the basic premise of

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<sup>252</sup> Williams, pp. 439-40.

<sup>253</sup> Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, p. 252.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 778.

practicing social welfare”, particularly when this comes at the supposed detriment “of an individual's right to well-being” – Frost's meditation on physical (and personal) labour in a time of general poverty founded on a dichotomy of “the needs of spirit, aspiration, and self-fulfillment against the need for working for food.”<sup>255</sup> Frost's rankled opposition to “working for food” may of course help to contextualise Williams's view of the older poet “as a reactionary with 'no grasp of the crucial issues' facing his world”, particularly compared to Williams's own sensitivity to questions (and facts) of deprivation throughout his life.<sup>256</sup> In any case, Frost's poem in turn clarifies Williams's approach in “A Portrait of the Times”, which draws into its critical spotlight not the premise of social welfare, but the effectiveness of those programmes already implemented – as well as the physical wellbeing, the embodied humanity, of the various actors described.

It is worth noting the remarkable extent to which the poem's political commentary (implicit or otherwise) is an effect once again of its exploratory visual practice – thus standing as another of Williams's emblematic, if precisely observed social descriptions. Once again, Williams's portrait seems almost obsessed with forms of seeing and impediments to sight – both internal to the scene described and relating to Williams's own creative-spectatorial role. The two men are “overlooking / the river”, although in opposite directions: one, towards the water into which he is “pissing”, and the other, presumably, towards Williams himself, who consequently perceives his face with such clarity. The old woman, similarly, is “squint-eyed” and actively reluctant to observe the scene, turning her back on the W. P. A. workers “at the corner” (*CP II* 10). Williams's own role, finally, is

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<sup>255</sup> George Monteiro, “Frost's Politics and the Cold War”, ed., Robert Faggen, *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 223-224.

<sup>256</sup> Mariani, *New World Naked*, p. 638.



all-seeing and artistically integral, and yet seems curiously constricted, lacking (in this instance) the motion and agency which the other figures clearly possess.

If the poem presents a political vision of its place and era, in short, it does so largely by demonstrating both the necessity and the various limitations of visual perception. As discussed above, the foregrounding of conflicting visibilities and perceptual tensions is a notable feature of Williams's later work, and indeed is symptomatic of the significance he accords to the politics of materiality in his poems. His late piece, "A Vision of Labor: 1931", develops and focuses the concerns of the poem above. "In my head", Williams writes, this time as a self-conscious artist-spectator,

... the juxtapositions  
impossible otherwise to accomplish:  
two young rubber-booted ditchdiggers  
beside the bed of the dying bishop –  
cracking obscene jokes...

(*CP II* 81)

As in "A Portrait of the Times", the two workers seem unaware of being watched, while also standing as active observing agents in the scene depicted: "washing their / hip-boots off in the stream jerking / from the pump at the finished manhole", they stare distracted at a "girl lying there / supine in [an] old rowboat" nearby, "looking down and smiling over / her like insane men" (*CP II* 81-2). The uneasy sexual dynamic between the three figures of course is predicated on the sexist reduction of the girl to a product of the men's desires. So she lies "flat out there in the heat with / her five-and-ten dark glasses on", while her "white suit", Williams writes, is "pulled up tight into her crotch" (*CP II* 82). Critically perturbing as such objectification is, we should note Williams's method here: whereby he becomes doubly the voyeur, adapting the viewpoint and observational focus of the two

workers he himself surveys.

Importantly, on this occasion Williams seems not entirely heedless of the sexual transgressiveness to which the politics of visibility here gives license. The poem contains the interjection,

[w]hen you've been broke  
and damned near starving for  
five years you get to look that way...

and so acknowledges (if also, to an extent, explains away) the predatory spectation of the two men, while also highlighting the prolonged material and physical deprivation which, as working class citizens, Williams presumes they have endured. “You can't help it”, the poem continues, “That's / poverty. Both your mind and your body / are affected” (*CP II* 82).

There is, needless to say, an unsettling bias in Williams's ascription of sexual voracity to these figures on the basis of their working-class identity – in the connection he posits, indeed, between poverty, on the one hand, and mental and physical perversion on the other. In this respect, the poem perhaps illustrates some of the deficiencies of Williams's worldview and aesthetic approach, concisely indicating what seems to be a reflexive recourse to reductive classifications as a means of understanding working-class people and living conditions in particular. It is on such a score, in fact, that one scholar has accused Williams of a “pure aestheticization of the oppressed” in his work – a critically suggestive conclusion, which is arguably tempered, however (and as we have seen elsewhere in this discussion) by the consistent anti-establishmentarianism and politically

sensitive portraiture to be found throughout his poetry.<sup>257</sup> Williams often refuses such aestheticization with the same intensity with which he apparently indulges in it elsewhere.

As in many of the other pieces featured above, Williams's "Vision of Labour" is arguably most notable for its perception of the interrelation between material conditions and poetic process – permitting "each a meaning / and all a meaning jointly" in the finished work, as Williams puts it (*CP II* 14). The poem's underlying understanding, moreover, of the creative strain which such an interrelation generates, and with which the writer must contend, reflects one of the fundamental concerns of his poetics: how to remain poetically faithful to artistic and social circumstances which the writer has not chosen, which he may not even be in the position (spectatorial, or political) to understand, but which are nevertheless his own. Williams is in this respect akin to Pieter Brueghel the Elder, depicted in his final collection of poems as an "alert mind dissatisfied with / what it is asked to / and cannot do", who nonetheless "accepted the story and painted / it in the brilliant / colors of the chronicler" (*CP II* 387).

If Williams's poems both expose and reiterate the prejudicial discourses, concerns, and frames of understanding that permeate his society – and in this sense have justly provoked a great deal of criticism and academic discussion – their distinctive and abiding value may ultimately lie in the "brilliant / colors of the chronicler" they display. Voiced with an energy and outlook entirely Williams's own, his work is as socially directed as it is individualistically inclined – the outcome of a thoroughly politicised consciousness, attuned to the often conflicted materialities of the social, medical, and personal

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<sup>257</sup> Bob Johnson, "'A Whole Synthesis of His Time': Political Ideology and Cultural Politics in the Writings of William Carlos Williams, 1929-1939", *American Quarterly* (Vol. 54 Issue 2; 2002), p. 203.

environments in which he works and lives. In their unremitting opposition to artistic and political exclusivism, in their interventionist attitude to global and domestic political issues, in their prosodically intent affirmation of the sights, struggles, and spoken language of daily American lives, Williams's poems form a matchless compendium of the experience of his time.

Ranging from erratic rants to delicately seething snapshots of his locale, from his imagination of war abroad to the glimpsed and held reality of sickness, hardship and otherwise anonymous lives at home, Williams's chronicle makes of poetry “[a]n ungainly flower / and an unnatural one”(CP II 258), which nonetheless fits “in distressing / detail” the world he knows (CP II 27). In this way, Williams's work sets out to effect – if not political change, then communication in a new mode, which for Williams is perhaps the deeper necessity. To the question, “How shall we get said what must be said?”, Williams can thus reply, “Only the poem”: the site of first and final understanding, where the reality of suffering and the possibility of beauty each hold equal place, and where the bomb and the asphodel alike can bloom (CP II 274).

#### 4. “Doc, listen”: *Paterson*

##### 4.1 Introduction

“Patterson [sic.] repels me”, one reader declares in 1959, professing to find in Williams's poem “one of the first symptoms & general encouragements of the modern literary syphilis”:

... verseless, styleless, characterless all-inclusive undifferentiated yelling assertion of the Great simplifying burden-lifting God orgasm... damning all constructed civilisation, including all poetry that has not been gasped out with vomit or orgasm.<sup>258</sup>

The reader in question is twenty-nine-year-old Ted Hughes, recently returned from America, where he first encountered *Paterson* some months previously. In the same note, he goes on to express his affection for W. B. Yeats's pre-1928 verse, querying: “Don't you really like the Yeats before Byzantium?”<sup>259</sup> The letter thus reveals a great deal as to the burgeoning literary taste of Hughes; but it also suggests something of the polarising (and often visceral) response that Williams's epic has elicited from critics of varying sensibilities over the years, not to mention the force of *Paterson's* challenge to those traditional monoliths of *civilisation*, *verse*, and *differentiated style* that Hughes apparently values so highly.

This last point is particularly instructive, opening as it does an interpretative rift, on either side of which scholars and readers have tended to array themselves: over whether, that is, the stylistic violence with which Williams's epic breaks free of (and subsumes) traditional poetic procedures is necessary to the successful integration of mid-century American modernity into verse, or if by contrast it represents the surrender of expressive artistic

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<sup>258</sup> Ted Hughes, ed., Christopher Reid, *Letters of Ted Hughes* (London, 2009), p. 145.

<sup>259</sup> *Idem*.

standards to what Hughes clearly views as the fads of *the modern*. Where one stands on this question invariably relates to whether or not one views “constructed civilisation” as a relevant frame for approaching the American city, in both its material presence and its historical development. It is a Paterson “degenerating into a twentieth century mafia-police-bureaucracy-race-war-nightmare-tv-squawk suburb” that Allen Ginsberg remembers from his boyhood, for instance, and which Williams – he states with admiration – “articulated to its very rock-strata foundations”.<sup>260</sup> What Hughes presents as *Paterson's* failing, Ginsberg perceives as its exemplary value: that of picking up the shards of an aesthetic mirror modernity has definitively shattered, and gathering them together (jagged and anachronistic as they may now appear) to reflect the many degradations of Williams's place and time. As Robert Lowell similarly suggests in 1962, if “*Paterson* is our *Leaves of Grass*”, it is precisely so *because* the “times have changed”, and the American “scene is dense with the dirt and power of industrial society” – Williams's “drastic experimental art” providing no less (and no other) than what his subject matter “expected and demanded”.<sup>261</sup>

In this respect, *Paterson* falls into the same developmental trajectory as that outlined in the preceding chapter. As we have seen, Williams in his later years develops an ethically charged understanding of the modern poem's purpose and place in American society – adapting (and often posing as a corrective to) the various civic discourses of his day, while also registering the social life and material conditions that he himself encounters as both poet and physician. The poem becomes both a register and a diagnosis of its social moment, its literary experimentalism honed by Williams's urge for a holistic – and often a

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<sup>260</sup> Ginsberg, “Confrontation with Louis Ginsberg's Poems”, *Deliberate Prose*, p. 217.

<sup>261</sup> Lowell, “Dr. Williams”, *Collected Prose* (London, 1987), p. 44.

critical – understanding of modernity in America: a record of its sites and symptoms, in particulate detail. “Now, when I'm walking down the street there”, Williams is reported to have remarked of his writing practice in the 1940s:

I'm hoping people will give me some access – talk with me and help me figure out what's going on around here [in Paterson, New Jersey]. I'm trying to look and listen, just as I do with the sick kids I see and their parents. I'm sizing up a place, a whole city, you could say....<sup>262</sup>

For Williams in his later years, the idiom, verse-line, and formal measurements of the poem must undergo a “sizing up” (as in *Paterson* – or a sizing down, as the case may be) appropriate to the social spaces that stimulate it: the poet's literary notations tailored to depict the circumstances from which they arise, in the same way that a doctor's prescriptions relate case-specifically to the medical conditions evaluated. “Will you please rush down and see / ma baby”, one poem from this period begins, “I, I, I don't think it's brEAthin” (*CP II* 222) – the aesthetic features and documentary insights of the poem combining into what may be understood as both a diagnosis (quite literally in this instance) and a recognizable image of its place and moment. If such a trend is discernible throughout Williams's later work, however, these concerns arguably receive their fullest expression and most thorough exploration in *Paterson*, his boundary-breaking long poem, published from the mid-1940s onwards.

*Paterson* marks both a deepening of many of Williams's previous literary preoccupations and a new direction entirely in his poetic corpus. This duplexity is in fact an active element in almost every immediately discernible feature of *Paterson* as a work. The poem stands as a uniquely extended and diverse literary experiment by Williams, for example, which nonetheless draws on previous long poems from his career, most notably “The

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<sup>262</sup> Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work* (New York, 1997), p. 132.

Wanderer: A Rococo Study” (1914) and “Paterson” (1927). *Paterson: Book II* (1948) quotes directly from the former – and specifically from the segment (mentioned earlier) dealing with the Paterson strike of 1913, in which Williams describes “the ugly legs of the young girls” as “pistons too powerful for delicacy!”, while glimpsing “the men's arms, red, used to heat and cold” as he travels the local streets (*P* 44). As here, Williams's later poem literally reiterates the tropes and concerns of his prior work, while also serving as a more stylistically expansive and thematically ambitious engagement with such subjects than he has ever previously attempted. Striving “to be an abstract design without [sic.] design”, as Williams's drafts for *Book VI* put it, the later *Paterson* project links the (somewhat appalled) perception of the factory laborers above not just to Williams's now-consolidated aesthetics of materiality, but to the titular New Jersey city's economic and social history – originating with Alexander Hamilton's industrialisation of the area in the late eighteenth century: “he hated it”, Williams writes with sharp irony, “[but] used it in his schemes [sic.]” so that the city might one day “increase to be the wonder of the world” (*P* 238-239). As Jen Hedler Phillis suggests, it is in this latter context that “the dissonance Williams is concerned with in *Paterson*” may be seen primarily to “exist between the ideals of the American revolution and their instantiation in history” – the poem standing as literary testimony to the palpable failure of American aspirations towards a free and prosperous society, as later segments of the discussion below suggest.<sup>263</sup>

Similarly, the consistent incorporation of multiple prose segments into the poem – ranging from personal letters sent by Williams's own correspondents to historical and local records discovered in the Paterson public library – is both a novel communicative

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<sup>263</sup> Jen Hedler Phillis, “‘The Dissonance is Discovery’: Marie Curie, Social Credit, and the New Measure”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 31 No. 2 (Fall, 2014), p. 161.



mode engaged by Williams and a continuation of that fusion of poetry and creative prose in books such as *Spring and All* (1923) and *The Descent of Winter* (1928). As “a collection of fragmented, nominally out-of-sequence sections of prose interwoven with poetry”, Jason Menzin argues, in its “form and sensibility” *Spring and All* “prefigures much of Williams's work over the coming decades, [including] *Paterson*.”<sup>264</sup> In the earlier book, indeed, after realising “[h]ow easy” is to “to slip / into the old mode, how hard to / cling firmly to the advance” (*CP I* 191), Williams converts such an insight into poetic praxis, merging his registers of reflection and address:

... the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality – Taught by the largeness of his imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression.

The contraction which is felt.

(*CP I* 193)

As well as clarifying Williams's self-consciously specular poetics, the segment's persistent meshing of theory with practice across a range of ostensibly discordant literary styles – a feature of *Spring and All* in its entirety – sets an obvious precedent for the process of Williams's later long poem. So, for example, we find Paterson's invocation of “Earth, the chatterer, father of all / speech” – a symbolic resurrection of “the myth / that holds up the rock” of the world in his own locality – segueing into a prose passage from John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets*:

... by their acceptance of [a] halting meter, the Greeks displayed their acute aesthetic sense of propriety, recognizing the harmony which subsists between crabbed verses and the distorted subjects with which they dealt – the vices and perversions of humanity... Deformed verse was suited to deformed morality.

(*P* 39-40)

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<sup>264</sup> Jason Menzin, “Cubism in Words: Broken Pieces in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 31 No. 2 (Fall, 2014), p. 129.

Williams's emphasis on deformation here, as well as his more general depiction of a return to primal subject matter amid his own supposedly banal surroundings, is an inverse expression of his desire to interrogate and reinvent poetic form – and in the manner that Hughes will ultimately find so objectionable. In this sense, *Paterson* extends and dramatises Williams's lifelong efforts to attain a modern and universal idiom for American verse, drawn from the local circumstances of his own life. As Williams puts it to Parker Tyler in 1948:

All the prose [in *Paterson*] has primarily the purpose of giving a metrical meaning to or of emphasizing a metrical continuity between all word use.... It is that prose and verse are both *writing*, both a matter of the words and an interrelation between words....

(*SL* 263)

As the extracts above imply, Williams's punctuating prose passages, often linking previous historical and geographical experiences of Paterson city to the present moment, are symptomatic of his long-standing intention to emulate the speech and material circumstances of his native (New Jersey) environment. “The poem”, Williams writes, “is the assertion that we are alive as ourselves – [and so holds] as much of the environment as it can grasp” – an adage *Paterson* seems uniquely composited to fulfil (*SL* 286).

Williams's late epic is also noteworthy for his development within it of what he terms *the variable foot*. It is in this double context, indeed – of immersing his work in a familiar environment, and of developing this particular verse-line over the poem's course – that Williams can state in 1947: “I am trying in *Paterson* to work out the problems of a new prosody [...] but I am doing it by writing poetry rather than 'logic'” (*SL* 258). Once perfected in *Paterson*, the prosodic structure in question goes on to appear repeatedly in

later collections such as *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955) – to the extent, indeed, that Williams's poem, “The Descent”, owes its origins to *Paterson II* (1948), where its opening can be found as follows:

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....

(P 78)

Envisaged as a flexible, breathing (and breath-related) formal mechanism, the “variable foot” in evidence here becomes a hallmark of Williams's late style. As Stephen Matterson has stressed, moreover, one of the most remarkable aspects of this innovation is its seemingly organic development – a technique Williams happens on (rather than planning for) in the composition of *Paterson* at large.<sup>265</sup>

This improvisatory mode of proceeding on Williams's part is key to understanding not just the creative background of the poem, but the meaning of the overall *Paterson* project. I take issue with Frederic Jameson, for example, who insists on interpreting *Paterson* as a four-book epic only, resisting “the canonicity of Williams's Fifth Book”, he writes, which otherwise would “open *Paterson* up into the endless work-in-progress diaries of Pound, Olsen, and Zukofsky”.<sup>266</sup> As the quotations from Williams's drafted sixth book above may suggest, I contend to the contrary that the form-fluent open-endedness of *Paterson* is

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<sup>265</sup> Stephen Matterson, “American Modernism from the 1930s to the 1950s...”, *A History of Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 353.

<sup>266</sup> Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, p. 19.

essential to its status as a twentieth-century epic. After all: in purely aesthetic terms, the radical shifts in stylistic register, along with the poem's continuously deepening sense of formal complicity in the sites of ruined modernity it stems from, could indeed continue to evolve indefinitely. Once the exemplary riffs and contingencies of technique in the early books have been established, *Paterson* seems to become peculiarly parthenogenic. The fact that the poem is delimited by Williams's own lifespan and physical capabilities is merely another of the many ironies it naturalises, and one not unsuited to the sophisticated postmodernism of its aesthetic – which is defined principally by what Jameson himself elsewhere calls the “attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.”<sup>267</sup>

One senses that *Paterson* (the poem) could readily forget the limitations of its compositional anchorage in Williams's life specifically – replacing these with an infinite performance of its own stylistic possibilities, or an ever-expanding projection of its chosen locale – were these not so palpably curtailing in nature. In this sense, every historical rupture *Paterson* brings to light, every linguistic or discursive erasure the poem releases into expressive play, bottoms out in the literalness of Williams's own life, and in his death – possibly the poem's most definitive proof that there can be “[n]o ideas but / in the facts” (*P* 27). “We shall not get to the bottom”, Williams writes, “death is a hole / in which we are all buried”, adding that it is only “through this hole / we escape” (*P* 209-210).

Such concerns, like the alternating indentations and triadic verse structure mentioned

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<sup>267</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, 1991), p. ix.

above, are sharply new in Williams's work in this period. And yet they arguably still reflect and fulfil at least a formal interest that has long defined his thoughts about the shape and practice of poetry – again indicating both the novelty and creative continuities defining *Paterson* as a literary work. Without “invention”, Williams declares in the 1946 edition, as if anticipating the “variable foot” he evolves in *Paterson Book II*,

... the line  
will never again take on its ancient  
divisions when the word, a supple word,  
lived in it, crumbled now to chalk.

(*P* 50)

As before, the speech-like flexibility on the page that Williams is seeking here is both “ancient” and novel – a prosodic practice with considerable formal precedents (for example, in ancient Greek literature), which nevertheless reflects the particularities of Williams's own place and era. As Williams's prefatory note to *Paterson* suggests, the poetics of the work are intended as “a dispersal” of present knowledge and “a metamorphosis” of traditional understandings (*P* 2). As Adam R. McKee observes, moreover, the final effect is “a continuous gathering and dispersing, a dissolution of the solipsistic desire for the citizen to completely order their surroundings”: *Paterson* is a processive work (and a work in progress), and not a finite narrative or closed system.<sup>268</sup>

If Williams would have us believe that such a formal mechanism is both symptomatic and constitutive of the modern moment in which he is writing, the poem is also clearly a work of *place* and *placing*. As such, *Paterson* reflects the nascent multiculturalism and exploratory geographical consciousness of Williams's own life and surroundings.

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<sup>268</sup> Adam R. McKee, “Paterson: William Carlos Williams's Image of the City”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol.31 No. 2 (Fall, 2014), p. 150.

Although *Paterson* sets out to distil a definitively American language and environment into poetic form, for instance, there is a notably literalistic strain to Williams's contention that the “flow [of the poem] must originate from the local to the general as a river to the sea” (SL 225) – in that by offering a poetic and discursive graph of its titular New Jersey city, *Paterson's* coordinates of reference range from the West Indies, where Williams's mother grew up, to Rupertsberg, where “the Abbess Hildegard, at her own / funeral [...] enjoined” her fellows “to sing the choral, all / women” (*P* 179), thus breaking local custom (in the way that Williams's poem sets out to do). In mining his own personal origins for historical and cultural resonances, the poem serves as a genealogy of Williams's own biographical and imaginative concerns. Recalling his London-born father's upbringing in the Caribbean, Williams notes:

There was an earlier day, of prismatic colors : whence  
to New Barbadoes came the Englishman .

Thus it began .

(*P* 110)

“Let the colors run”, Williams continues, as remembered and imagined experiences clash and blend over the poem's course – in a process that, as above, is as geographically excursive as it is symbolically precise, *Paterson's* eclecticism of personal and locational references catalysing the thematic progression of the work as a whole. Williams's eponymous man-city walks “upstream”, observing “fields, hot and cold / parallel but never mingling”, while simultaneously envisioning “the sombre mountains of Haiti”, where

... Carlos had fled in the 70's  
leaving the portraits of my grandparents,  
the furniture, the silver, even the meal  
hot upon the table before the Revolutionists

coming in at the far end of the street).

(P 25)

The murmur of long-distant “Revolutionists”, charging the streets of Port-au-Prince, ebbs in the ambulatory pace of Paterson's extended American walk, entering what Roger Gilbert has termed its almost “cinematic [...] rhythm of perception.”<sup>269</sup>

Curiously, such transnational references seem ultimately to compound *Paterson's* function as a self-situating poem – one evoking the place from which it springs, and interrogating its own relationship (as a literary work) to that place in complex ways. Indeed, the procedures of spatial and cultural incorporation Williams deploys throughout *Paterson* are integral to the examination of such central questions as divorce and marriage, aphasia and linguistic verisimilitude, that the poem enacts. An account of an African fertility rite drives to the heart of each of these issues, standing as both an echo of and counterweight to the mores of Paterson's own society, in which “[d]ivorce is / the sign of knowledge in our time” (P 17), while “the language / is divorced from [our] minds” (P 12):

When an African Ibibio man is slain in battle, married women who are his next of kin rescue the corpse. No man may touch it. Weeping and singing songs, the scouts bear the dead warrior to a forest glad called Owokafai – the place of those slain suddenly by death. They lay him on a bed of fresh leaves. Then they cut young branches from a sacred tree and wave the bough over the genital organs of the warrior to extract the spirit of fertility into the leaves [...]. This ceremony is conducted to the accompaniment of low, wailing chants, which only these wives of warriors have authority to sing, or even to know.

(P 144)

If such a segment suggests a perhaps unsettlingly acquisitive approach to so-called primitive African cultures on Williams's part, it also indicates something of the contemporaneity of *Paterson* as a poem. Extracted from a study of women and music

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<sup>269</sup> Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton, 1991), p. 114.

published in 1948, the passage betrays Williams's sexualised and exhilarated conception of both women and persons of colour – addressed in other sections of this discussion – but is also indicative of his abiding insistence on the novelty (the modernity, even) of the poetic act itself. Writing in 1949, Williams is keen to include, as he sees it, the most recently reprinted scholarship on his eclectic subjects: marriage and remembrance, self-expression and cultural speech.

As in other sections of this thesis, the discussion below will explore the dynamic of social bias hinted at above, which seems often to animate and impel Williams's creative project. This chapter will also attempt to make clear, however, the surprisingly nuanced manifestations of such a tendency in *Paterson* in particular. If Williams's localised modern epic contains provocations a-plenty concerning such crucial (and crucially American) issues as poverty, racism, and sexual and gendered violence, it also has much to say about the nature, the limitations, and the challenges of national and literary imagining – a feature which anticipates and may partially counterbalance the potentially damaging effects of the discourses mentioned above. *Paterson*, in short, appears at certain points to be as laudably self-critical as it is elsewhere blithely unheeding – a strange, if by now familiar, characteristic of Williams's writing style. Importantly, however, such apparently fricative tendencies in *Paterson* are arguably intensified by the formal registers (and some would say, disjunctions) under which Williams labours to fulfil the poem's expressive project – a question to which the remainder of this introductory segment will be dedicated to examining.

Numerous critics have interpreted *Paterson* primarily in terms of what Marjorie Perloff



has identified as its symbolist, and thereby “closed”, formal procedures –<sup>270</sup> tracing the ways in which Williams's imagination of marriage and divorce, elemental creation and destruction, public speech and historical silence, structure the work as a whole. In this school of thought, Williams's recourse to such symbolic equations as a means of organising the poem is often as lamentable as it is complex, reducing Paterson-the-city's material multiverse to a series of wilful, and occasionally problematic, motifs. Why should Williams's discernment of a “common language to unravel” from among Paterson's “office towers” and “oozy fields” be best expressed through the imagination of a “man like a city and a woman like a flower” (*P* 7)? The implication, of course, is that the poem's many clear-eyed observations of its place and moment become aesthetically muddied when merged with Williams's quite personal programme of symbolic representation. For Michael André Bernstein, indeed, such formal gymnastics in *Paterson* are ultimately “inadequate to its purpose”, with the result that its narrative “almost entirely neglects the actual political and social organization of the community”.<sup>271</sup> For Carla Billitteri, similarly, the tension between the materiality of its subject matter and the abstraction (however energetic) of its treatment in the poem marks *Paterson* as an experimental exercise that ultimately “fails”, testing “the social usefulness of poetry” and finding itself “unable to bring or cause actual change through the imposition of formal order.”<sup>272</sup>

While such analyses can serve to clarify the thematic and formal procedures of *Paterson*, I argue instead for a holistic interpretation of the poem (and of its stylistic range) in the

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<sup>270</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston, 1981), p. 151.

<sup>271</sup> Michael André Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 210-212.

<sup>272</sup> Carla Billitteri, “William Carlos Williams and the Politics of Form”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 30 No. 2 (Winter, 2007), p. 58.

context of Williams's literary development as a whole. In its multi-form shape and shifting layers of historical and aesthetic enquiry, after all, *Paterson* arguably represents not an imposed artistic order, as Billitteri suggests above, so much as the workings of that consciousness out of which such an order may be generated – or, for that matter, disarrayed. By Williams's own account, as we have seen, *Paterson* is designed to serve as “a reduction to one”, but also as “a dispersal” of conventional approaches to art, knowledge, and social conditions (*P* 2). *Paterson* thus stands as an effort to disband and evade traditional notions of “formal order” as much as it attempts to regularise by example the representation of local experience: a factor which may explain the poem's groundedness in given conditions, along with its simultaneous assertion of literary perception as flux – as being recognisably “variable”, in other words, “as all things in life properly are” (*IWWP* 82).

Importantly, moreover, interpretations such as Bernstein's above arguably miss (or suppress) the remarkable effectiveness of *Paterson's* symbolically charged documentary mode. Acclaimed photographer, George Tice, for one, has cited *Paterson* as an influence on his own later projects in the New Jersey area, describing Williams's work as being “like jazz in its complexity” while also serving as a vital source of “information” about its place and time.<sup>273</sup> Like Williams, furthermore, in immersing his artistic practice in *Paterson* and its environs, Tice notes that in this “time-coloured country”, this “world that was everywhere patterned [by the] living and dead”, as a photographer his aim becomes that of attempting “the impossibility of being at once subjective and objective, so the pictures might serve as both document and interpretation.”<sup>274</sup> Tice's approach clearly

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<sup>273</sup> cit., Mark Hillringhouse, “Looking at Paterson”, *Paterson Literary Review*, 34 (2005), p. 51.

<sup>274</sup> George A. Tice, “Paterson, New Jersey: Thirty Photographs...”, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

chimes with Williams's opening definition of *Paterson* as being simultaneously “an identification” with existing conditions and “a plan for action to supplant a plan for action” – a work that is faithful to the environment it describes and yet passionately alive to the creative necessities which such description entails. If anything, indeed – and as Stephen Hahn suggests – what distinguishes the two artists is not so much a formal incongruity between their respective creative modes, but the fact that Williams's poem “contains more directly and enacts more vigorously an evaluation of the circumstances of 'civilisation'” its titular New Jersey town displays.<sup>275</sup> We find the character Paterson, for example, “seek[ing] to induce his bones to rise into a scene”,

illuminating it within himself, out of itself  
to form the colors, in the terms of some  
back street, so that the history may escape  
the panders

. . . accomplish the inevitable  
poor, the invisible, thrashing, breeding  
. . . debased city

(*P* 81)

Paterson attempts to express with verisimilitude the “debased city” he encounters, but also enacts a symbiosis between the scenes he perceives and his own perceiving body, down to the very bones – re-forming “the colors” he discerns (and with which, symbolically, he paints what he sees) “in the terms of some / back street” (*P* 81). At the very least, like Tice's photographs, the resulting poem is *meant* to exist as both a document and an interpretation – and the apparently free-flowing combination of symbolism and social portraiture (criticised by some scholars) is one expression of such structural intentions.

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*Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 30, No. 6, (Jun-July, 1972), p. 290.

<sup>275</sup> Stephen Hahn, “It was ... civilisation I was after’: George Tice, William Carlos Williams, and the Archaeology of *Paterson*”, *Literary Review*, Vol. 50 Issue 4 (Summer, 2007), p. 75.

This double role of *Paterson* – as a social record and an aesthetic experiment – has also been noted and praised by Robert Coles, who as a junior doctor accompanied Williams on house-calls around various New Jersey towns in the 1930s. Lauding Williams's seeming inability “to be indifferent to social reality in the ways that some of his poet friends found quite congenial”, Coles likewise relates Williams's art to that of documentary photography, arguing that “he gave us a chronicle” of urban New Jersey in the way that “Walker Evans... Marion Post Wolcott [and] Dorothea Lange” did elsewhere in America, each figure implicitly or otherwise positing art “as an instrument of social awareness, of political ferment”.<sup>276</sup> This particular comparison seems apt – not least because Williams himself suggests it in a review of an exhibition of Evans's work in 1938, describing the photographer's combination of artistry and realism as “a pleasure to the eye and a satisfaction to the intelligence” (*ARI* 136). For Williams, moreover, Evans's example affirms one of the principal assertions and concerns of his own work, namely in that it offers creative life to the possibility that

here is everywhere, related to everywhere else, and if we don't see, hear, taste, smell and feel in this place – not only will we never know anything but the world of sense will be by that much diminished everywhere.

(*ARI* 137)

Critics such as Dickran Tashjian and Terence Diggory have long established Williams's vital and interactive relationship with the emerging scene of European and American painters in the first half of the twentieth century. Such an emphasis naturally has its merits, and is one to which Williams himself often gestures. *Paterson*, indeed, goes as far as noting:

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<sup>276</sup> Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*, pp. 109-137.

Pollock's blobs of paint squeezed out  
with design!  
pure from the tube. Nothing else  
is real . . .

(*P* 211)

The remark speaks not just to Williams's continuing appreciation for the New York avant-garde in his later years, but also to his longstanding belief in the palpable and literalistic base from which all expressive art arises – and to which, apparently, it returns (“Nothing else / is real”). “Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks”, Williams writes, urging that “the writing / be of words, slow and quick, sharp / to strike [...] sleepless” (*CP II* 55). Similarly in his autobiography, Williams emphasises the material impetus of art, gleefully recalling a comment made by a gallery attendant in 1920s Manhattan: when asked about a particular painting, “...what is all that down in this left hand lower corner?”, Williams writes, the attendant “came up close and carefully inspected the area mentioned”, before responding, “That, Madam [...] is paint” (*A* 240). Just as “Pollock's blobs of paint squeezed out / with design! / pure from the tube” become all the more real for their aesthetic self-sufficiency, their own *is-ness*, so Williams suggests of the exchange that it marked “the exact point in the transition” in the period from an understanding of “art as a copying of nature” to the recognition of art “as the imitation of nature”, concluding: “[it] is still the failure to take this step [that] blocks us in seeking to gain a full conception of the modern in art” (*A* 240).

As the comments above suggest, Williams's creatively stimulating concern with visual experimentalism and “the modern in art” also extends to the media of film and photography – and in equally productive fashion. There is a “present' / world”, Paterson

asserts, “Ben Shahn saw it / among its rails and wires, / and noted it down” (P 211) – referring to Williams's friend, the Lithuanian-born American artist, acclaimed for his socialistic Jersey Homesteads Mural, as well as his now-famous documentary photography during the New Deal era. Williams, indeed, is reported to have kept “[a] colorful Ben Shahn abstraction / Of a building that seemed to be / All eyes” hanging in the parlour of his house – as remembered by James Laughlin – a gift from Shahn himself.<sup>277</sup> Like Williams's own, Shahn's artistic vision is grounded in “the most corrosive details of poverty” and hardship in America, as Timothy Egan summarises, while also attempting to “find a telling detail that went beneath the surface” of the life around him, combining a “deep-rooted anger at injustice” with an attentiveness to place and society.<sup>278</sup> The fact that Shahn over time garners acclaim as both a painter and a photographer is also no doubt part of Williams's interest in his work. For as David Kadlec reminds us:

[Williams] subscribed to *Experimental Cinema*, together with other journals that took up the question of visual arts and the significance of documentary methods to current work in American film, radio, and poetry as well. *Hound and Horn*, *The Left, U.S.A.*, and *Direction* were among the magazines that placed the poet in dialogue with writings by and about Russian, British, and American nonfiction filmmakers.<sup>279</sup>

Photography and cinema, then, are media to which Williams is actively attracted in his later years – a factor particularly pertinent to our understanding of *Paterson*, a poem that in many ways may be understood as a cinematographic work: in the techniques and cultural references it deploys, and also in the influence it has exerted on film-maker, Jim Jarmusch, most notably in his own feature of the same name (*Paterson*), released in 2016. Both of these aspects of Williams's poem are discussed in later segments of this chapter. For now, the crucial point is to emphasise the generic, discursive, and thematic openness

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<sup>277</sup> James Laughlin, *Remembering William Carlos Williams*, p. 6.

<sup>278</sup> Timothy Egan, “Ben Shahn”, *The Photographs of Ben Shahn* (Washington 2008), pp. viii-ix.

<sup>279</sup> Kadlec, “Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry”, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol.11 No.2 (April, 2004), p. 313.

of *Paterson* – its indefatigable contemporaneity – which once again clarifies and counteracts what some critical narratives, as we have seen, reject as merely jarring flights of fancy.

Of course, the fact is that Williams's realism and his apparent penchant for allegory and symbolism have always existed side by side, as any close reading of his poetic development suggests. “The Wanderer” (1914) is as notable for its population of vivid faces from the New York and New Jersey streets as for the almost mystical muse figure who impels the erratic reverie in which they appear. And a similar observation may be made of the book in which “The Wanderer” is first published, *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), which accommodates a sequence of tenement-shadowed (and now iconic) pastorals alongside that piece's comparatively high style. Likewise, a later poem like Williams's “The Yachts” (1935), with its mixed modes of factual notation and almost feverish parabolic imagining, succinctly highlights such a dualism in action. Opening with the yachts themselves, “scintillant in the minute // brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails” as they “glide to the wind tossing green water”, the poem swerves and sways until the scene observed has been lifted to a second plane, defined by a primarily symbolic antagonism between society's rich and poor:

Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.  
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,  
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies....

(*CP* I 389)

*Paterson* operates in a similar mode. In fact, it is partly in recognition of these stylistic contrasts retained from Williams's earlier work that some critics have labelled *Paterson* as

being primarily a pastoral poem – and so, a complex elaboration of his previous engagement with that mode. Kinereth Meyer, for example, sees in *Paterson's* self-conscious and sometimes jolting incorporation of historical and epistolary materials an urge (and, ultimately, an incapacity) “to recover an Edenic state”, suggesting that in this sense the poem “may be seen as an American pastoral”.<sup>280</sup> In the same vein, Lee Rozelle posits an epistemic resemblance between Williams's melding of historical, perceptible, and environmental fields of experience in *Paterson* and Alfred North Whitehead's theorisation of “Nature and Life”. Just as Whitehead contends that “there is a unity of the body with the environment” in the essay of that name, Rozelle suggests, so *Paterson* envisions and enacts a complex imbrication of personal, social, and material identities in the constitution of its title-character, Williams's doctor-poet who is both man and city in one. “Central” to both figures, Rozelle concludes, “is the idea that body, place and city interrelate directly – the molecular, the ecological and the urban.”<sup>281</sup>

The comparison is suggestive – although, on examination, Williams's engagement in *Paterson* with such themes and processes as Rozelle identifies arguably bears more of a likeness to the investigations of Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, than to the formulations of his intellectual predecessor Whitehead. Williams is, admittedly, almost guaranteed *not* to have written *Paterson* with Wittgenstein's work in mind; yet, as path-breaking innovators in their respective disciplines, both figures are conscious inheritors of Whitehead's work, and forge their own distinctive variations on the English philosopher's speculations. If Whitehead emphasises the porous, mutually processive relationship

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<sup>280</sup> Kinereth Meyer, “Possessing America: William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and the Poetics of Appropriation”, eds., Wayne Franklin, Michael Steiner, *Mapping American Culture* (Iowa, 1992), p. 157.

<sup>281</sup> Lee Rozelle, “Ecocritical City: Modernist Reactions to Urban Environments in “Miss Lonelyhearts” and “Paterson””, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, Vol. 48 No. 1 (Spring, 2002), p. 110.



between material reality and human perceptions, Wittgenstein adapts this framework to his own purposes, replacing the concept of language as a classifying system – an autonomous means of knowing and analysing experience – with an understanding of language as a symptom of the expressive cultures in which it is used, and in which, indeed, it is *lived*. “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him”, Wittgenstein asserts, affirming his adage that “an expression” (including, presumably, a lion’s hypothetical expression) “has meaning only in the stream of life”, and so cannot be extracted from this without epistemological distortion.<sup>282</sup> Similarly, “knowledge”, for Williams, who professes to have read Whitehead, “has no absolute value and all the value it has exists in the deed” (*EoK* 189). In *Paterson*, moreover, and like Wittgenstein, Williams suggests that this condition is not reducible to human language (or a particular system of human signs) . Rather, Williams perceives that the “dogs and trees” in the park

conspire to invent  
a world – gone!

Bow, wow! A  
departing car scatters gravel as it  
picks up speed!

“Bow, wow! Bow, wow!”, the segment finishes (*P* 79). The passage of course acts out in practice what Williams elsewhere proclaims as theory: that poetry should signify “the emplacement of knowledge into a living current” (*CP I* 225) – interpreting the poem not so much as an object that is creative of its own order, as a kind of living artefact, traced through with the whole flux of experiences (including linguistic experiences) from which it is drawn. Williams elaborates:

Were we to scrape the words from the paper, or the stars from the sky, they would mean alike, nothing. It is only in their interrelationship with the perceptions that we

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<sup>282</sup> cit., Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London, 1990) pp. 556-578.

know them. And there they are equally real.

(*EoK* 128)

Just as Wittgenstein envisions “philosophy” as “a fight against the fascination that forms of expression exert upon us”,<sup>283</sup> Williams similarly recognises that were “we called upon to go back to what we believed in the past we should be lost” (*SE* 337), stating that a “new measure” of poetry, “commensurate with [the] world in which we are living” is required (*SE* 283). It is in this context, moreover, that the eponymous character in Williams's poem first discerns “a common language to unravel” in his native environment (*P* 7) – in order to mend the gap he detects, whereby “the language” of American verse “is divorced from [the] minds” of his fellow townspeople (*P* 12).

Strikingly, both Williams and Wittgenstein reach for the same analogy when evolving their respective theorisations. “WALK in the world”, Williams urges, for “you can't see anything / from a car window, still less / from a plane” (*P* 211). Similarly, Wittgenstein suggests,

To get clear about philosophical problems ... it is useful to become conscious of the apparently unimportant details of the particular situation in which we are inclined to make a certain metaphysical assertion. So we may be tempted to say, 'Only this is really seen' when we stare at unchanging surroundings, whereas we may not at all be tempted to say this when we look about us while walking.<sup>284</sup>

*Paterson* of course adopts Williams's exhortation above as one of its principal themes, imbricating such an insight into its very structure and punctuating its constitutive materials with the activity (and the word), “Walking –” (*P* 52). A representative segment from *Book I* reads:

Walking –

across the old swale – a dry wave in the ground  
tho' marked still by the line of Indian alders

<sup>283</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Notebooks* (New York, 1965/1958), p. 27.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

. . . they (the Indians) would weave  
in and out, unseen, among them along the stream

. . . come out whooping between the log  
house and men working the field, cut them  
off! they having left their arms in the block-  
house, and – without defense – carry them away  
into captivity. One old man . . .

Forget it! for God's sake, Cut  
out that stuff . . .

Walking –

he rejoins the path and sees, on a treeless  
knoll – the red path choking it –  
a stone wall....

(P 52)

Paterson's egress lets the collective (and historical) life of his locale *in* to the poem, opening his private (self-)perceptions to the shaping influence of the city's own practice. As Michel de Certeau observes, to “walk” is to become one of the “ordinary practitioners of the city [...] they are walkers” – as the process of *Paterson* as a poem, and the behaviour of Paterson the character, continually attests.<sup>285</sup> Throughout *Paterson's* opening segment, “Walking” is at once the verbal node around which the poem's diverse materials pivot and the physical-perceptual activity that Paterson himself engages. “Walking”, in short, serves as one of the poem's key architextural fixtures, as well as providing the *access* to that “living current” Williams refers to above – thus becoming for him, as Hugh T. Crawford notes, “another way of knowing” of the world.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Michel de Certeau, trans., Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 93; for a stimulating discussion of de Certeau and *Paterson*, see Rise B. Axelrod, Stephen Gould Axelrod, “The Metro-poetics of Paterson”, *William Carlos Williams Reivew*, Vol. 29 No. 2 (Fall, 2009), pp. 121-135.

<sup>286</sup> Hugh T. Crawford, “Williams, science, and the cody”, ed., MacGowan, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 181.

This functional doubleness of “Walking” also manifests in microcosm the dialectic between *Paterson's* formal structure and thematic concerns discussed earlier. On the one hand, “Walking” for Paterson is an unfolding process of perception and literary incorporation; on the other, for Williams and his readers, it is very clearly a literary device. As such, Stephen Tapscott suggests, Williams may be understood as detailing “the specific place and circumstances of his city” from a concern “to teach others *how*, not what, to see”.<sup>287</sup>

Of course, if Williams's “Walking” motif facilitates the multi-form representation of modern consciousness that *Paterson* dramatises, it also renovates and echoes a quintessentially American literary trope. “I have walked out in rain – and back in rain. I have outwalked the furthest city light”, Robert Frost records, picking up “an interrupted cry” that “came over houses from another street” – and thus acting out as a form of solitary introversion what Williams, in *Paterson*, adopts as a method of social understanding.<sup>288</sup> Williams's excavation and performance of local meaning in the poem similarly resembles the project – at once literary and ambulatory – of Henry Thoreau, who reflects:

There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.<sup>289</sup>

If Thoreau's tract offers a meditation on walking as an art of life, *Paterson* may be read as an exploration of what the art – or more specifically, the poetry – of walking might look and sound like. As the extract quoted above demonstrates, moreover, for Williams this art

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<sup>287</sup> Stephen Tapscott, *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman* (New York, 1984), pp. 17-18 (emphasis mine).

<sup>288</sup> Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, p. 234.

<sup>289</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, “Walking”, *Excursions* (New York, 1975/1862), p. 169.

must be receptive to (and expressive of) historical conflict, social and ethnic alterity, and narratological tension – and not just to the “harmony discoverable” in local conditions. In associating the present “line of Indian alders” along the riverbank with a centuries-old raid by Native Americans in the same area, Paterson transmits not only a materially precise image of the places he encounters, but also an abiding retort to his hidden (and traditionally minded) interlocuter, who urges him to “Forget it! for God's sake, Cut / out that stuff” (*P* 52). Like Thoreau's, Williams's “Walking” is an experience of discovery, but also an act of rebellion against received understandings of literary acceptability – a refusal to forget or edit out the alternative narratives of Paterson, the multiple cities and pre-urban spaces, if you will, that lie within and beneath the walkable “limits” of his doctor-poet's traverses.

As such, in *Paterson* the poet's task is to “pay attention”, as Muriel Rukeyser will later urge, “to what they tell you to forget”.<sup>290</sup> Just as Paterson revives the activities of a centuries-old native American war band above, in the present he strolls “among // the working classes”, delighting that “SOME sort / of breakdown / has occurred” (*P* 51) as he hears

[...] Voices . . . indeterminate! Sees them  
moving, in groups, by twos and fours – filtering  
off by way of the many bypaths....

(*P* 45)

For Williams, the delicious paradox of such a process of aesthetic discovery is that many of those fields of narrative, memory, and local experience are literally unspeakable: having escaped the historical record, they now elude poetic utterance. Paterson's

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<sup>290</sup> Rukeyser, “Double Ode”, *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, p. 274.

interpretative attentiveness to the materiality of life (including social life) around him also acknowledges the essential *otherness* of this category. “After all”, as Williams writes to Denise Levertov in 1954, “a poem is made up not of the things of which it speaks directly but of things which it cannot identify and yet yearns to know” (*DL/WCW* 8).

*Paterson* may be understood as Williams's most sustained and far-reaching exploration of the latter apothegm in poetic form. In this regard, encompassing questions of ethnic and colonial conflict, class difference and mass culture, patriarchal discourses of remembering, sexuality, and gendered violence, as well as Williams's evolving understanding of modern prosody, *Paterson* proves always ambitious and often provocative. Williams's urge to counter a culturally amnesiac verse tradition with a socially and historically particulate imagination of place in *Paterson*, however, can be as politically convoluted as it is poetically invigorating – as the following portions of this chapter indicate.

#### 4.2 *The Labour of Paterson*

Before addressing some of the critical pitfalls of Williams's late long-poem project, it is important to acknowledge and assess the extent to which *Paterson* functions as a kind of social seismograph, recording and communicating the material politics of its given environment. *Paterson* may in some respects even be read as a complex exercise in class consciousness – with the proviso, that is, of it being Williams's esoteric (and sometimes vexed) understanding of class relations that prevails, rather than the dialectics of Marxist thought or working-class experience. “I am not a Marxian”, Williams declares to Babette Deutsch in 1947, clarifying that “in *Paterson* the social unrest that occasions all strikes is

strong... but I must confess that the aesthetic shock occasioned by the rise of the masses upon the artist receives top notice” (*SL* 259). In what is by now a familiar bind in Williams's work, *Paterson* thus offers a fitful, compulsive account of *both* the material conditions that give rise to political upheaval and the creative precarity, as Williams's sees it, which such circumstances imply for the artist and his work. Faced with “the rise of the masses”, Williams finds himself simultaneously partisan and discomfited (*SL* 259).

One of the most significant elements of the poem's progression is the frequency with which the “interpenetration, both ways” of past and present that *Paterson* posits is framed in terms of the city's legacies of labour and class tensions. “Rose and I didn't know each other when we both went to the Paterson strike”, one prose interpellation reads:

She went regularly to feed Jack Reed in jail and I listened to Big Bill Haywood, Gurley Flynn and the rest of the big hearts and helping hands in Union Hall. And look at the damned thing now.

(*P* 99)

The passage clarifies Williams's assertion in the poem, quoting Santayana, that “cities are a second body for the human mind, a second organism [...] a work of natural yet moral art” (*P* 94) – Paterson-the-city standing as a *social* organism, one defined by the relationships of labour and capital alluded to above. Williams's specific observation in this instance is that the “now” of Paterson seems “damned”, and in any case continues to be shaped by the defeat of the silk miners' strike of 1913 – not to mention the conditions of exploitation and material inequity which led to the strike in the first place. The extract also particularises the project and intentions of Paterson himself, who, we are told,

[...] dozes in a fever heat,  
cheeks burning . . . loaning blood  
to the past, amazed . . . risking life.





in the world, save that church, between them and the eternal stony, ungrateful and unpromising dirt they lived by” (P 62).

Significantly, in this sequence of the poem Paterson also tunes in to (and goes on to adapt) the discourse of Klaus Ehrens nearby – a vagrant pastor, part-visionary and part-outcast, preaching to other walkers in the hillside park. In Paterson's account of his sermon, Ehrens's goal is to formulate and popularise a number of basic arguments against avarice and division which, in his view, the majority of his fellows both lack and require. Faced with a culture of private wealth and apparently unfettered self-interest, Ehrens is unequivocal in his response:

NO! he shouted, bending  
at the knees and straightening himself up  
violently with the force of his emphasis – like  
Beethoven getting a crescendo out of an  
orchestra – NO!

(P 68)

As a character in the poem, Ehrens is not dissimilar to Paterson himself – at least in being both an outsider and a representative man to the society he addresses. Ehrens arguably embodies that individuality which for Williams is vital to the very idea of democracy, identifying himself as a German-Jewish immigrant and a kind of saving critic of his new home, “America the golden” – a country made “bitter” by its subservience to a cult of wealth he seems intent on exposing:

It did *not* make me good. (His clenched fists  
were raised above his brows.) I kept on making  
money, more and more of it, but it didn't make  
me good.

(P 68)

As such extracts suggest, Ehrens and Paterson share a visceral reaction to the varied social vistas of American life around them. However, as suggested above, Paterson also takes issue with the underlying religiosity of the pastor's message – which he feels is tailored to convert his listeners to “devout assistants” (*P* 71). As a gathered crowd echoes the sermonist's final “Amen! Amen!”, Paterson by contrast find himself ruminating on the nature and extent of the collective self-consciousness that Ehrens has inspired:

Is this the only beauty here?  
And is this beauty –  
torn to shreds by the  
lurking schismatists?

(*P* 71)

Paterson's ultimate suspicion of Ehrens relates to his awareness of the implications of the preacher's somewhat eccentric gospel for society at large. For whereas Paterson advocates (perhaps without ever fully achieving) a politics of compassion and mutual self-empowerment – taking up “the individual misfortune / by buffering it into the locality” (*P* 181) – Ehrens' social vision remains one of political distraction and intellectual self-relegation (to his church). Such effects are no accident, in Williams's eyes – but rather the result of a calculated effort not just by the likes of Ehrens and Billy Sunday, but by America's “Senate” and “industrialists”, to control and deflect the potentially decisive disaffection of working communities (*P* 62). Observing the church-bound masses, Williams observes:

Cash is mulct of them that others may live  
secure  
. . . . and knowledge restricted.

An orchestral dullness overlays their world

(*P* 62)

“Music it for yourself”, Paterson urges by contrast (*P* 29), suggesting that the “knowledge restricted” in American society be given shape and direction instead by the actual experiences of daily life – by “the low where / the life once flourished” (*P* 33).

If Williams's consistent interlinking of working-class experience with the aesthetically “low” is critically perturbing, it is important nevertheless to relate this impulse to *Paterson's* (broadly persuasive) social documentary mode, mentioned earlier. As ever in Williams's work, in its most fully achieved moments in *Paterson*, such a mode melds idiomatic authenticity with observational precision:

Doc, listen – fiftyish, a grimy hand  
pushing back the cap: In gold –  
Volunteers of America

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

(*P* 103)

The passage is principally a humorous crack at the gap between romantic (or perhaps, poetic) love and its actuality as encountered by Williams's doctor-poet on his daily round. Yet it is also worth noting how Williams stitches a social perspective into even the most seemingly commonplace of accounts – the patient's “grimy hand” adjusting a gold-lettered “Volunteers of America” cap on his head, thus re-focusing the poem's attention from the man's own character to the society in which he is living. *Paterson* as a whole functions in a similar manner: the “mystery / of streets and back rooms”, as Williams writes: “come here / to dream” (*P* 37).

Wedded to (and dependent on) such episodes of verbal, scatological, and social revelation

for its effect, Williams's project of “lifting an environment to expression” in *Paterson* seems at times to be less a display and flexing of poetic musculature than an almost palpable experience of social immersion. As above (“Doc, listen...”), moreover, the political implications that stem from *Paterson's* moments of social portraiture are often framed by Williams's experience and diagnostic concerns as a doctor. The political and the medical, in other words, are in a continual state of crosspollination in the poem. Hence, in the extract below, a vista of ecological pollution (resulting from Paterson's toxic industrial productivity) gives way to a scene defined by bodily sickness, social desperation, and domestic violence:

Where the dredge dumped the fill,  
something, a white hop-clover  
with cordy roots (of iron) gripped  
the sand in its claws – and blossomed  
massively, where the old farm  
was and the man broke his wife's  
cancerous jaw because she was  
too weak, too sick, that is, to  
work in the field for him as he  
thought she should .

(*P* 141)

It is largely due to segments such as this that Robert Lowell can find in *Paterson* “Whitman's America, grown pathetic and tragic, brutalized by inequality, disorganised by industrial chaos, and faced with annihilation”.<sup>291</sup> Crucially, the particulate devastation seeping through the scene above – and the same is true of similar episodes over the course of the poem – is for Williams a symptom of the historical and social structure of the city, in the long aftermath of Alexander Hamilton's economic programmes in the late eighteenth century. “Witnessing the Falls”, Williams writes,

Hamilton was impressed by this show of what in those times was overwhelming

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<sup>291</sup> Lowell, “Paterson II”, *Collected Prose*, p. 36.

power... planned a stone aqueduct following a proposed boulevard, as the crow flies, to Newark with outlets every mile or two along the river for groups of factories: The Society for Useful Manufactures: SUM, they called it.

(P 73)

Williams's stated intention in the poem to "make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general, rolling / up the sum" (P 3) is a conscious retort to Hamilton's utilitarian ("SUM") vision for Paterson here —<sup>292</sup> an industrial vision now manifest in the material shape of the city itself, and in its development (and degeneration) as an urban space.

Founded by Hamilton in 1792, as Iris Ralph summarises,

Paterson was the first industrial city in the United States and operated the country's first silk and cotton textile mills. By the nineteenth century it was among the largest producers of textiles as well as guns, paper, and locomotives. A century and a half later, in 1940, it was economically and environmentally stagnant. Many of the city's working-class populations could not find work, the rivers and tributaries were heavily polluted, and the once fecund swamps had become 'the vilest swillholes in christendom'.<sup>293</sup>

Williams's poem is self-consciously immersed in (and continually evocative of) such a historical and social vista. "Half the river red", Williams observes,

[...] half steaming purple  
from the factory vents, spewed out hot,  
swirling, bubbling. The dead bank,  
shining mud .

(P 36)

All of which may serve as a reminder that *Paterson* isn't just an effort by Williams to write a *poem including history*, to adapt Ezra Pound's definition of the epic. So above, for example, Williams is not only attempting to incorporate an awareness of the *fact* of Hamilton's influence on the Paterson area, but to critique what he calls in his *Autobiography* the "fiscal colonial policy" and elitism of Hamilton as a figure (A 391).

<sup>292</sup> Phyllis, "Dissonance is Discovery", *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 31 No. 2, p. 167.

<sup>293</sup> Iris Ralph, "Ecocriticism and the Modern Artist's Notice of Nature", *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 32 Nos 1-2 (2015), p. 129.

Indeed, Williams elsewhere describes the American economist as “a balloon of malice” (*IAG* 190), presenting a refreshingly sceptical portrait of the founding father whose reputation in recent years has undergone a remarkably positive popular revival (in the form of the revolutionary hip-hop dazzle-fest that is the Broadway musical, *Hamilton*). The main point being that if Williams can insist on there being “[n]o ideas but / in the facts” (*P* 27), it is vital to remember that while these “facts” do indeed ground his poetry in an identifiable setting and social environment, they are also occasions for historical argument and creative conflagration.

Similarly, in the segment above, the marital abuse and cancerous break-down of the woman's body occurs in the vicinity of “[w]here the dredge dumped the fill” (*P* 141) – the violence and deprivation of individual experiences thus unfolding against the backdrop of the long decades of industrial exfoliation of the Paterson area. Pacing among the detritus and apparently toxic atmosphere of the Passic riverbanks, Paterson's stated mission is to draw up from the wasted products of Hamilton's vision – from the polluted falls to the “Tenement windows, sharp edged, in which / no face is seen” (*P* 37) – a serviceable and accurate imagination of American life. As Angela Hume notes in another context, “readers find themselves well outside the realm of nature poetry, instead approaching something more akin to a poetics of environmental justice”, one that rejects “the sublime wilderness ideal” in favour of America's blasted “landscapes, along with the people who inhabit them”.<sup>294</sup>

If the dynamic of ecological witness and protest here is mainly an off-shoot of Williams's

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<sup>294</sup> Angela Hume, “Toward an Antiracist Ecopoetics: Waste and Wasting in the Poetry of Claudia Rankine”, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 57 No. 1 (Spring 2016), p. 85.

desire to record things as they are (as “the facts” dictate) in his titular city, it nonetheless forms a distinctive and intrinsic element of *Paterson's* critical discourse. Indeed, Williams's penetrating socio-environmental consciousness of the falls and the surrounding area is largely absent from Jim Jarmusch's filmic portrayal of the same spaces – a point of contrast that arguably qualifies the latter's own social documentary tendencies. Reportedly conceived as “cinema in a poetic form”, Jarmusch's *Paterson* (2016) features multiple allusions to Williams's work, offering a culturally referential portrait of the New Jersey town as well as a meditation on the process of literary composition.<sup>295</sup> As in Williams's poem, the sound of the Passaic river and the image of Paterson's 'Great Falls' are invoked throughout the film as symbols – or perhaps, catalysts – of the main character's writing process, coaxing his thoughts into language. And yet, as mentioned, Jarmusch's work communicates no awareness of the industrial pollution (and hence, the continuing environmental and political history) that has defined the Passaic River since the early nineteenth century. By contrast, and as we have seen, the Passaic as it appears in Williams's poem supplies not just an occasion for literary reverie, but also – “steaming purple / from the factory vents, spewed out hot” (*P* 36) – an opportunity to engage questions of environmental degradation, corporate power, and social decay in the surrounding region. Indeed, as Williams writes in his preface to the 1951 edition, the poem as a whole follows

the course of the river whose life seemed more and more to resemble my own...  
the river           above the Falls, the catastrophe of the Falls itself, the river below  
the Falls and the entrance    at the end into the great sea.

(*P* xiii)

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<sup>295</sup> cit., Amy Taubin, “Common Sense: An Interview with Jim Jarmusch”, *Film Comment* (December 2016), <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/jim-jarmusch-paterson-gimme-danger-interview/> (accessed 08/08/2018).

Whereas for Jarmusch, Paterson's falls represent the fructifying source and analogical image of his protagonist's creative consciousness, for Williams they are also, and fundamentally, a "catastrophe" – a fact without which their historical and symbolic significance in the poem cannot be understood. As Ariel Salleh has noted in general terms, when "the lifestyle" and political choices of a small elite "brings ecological devastation and poverty to many", causing "dammed-up rivers [to] run sour and parched soils [to] crack open", citizens are faced with an "urgent need to reappraise economic alternatives to industrialisation, to reframe our political tenets".<sup>296</sup> Conceived in opposition to a Hamiltonian understanding of industrial progress and democratic development, *Paterson* constitutes Williams's reappraisal of such choices for his time. "Alexander Hamilton", Williams thus argues elsewhere, "led the country [to] financial stability but at the cost of much that had been envisioned during the early years of the revolution" – a narrative, as Williams sees it, exemplified in the environmental toxicity and social decrepitude of Paterson and its hinterlands.

As such observations suggest, the aesthetics of description at work in *Paterson* may be understood equally as an ethics of diagnosis and correction on Williams's part – an ethics which his environmental attentiveness reflects, and which his medical experience also affirms. Robert Coles records Williams himself suggesting as much, in a reminiscence of his own early medical training in the Paterson area. "[T]here are days that I wonder what I'm doing in my study, of all places!", Williams reportedly exclaimed on one occasion:

Don't you see – that's it: I'm not seeing *here*, I'm remembering. When I'm *there*, sitting with those folks, listening and talking – the flow of it! – I'm part of that life, and I'm near it in my head, too. The words are coming to me, and I have to push them

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<sup>296</sup> Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London, 1997), p. 194.



away, because I've got to ask those medical questions and use my stethoscope.<sup>297</sup>

Williams's portrait of Paterson is achieved by similar means, through a method that is both diagnostic and receptive – a matter of “examination” and excursion simultaneously. For Williams, moreover, such a project explicitly requires the clearance (and reconstitution) of what he terms the “avenues of information” – the poem attempting “to leap the gap” between educational, literary, and public discourses as they currently exist, on the one hand, and the reality of the material conditions experienced by the majority of Americans, on the other (*P* 33). “Who restricts knowledge?”, Williams declaims, before expanding his poem's critical scope with the answer: not only “a spineless Congress” in thrall to “private enterprise” (*P* 73), but also “the knowledgeable idiots [of] the university”, who wear (Williams charges)

The outward  
masks of the special interests  
that perpetuate the stasis and make it  
profitable.

(*P* 34)

Regardless of whether one credits Williams's views, or the scathing rhetorical pitch at which they are delivered, the critical point here is that *Paterson* functions not just as “an elucidation by multiplicity” (*P* 61), but also as an education of prospective versifiers as to the state of the nation, and the many forms of power and exploitation that prevail in American life. As such, for Williams the modern poem stands as a multidirectional protest *against* its time and place, as much as it serves as an illumination and reflection of these. “Escape from it – but not by running / away”, Williams urges, suggesting rather that poets should “[e]mbrace the foulness” (*P* 103).

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<sup>297</sup> Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*, p. 46.

Such an exhilaratingly oppositional stance on Williams's part is not without its own problems, which in *Paterson* often emerge at precisely those points at which Williams's identification of the “knowledge restricted” by the elites of American society is met with the claim (tacit or open) that the poem itself provides the necessary cultural counterweight and remedy required. Such propositions relate, of course, to Williams's stated hope that *Paterson* stand as a chronicle not just of the “social unrest” perceptible in the region, but of Williams's own “aesthetic shock” in midst of it (*SL* 259) – a condition often accompanied by problematic assumptions and effects, as the next portion of this discussion makes plain.

#### 4.3 *Paterson and Mass Culture*

As suggested earlier, *Paterson* continues what appears to be almost a tradition of Williams's work – in its combination of a passionate identification with and an occasionally troubling paternalism towards mass culture, and specifically the working-class citizens he (or in this case, his poem's central character) encounters and attends to medically. If *Paterson* is envisaged as a poem of local conditions and daily experiences, “a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands” (*P* 2), such a concern on Williams's part seems nevertheless to involve an unabashed objectification of the communities and characters most affected by the material circumstances the poem sets out to address. As the industrially polluted Passaic waterfall both stimulates and defies comprehension, for example, so *Paterson* depicts

– girls from  
families that have decayed and  
taken to the hills: no words.  
They may look at the torrent in  
their minds

and it is foreign to them....

(P 12)

Here once again Williams seems to be riffing on (if not directly quoting) his poetic passage from *Spring and All* (1923), in which “a girl so desolate”, descended from “mountain folk in Kentucky // or the ribbed north end of / Jersey”, lives and embodies an experience “which [she] cannot express” – but which still catalyses Williams's own literary experimentalism. (*CP I* 217-18). “[T]he language”, Williams writes of Paterson's “decayed” under-class, “fails them... is divorced from their minds” (P 11-12) – a rift which *Paterson* as a work sets out to mend, rendering communicable the materiality of such experience in poetic terms. What is at issue in this instance, of course, is Williams's (apparently perennial) presumption to categorise and educate figures for whom he simultaneously expresses his aesthetic disdain. “What can he think else”, Williams rhetoricises, but of “the wild workers' children tearing up the grass, / kicking, screaming”, workers

[whose] mouths eating and kissing,  
spitting and sucking, speaking; a  
partitype of five .

(P 36)

“[H]ow complex / the mathematic”, Williams writes, as he attempts to formulate a verse-line and to dramatise a mode of attention which together adequately express the social physiology of such figures. As Carla Bilitteri has observed, Williams's poetics in this way reflect a “relation toward the masses” that is “ambivalent” at best.<sup>298</sup>

Directly quoting Hamilton on another occasion, Paterson lends an ear to what he terms

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<sup>298</sup> Carla Bilitteri, “William Carlos Williams and the Politics of Form”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 12/1/2007, Vol. 30, Issue 2, p. 50-60.

“the great beast” of ordinary people – a living “mass” he moves among with an impulsive and sometimes unsettled curiosity (*P* 18). Indeed, despite Williams's critique of Hamilton's elitist “thwarting of democracy” in favour of the “plutocracy” of Wall Street, Paterson's portrayal of the economist's so-called “beast” of the streets itself expresses a perturbing mixture of fascination, sympathy, and distaste – an aloofness from the “wild workers” and their children, which nevertheless appears intent on breaking its own taboos (*P* 36).<sup>299</sup> So Paterson finds himself:

... among the others,  
– treads there the same stones  
on which their feet slip as they climb,  
paced by their dogs!

Laughing, calling to each other –

Wait for me!

. . . the ugly legs of the young girls,  
pistons too powerful for delicacy!  
the men's arms, red, used to heat and cold,  
to toss quartered beeves and .

Yah! Yah! Yah! Yah!

(*P* 44)

Amid the cacophony of the crowd, Paterson explicitly relates the exhilaration he feels to the primal noise and “ugly” features of the bodies around him – bodies whose common characteristic, Paterson suggests, is their habituation to manual labour, the men's arms “red, used to heat and cold, / to toss[ing] quartered beeves” (*P* 44). The negative description, in other words, plays on notions of class structure and hierarchy for its descriptive effect – refiguring Paterson's poetic discourse in terms of a democratic polyvocality, yet at the same time reinforcing the presumption of social difference

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<sup>299</sup> cit., Mariani, *New World Naked*, p. 382.

between himself and his subjects.

As in other segments of this discussion, Raymond Williams's conception of intellectual bias may be relevant here. In his groundbreaking studies of modern culture – and in direct contrast to the language and imagery deployed in the above sequence in *Paterson* – the Welsh critic contends that “[t]here are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses”.<sup>300</sup> According to such a theorisation, moreover, these latter are ideological to the core – for their potential dehumanisation of the people observed, and for the subtle validation of class prejudice that the resulting perspective permits. Unlike his American namesake, Williams suggests that the practice of categorising and interpreting people as masses affords an implicit mandate for “political or cultural exploitation”, rather than the clarifying viewpoint on modern experience for which it may originally have been intended. Williams argues that the recourse to reductive categories – which would presumably include Paterson's tropic repetition of the beastliness and vulgarity of the people in his city's park and back streets – effectively replaces humanity with a “convenient formula”.<sup>301</sup> This formula, Williams furthermore argues, invariably serves to legitimise the privileged position of the observer.

Such criticism of course pertains as much to poetry and poets as it does to the scientific and sociological discourses with which Williams himself is concerned. Indeed, it is on the basis of this last insight that critic John Carey has endeavoured to demonstrate the anti-democratic nature of the modernist project in general.<sup>302</sup> In *The Intellectuals and the Masses* Carey persuasively relates an array of reactionary assumptions underlying the

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<sup>300</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 299.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>302</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London, 1992), p. 4.

political opinions and artistic statements of a number of modernism's leading personalities to the more disturbing political ideologies of their time. Carey's key critical insight is to suggest that in place of any doctrinally consistent aesthetic principles, it is these assumptions that supply the unifying feature of Anglo-American modernism's otherwise disparate series of experiments and ventures. In particular, and in step with Raymond Williams's more generalised observations, Carey takes issue with what he sees as the pernicious tendency among poets and thinkers to “mass” the lower classes of their societies – often as a means of affirming their own more privileged artistic role in relation to the crowd. Carey consequently perceives in modernist art and thought a proclivity for distortion – an antagonistic attitude to modern culture that nonetheless reiterates the authors' own insulated social status within it:

Since the 'mass' is an imaginary construct, displacing the unknowable multiplicity of human life, it can be reshaped at will, in accordance with the wishes of the imaginer... it can [also] be replaced by images, equally arbitrary, of 'typical' mass men or mass women.<sup>303</sup>

Although Williams Carlos Williams's poetry is not discussed in Carey's study,<sup>304</sup> the assumption of a social dichotomy between poet and crowd (along with a presumed creative superiority on the part of the poet) vitalizes and often seems to drive *Paterson's* aesthetic project. “What / irritation of offensively red brick is this”, Paterson asks when he passes one of the city's tenements – “[bricks] red as poor-man's flesh? Anachronistic?” – contemplating the “mystery” of such a sight as he drives “his new car out to the suburbs” (*P* 37). Similarly, later in the poem Paterson describes the “Love” he seeks to inject into the language of his city as

[...] reversed in the mirror of its

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>304</sup> Indeed, and as we have seen, in other critical quarters Williams has been praised as a “fellow traveller” of the radical left in the American arts; see Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory*, p. 153.

own squalor, debased by the divorce from learning,  
its garbage on the curbs, its legislators  
under the garbage, uninstructed, incapable  
of self instruction

(P 81)

The political perspective advanced in this passage is significant. For if Shelley famously envisions poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”, Paterson's acknowledgement here takes the form of a grim disdain for the conditions in which a people's poet apparently must work – among the “garbage” of the streets, the crowd's craft made impotent by their lack of “self instruction” (P 81). Although he also draws a propulsive energy from the “confused / uproar” of the same, Paterson's view of the “thrashing, breeding” mass appears to manifest exactly that sense of judgemental superiority that Carey deplores in the modernist cosmology in general (P 81).

Importantly, Paterson's image of squalor-laden “legislators” in need of poetic instruction finds a somewhat disquieting addendum in Williams's view, elsewhere expressed, of Walt Whitman's achievement as poet:

[Whitman] didn't have the training to construct his verses after a conscious mold which would have given him power over them to turn them this way, then that, at will. He only knew how to give them birth and to release them to go their own way.

(LOG 23)

Putting aside the persuasiveness (or implausibility) of such a conclusion, Williams's willingness to link the value of a creative work to the professional expertise of its author is telling. To suggest that the flaws in *Leaves of Grass* stem primarily from Whitman's lack of training as a poet is indeed an apparently antithetical position to the one which Williams – the tradition-shattering celebrant of ordinary people and common speech –

consistently affiliates himself. Throughout his work Williams expounds the necessity of creating a democratic verse in America, a poetic mode and attitude both flexible and visceral enough to express the real experience of all people, rather than speaking only to the concerns of an elite group in society: “[we need] a new measure”, Williams writes in 1948, “a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living” from day to day (*SE* 283). Yet, as is evident here and throughout *Paterson*, Williams nonetheless develops an image of the representative poet as being socially elevated and distinct from his subjects – their lives, mannerisms, and dwellings chiefly of interest for the insight they offer into material circumstances from which he himself remains isolated. Williams seems furthermore to perceive this separation between speaker and subjects, between the poet of democracy and the democratic mass, as a fundamental condition of his creative project:

... unless I find a place

apart from it, I am its slave,  
its sleeper, bewildered – dazzled  
by distance .

(*P* 145)

It is possible that this detached position assumed by Paterson merely reflects what is a key element of Williams's poetics in general, namely his concern to achieve poetic vitality by practicing a wide-reaching objectivity – attaining, that is, a balance of living materials in his poem, so that “the vividness comes up 'true'” (*CPI* 301). As *Paterson* suggests, for Williams the most successful artists are those figures who can look on their community and say they “saw it / from the two sides”; the visionaries who, like the painter Toulouse-Lautrec, perceiving that the “imagination must be served”, “served / dispassionately” (*P* 225).



Dispassion, however, is a quality that *Paterson* itself appears to lack, animated as it is by Williams's constant urge to render modern America in verse – in all its rawness and intimacy, or as Williams writes, its *lowness*. “The [American] scene is dense with the dirt and power of industrial society”, Robert Lowell remarks after reading *Paterson Book II*, and “Williams looks on it with exasperation, terror, and a kind of love”.<sup>305</sup> The point here, of course, is that in *Paterson* the impulse to balance this very combination of emotional responses all too frequently brings with it a reductive, biased, or judgemental depiction of its subjects, rather than dispassion – a factor which certainly complicates the objectivity of the views Williams's doctor-poet attains, and the universality of his discourse. “Woman is the weaker vessel”, *Paterson* can intone, though “the mind is neutral, a bead linking / continents” – an obviously problematic perspective, which Williams appears to both entertain and dissolve over the complex play of his poem (*P* 178).

This last assertion arguably illustrates in microcosm what many of Williams's critics have referred (and objected) to as *Paterson's* appropriative drive – the poem's projection of alien lives or minority experiences as curiosities to be displayed rather than voices to be heard and understood.<sup>306</sup> Certainly it seems consistent with William's use of gendered symbolism and his references to sexual violence over the course of the poem. Indeed, while Audrey T. Rodgers suggests that on the whole, Williams holds a “more empathetic, perceptive and enlightened view of women than yet existed in American society” of the

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<sup>305</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, 44.

<sup>306</sup> For this and the remarks that follow, see Jason Barr's brief but suggestive discussion of white patriarchy in “Viewing Toni Morrison's *Paradise* as a Response to William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*”, *African American Review*, Vol. 44 Issue 3. 2011, pp. 421-433; also Kerry Driscoll's useful engagement with Williams's view of women in “Williams and the Female Principle”, eds., Stephen Gould Axelrod, Helen Deese, *Critical Essays on WCW* (New York, 1995).

early 1950s,<sup>307</sup> many commentators have highlighted the almost laconic depictions of rape and the general objectification of women as serious problems of the final work.<sup>308</sup> The treatment (poetic and literal) of women in the poem, in any case, is a necessary field of inquiry for any analysis of *Paterson's* cultural politics – as the next segment of this chapter will illustrate.

#### 4.4 *The Symbolism of Paterson*

One of the most striking qualities of Paterson as a character is the seeming solipsism of many of his views. “Why even speak of 'I'”, Williams's garrulous man-city queries at the beginning of his journey, “which / interests me almost not at all” (*P* 18). And yet, despite the inclusivity of his eavesdropping in succeeding segments, Paterson is arguably the only full character the poem portrays. Paterson, of course, is an imaginary man whose identity appears as the effect of his surroundings, yet still he seems on the whole more human – and certainly more thoroughly articulated – than the woman whose beauty and suffering catalyses more than one poetic address over the course of the poem. The woman in question is literally objectified; known only as “Beautiful Thing”, she is speechless, subjugated, and desired. As Sergio Rizzo notes,

Her role in *Paterson* is doubly critical. She is crucial to the white fictions that support the author as man and poet. Yet her presence within *Paterson* also reveals Williams valiantly attempting to criticize and revise those fictions<sup>309</sup>

“What is there to say?”, Paterson asks as he observes the woman and reflects on the

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<sup>307</sup> Audrey T. Rodgers, *Virgin and Whore: The Image of Women in the Poetry of WCW* (Jefferson, 1986), p. 4.

<sup>308</sup> Linda A. Kinnahan qualifies this line of inquiry in her own study of Williams in relation to various feminist frames by proposing a certain self-consciousness on Williams's part, suggesting that “[his] identification with the powerless, the degraded, the violated” is “a central impulse often embattled with the awareness that his own position, as male, grants him power”, *Poetics of the Feminine*, p. 35.

<sup>309</sup> Rizzo, “Can 'Beautiful Thing' Speak?: Race and Gender in *Paterson*”, eds., Steven Gould Axelrod, Helen Deese, *Critical Essays on WCW* (New York, 1995), p. 99.

prevailing attitudes of her townspeople: but that

beauty is unheeded . . . tho' for sale and  
bought glibly enough

But it is true, they fear  
it more than death, beauty is feared  
more than death, more than they fear death

Beautiful thing

(*P* 106)

Paterson's tone of address (and general attitude) to the woman here of course raises questions about the internal politics of Williams's work – and this is true, indeed, of every episode featuring Beautiful Thing. Despite the earnest attempts at tribute and sympathy on the doctor-poet's part, the fact that his muse is defined solely in terms of the categories that Paterson (the city first, and then the man) imposes on her – including gang-rape, racial alterity, and poverty – shows up the extreme limitations of the protagonist and his world-view. The woman is “queenly” as “the black stars”, Paterson observes, even after “they maled / and femaled [her] jealously / Beautiful Thing”, seen “[t]hree days in the same dress / up and down” (*P*, 128).

However exhilarated Paterson's admiration may be, the totemisation of the woman – and her selection for symbolic status on the grounds of her subjugation – smacks of a patriarchal (not to mention racial) bias.<sup>310</sup> In effect, and in what Williams sees as a radical gesture, Paterson redesignates the woman who is abused and outcast on multiple fronts as a symbol of what Raymond Williams terms the “structure of feeling” of the city that surrounds her.<sup>311</sup> In itself, of course, this is hardly objectionable. Angela Davis, for

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<sup>310</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>311</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961), p. 49.

example, argues critically (and persuasively) that “rape bears a direct relationship to all of the existing power structures in a given society”, and as such may serve to elucidate “the complex interconnectedness of race, gender, and class oppression which characterize that society”.<sup>312</sup> The problem, in this instance, is Williams's partial replication of such power structures, and aestheticisation of their effects, over the course of the poem's unfolding. Beautiful Thing is made to represent and embody the complicated, but persisting beauty of Paterson's material existence, as Williams sees it. “Embrace the foulness”, Paterson once again encourages his imagined audience (*P* 103), urging them to acknowledge this “drunk and bedraggled” figure for what she is: “the strictness of beauty / under a sky full of stars” (*P* 104).

Under Paterson-the-man's creative vision, the woman becomes an emblem of those very conditions prevailing in Paterson-the-city that violate her – conditions which seem to repulse and inspire Williams's protagonist in equal measure:

... You smell  
like a whore. I ask you to bathe in my  
opinions, the astonishing virtue of your  
lost body (I said)

(*P* 106)

Paterson's convulsive mode of address here accurately evinces the tangled emotion that informs it, expressing the heady mix of disdain, dismay, and affection he apparently feels towards the woman, and which some critics suggest is Williams's own. As Driscoll observes: “[d]espite his deep affinity for women and sensitivity to their plight, Williams [is] unable... to surmount an inherently patriarchal bias involving notions of male primacy

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<sup>312</sup> Angela Y. Davis, “Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism”, ed., Joy James, *The Angela Davis Reader* (Oxford, 1998), p. 145.

and dominance”.<sup>313</sup> Tellingly, later in the poem Paterson builds on exactly this blend of psycho-sexual tension to form a theory of marital relations in general, suggesting that

[...] every married man carries in his head  
the beloved and sacred image  
of a virgin  
whom he has whored

(P 231)

Troubling as it is, such a “beloved and sacred image” of course directly relates to the poem's prescription of a life-creating “interpenetration, both ways” (P 4) with “[i]nnumerable women, each like a flower” (P 7) – and also thereby serves to reframe Paterson's association of “[d]ivorce!” with creative sterility (P 21). Judged by this passage, indeed, and as Celia Carlson has suggested, Williams's theorisation of marriage in *Paterson* seems rather to be torn “between erotic union and misogyny”, the product of Paterson's dual desire to praise and to possess in sexual terms the women he encounters.<sup>314</sup> As we've seen in other segments of this discussion, it is in this respect that Williams's portraits of female characters in *Paterson* may be read again as oblique exercises in self-description – in that they serve as screens against which his own sexual urges are formed and expressed:

These women are not  
beautiful and reflect  
no beauty but gross . . .  
Unless it is beauty

to be, anywhere  
so flagrant in desire . . .

(P 71)

This complex of phallic impulses on Paterson's part may explain the emotional angst which Williams's protagonist seems to feel when he meets Beautiful Thing, ordering her

<sup>313</sup> Driscoll, “Williams and the Female Principle”, *Critical Essays*, p. 148.

<sup>314</sup> Celia Carlson, “Compelling Objects: Form and Emotion in Williams's Lyric Poetry”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Volume 26, Number 1 (Spring, 2006), p. 45.

to “[t]ake off your clothes... while your beauty is attainable”, before checking himself: “let me look at you (I / said, weeping)” (*P* 105). It is presumably due to such incidents of self-contradiction and -awareness that Ann Mikkelsen can propose a “purposefully conflicted” politics at work in Williams's poem, his discursive treatment of women as objects serving as a critically vexing, but nonetheless clarifying register – making plain the various valencies of domination and acknowledgement that characterise social and sexual relationships.<sup>315</sup>

In this view, Beautiful Thing's status as a creative symbol – a central one in the poem's thematic development – need not be approached entirely unsympathetically. In the poem, Beautiful Thing is depicted as “a dark flame, / a wind, a flood – counter to all staleness” that Paterson deplores in contemporary culture (*P* 101). In Williams's eyes, then, the woman's suffering – her very alterity when compared with Paterson the man – holds out both a challenge and a gift to the modern poet, demanding moral redress at the same time that it offers new possibilities of verbal meaning: “a song”, Williams suggests, which in its raw force and disturbing beauty can “make death tolerable” (*P* 107). Beautiful Thing is thus transfigured from a violated object to a celebrated muse – and by dint of the doctor-poet's dual sense of desire and poetic mission. Significantly, her metamorphosis registers as a kind of difficult birth in the poem's topology – a fracture yielding to a synthesis:

BRIGHTE  
                                   the cor  
   ner  
 where                          you                  are!  
  
   – a flame,  
                                   black plush, a dark flame.

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<sup>315</sup> Mikkelsen, “The Truth About Us’: Pastoral, Pragmatism and Paterson”, *American Literature*, Vol. 75 Issue 3 (September, 2003), pp. 601-603.

(P 128)

For all his blitheness at times, Williams's urge and imagery here – reconstituting Beautiful Thing's damaged identity as a vital force and a compelling metaphor for America itself – is in one sense akin to Langston Hughes' contemporaneous (if less aloof) portraiture of life in Harlem. “What happens to a dream deferred?”, Hughes asks in a bruisingly catechetical piece, “does it explode?” –<sup>316</sup> questions which could as easily have impelled Williams above, whose transformation of the coloured woman from neglected citizen to “dark flame” is prefaced by Paterson's pointed observation that, in America,

... there are fires that  
smolder  
    smolder a lifetime and never burst  
into flame

(P 117)

If Williams does little to break the enforced silence in which Beautiful Thing's experience is contained, treating her more as a trope than an individual, he nonetheless transmutes her oppression into a powerful symbolic force – the fire that smolders beneath the surface of Paterson, and which in its literal form can raze and alter existing conditions. As one of the poem's most vital and violent metaphoric fields, indeed – although again, Williams's critics suggest with some justice that she is never more than this –<sup>317</sup> Beautiful Thing, like the stoked embers of a flame suddenly general all over Paterson, menaces the constraining mores of her city, of which she is both emblem and outcast. For Williams, Beautiful Thing's “beauty is / a defiance of authority” (P 119) – in the way the four

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<sup>316</sup> Langston Hughes, “Harlem”, ed., Arnold Rampersad, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 3: The Poems, 1951-1957* (Columbia, 2001), p. 74.

<sup>317</sup> Michael Andre Bernstein carries this criticism further, finding an unresolved conflict between the symbolism Paterson elaborates and the politico-cultural analysis it attempts; see *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (New Jersey, 1980), pp. 210-212.





## CONTAINS NOTHING OF YOU

(P 123)

Strangely, perhaps – given the misogynistic overtones of the themes above – Williams's intense, accusatory understanding of the role that culture and language play in maintaining the oppression under which Beautiful Thing suffers seems to anticipate a similar complex of concerns engaged in Adrienne Rich's poem, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children". Just as Williams recognises that the established institutions of knowledge (and the very verse tradition in which he is working) contain "NOTHING OF YOU", so Rich admits with furious concision, that "this is the oppressor's language // yet I need it to talk to you".<sup>318</sup> The act of articulate self-empowerment which each poem envisions stands in part as a concession to the very system (in this case, the language system and culture) which necessitates and attempts to defuse such empowerment in the first place.

In the iconography of the segment above, Beautiful Thing becomes "intertwined with the fire" as a political force, forming "[an] identity / surmounting the world", from which poets and critics alike "shrink squirting little hoses of / objection" (P 120). Paterson strives to lend a kind of poetic legitimacy to Beautiful Thing – "busted" and "marked up" by her townspeople, her legs "scarred (as a child) / by the whip" (P 126-8) – as a means of exposing (and offending) the perceived rules and elitism of an academicised verse. Williams even claims a kind of liberating parallel between Beautiful Thing's personal history of pain and his poem's account of modern experience:

... The page also is  
the same beauty: a dry beauty of the page –

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<sup>318</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001* (New York, 2002), p. 78.

beaten by whips

(P 126)

In this respect – to continue in the mode of intertextual suggestion above – Williams arguably reiterates the problematic creative perspective vaunted by Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, by which the poet passively identifies with (and claims to experience) the suffering of “the hounded slave”: “Agonies are one of my changes of garments”, Whitman writes,

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person,

My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.<sup>319</sup>

In both cases, the expansive egoism of the speaking persona would be comical were it not for the intensity of the “Agonies” encountered and the matrix of racial (and in Williams's poem, gendered) distinctions that remain unchallenged in the poem's exhortative act. In the segment from Williams's piece above, certainly, the politics of invoking such a symmetry are arguably feckless at best, illustrating once again a problematic (if important) aspect of *Paterson* as a work: its tendency to appropriate and acknowledge social, sexual, and racial alterity, but ultimately in such a way that reinforces the nexus of disempowerment in which its subjects are contained. Whether this is by necessity (as Rich seems partly to suggest) or by design, *Paterson* remains enmeshed in the problematic force-field generated by such an apparently biased literary approach. As Elizabeth Alexander has observed, “[i]f any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in this country, it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know” – an apothegm that Williams's poem does little to disprove or counteract.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself”, *Poetry and Prose*, p. 65.

<sup>320</sup> cit., Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940*

Even in celebrating Beautiful Thing's power, Paterson is explicit and apparently unapologetic in the identifications he makes: “your / vulgarity”, the poet proclaims, “surpasses all perfections”, and so overwhelms the standards and institutions on which the assumed experts have built and prospered (*P* 120):

That which should be  
rare, is trash; because it contains  
nothing of you. They spit on you,  
literally, but without you, nothing. The  
library is muffled and dead

(*P* 123)

Just as with his granting poetic validity to the supposedly beast-like mass of the city's working-class citizens, Paterson's assertion of the coloured woman's “vulgarity” here seems to be less an observance of the facts than a casting of judgement. And once again, the terms of representation Williams's doctor-poet chooses for the coloured woman reproduce the very structure of impotence that already deforms her social identity in reality.<sup>321</sup>

The main trouble with Beautiful Thing's symbolic centrality in the poem is that her primary role in *Paterson* is not so much that of a character in her own right than that of catalyst to the eponymous doctor's own programme of self-realisation. One result is that however radical Williams's democratic tendency may be – his desire to reconstitute poetry in the shape and image of common experience, rather than according to the sequestered conventions of an expert elite – throughout *Paterson* the dominant perspective still

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(Chapel Hill, 2013), p. 67.

<sup>321</sup> I borrow the phrase “structure of impotence” from the critic and writer Eduardo Galeano – partly for its echo and re-emphasis of Raymond Williams's cultural term deployed earlier in the chapter, “structure of feeling”; see Galeano, ed., Mark Fried, *We Say No* (New York, 1989), p. 204.

appears to be incorrigibly patriarchal, as well as socially distant from the people and circumstances its main speaker addresses with such energy. The woman, a “Beautiful Thing”, is portrayed as “the heart of the explanation” of the poem, but nonetheless remains “nameless”, “still to be possessed”, a persisting “dream” and perturbing fantasy “of dead men” (*P*, 123-6). Curiously, however, here and elsewhere Williams proves himself capable of acknowledging (if not quite surmounting) the apparent contradictions of his poetic perspectives, as the next section of this chapter will show.

#### 4.5 *The Self-Criticism of Paterson*

As the discussion above suggests, Williams's poetics in many ways replicate the forms of elitism and prejudice that Carey and others see as characterising that generation of Anglo-American modernists in which he is often grouped.<sup>322</sup> Yet if Williams concocts his democratic verse from a strange melange of sentiments – mixing vigorous inclusivity with unsettling bias – one of the most compelling features of *Paterson* as a work is its capacity for self-correction and -appraisal. The critical discourse of the poem is programmed in such a way as to redress its own ellipses, on occasion, and even to expose the forms of prejudice to which Paterson himself is often prone.

One of the clearest examples of this mechanism at work is in the poem's inclusion and adaptation of a series of real letters written by the poet Marcia Nardi to Williams. Although some critical accounts have taken issue with Williams's “unfair divulgence” and “co-optation” of Nardi's personal correspondence in the poem, by quoting Nardi so extensively *Paterson* in fact highlights the ultimately limited perspective of its primary

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<sup>322</sup> See, for example, Kaplan, *Poetry, Politics and Culture: Argument in the Work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams* (New Jersey, 2006).

narrator, and articulates those very criticisms that the doctor-poet's patriarchal outlook elsewhere appears to invite.<sup>323</sup> “Nardi's letter fragments”, as Alisa Allkins notes, “engage in a critique” of clinical (and implicitly male) “attitudes towards female creativity and madness”, which she links to “Williams's social and intellectual status as a 'doctor’”.<sup>324</sup> Named Cress in the poem, the Nardi character provides a stunning exposé of the complicated (and some would say self-serving) generosity to which both Paterson in the poem and Williams in life are inclined. “My attitude toward woman's wretched position in society”, Cress observes,

and my ideas about all the changes necessary there, were interesting to you, weren't they, in so far as they made for *literature* ... you saw in one of my first letters to you (the one you had wanted to make us of, then, in the Introduction to your Paterson) any indication that my thoughts were to be taken seriously, because that too could be turned by you into literature, as something disconnected from life... [something to be admired] especially by writers like yourself who are so sheltered from life in the raw by the glass-walled conditions of their own safe lives.

(P 87)

As is true of the other prose interpellations throughout the work – from newspapers, historical accounts, and correspondence – the Cress letters serve to contextualise some of the more pernicious assumptions and wilful flights of fancy that Paterson indulges. This corrective function extends even to the central symbolism of the poem – by which, again, “[i]nnumerable women” inspire the poet and have their suffering emblematised, but without attaining the vital conditions of empowerment or alleviation. With obvious implications for Paterson's attitude to Beautiful Thing, whom he celebrates and objectifies with such gusto, Cress accuses the loquacious man-city directly of “empty rhetoric” and a kind of well-meaning callousness in his political attitude to women, poverty, and

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<sup>323</sup> Alba Newmann, “Paterson: Poem as Rhizome”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 26 No. 1 (Spring, 2006), p. 64.

<sup>324</sup> Alisa Allkins, “Dismantling Clinical Authority in *Paterson*”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 34 No.2 (Fall, 2017), p. 130.

hardship:

But living (unsafe living, I mean) isn't something one just sits back and decides about. It happens to one, in a small way, like measles; or in a big way, like a leaking boat or an earthquake ... [your] literary man's ego wanted to help me in such a way, I think, that my own achievements might serve as a flower in his buttonhole, if that kind of help had been enough to make me bloom.

(P 89-90)

At its close, Cress's interjection also exposes Williams's earlier (and again, central) imagination of “Two women. Three women... each like a flower” as the sexually possessive and ultimately ornamental flourish it is (P 7) – thus embedding a literary-cultural critique of *Paterson* into the poem's own unfolding discourse.

Significantly, Cress is the only female character in the poem whose identity is entirely self-articulating, rather than being inflected or refracted by Paterson's observations. Williams's doctor-poet, of course, the posited “man like a city”, takes the shape of both multiplicity and unity – his voice a mingling of monologue and ambience, as dominating as it is representative (P, 7). Yet it is perhaps Cress who expresses most plainly the sense of life-in-common which directs Paterson's behaviour and forms his identity in the poem. Paterson, indeed, seems positively impelled by the credo Cress formulates: that life, like creative expression, “requires the cooperation and the understanding and the humanity of others in order to bring out what is best and most real in one's self” (P 87).<sup>325</sup> For all the monologic intensity of Paterson's view of the people around him, Williams's protagonist adopts a noticeably frank and (at the very least) exploratory attitude to the social and sexual identities of his subjects – communicating his own view of the world, but

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<sup>325</sup> Erin E. Templeton provides a useful overview of the role of Cress in *Paterson* in her essay “‘The Eternal Bride and Father – Quid Pro Quo’: William, Marcia Nardi and Paterson”, ed., Ian Copestake, *The Legacy of William Carlos Williams* (Newcastle, 2007), pp. 80-97.

specifically, as Cress recommends, by opening himself to the complicated “humanity of others” (*P* 87). As Rich also observes – in a reflection on her own creative endeavours that could easily describe Williams's here – for the modern artist “the poetries of men and women unlike you” form “a great polyglot city of resources, in whose streets you need to wander, whose sound you need to listen to, without feeling you must live there.”<sup>326</sup>

However unevenly this politics of inclusivity plays out over the poem as a whole, such advice from Cress finds precise expression in Paterson's part-dramatic, part-poetic account of the relationship between Corydon, a rich, ageing New Yorker, and her nurse Phyllis. Critics have rightly found this episode in *Paterson* noteworthy for its daring navigation of sexual (and specifically lesbian) themes.<sup>327</sup> Less often remarked upon, however, is the fact that such concerns are longstanding ones for Williams, and may be found throughout his work and letters – which continually attest to Suzanne Churchill's claim, for example, that “the modernist drive to renovate poetic form was part of a cultural movement to re-form the boundaries of selfhood, gender, and sexuality” .<sup>328</sup> In his *Autobiography*, Williams records with fascination (and notably without censure) an occasion when an injured, unconscious labourer was admitted to hospital, “a big lump of a man in dirty overalls”, who, prior to his medical examination, was discovered to be wearing “a woman's silk chemise with little ribbons at his nipples” underneath, with “women's panties and long silk stockings” – a circumstance Williams winkingly associates with the fact that the laborer's medical bills are later paid not by his wife, but by “one of the most prominent [political figures] in the state”, a man “of unusual

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<sup>326</sup> Adrienne Rich, *What is found there*, p. 216.

<sup>327</sup> See Mikkelsen, “The Truth About Us!...”, p. 603.

<sup>328</sup> Suzanne M. Churchill, *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry* (Burlington, 2006), pp. 3-4.

luxuriousness” in his speech and dress (*A* 82-83). “There is only one love”, as Williams similarly asserts in his late tribute to Sappho, asking, “what does it matter?” (*CP II* 433) – the poem standing as a companion piece to his late translation of Sappho's fragment recording the intensities of amorous (Lesbian) desire:

Sweat pours out: a trembling hunts  
me down. I grow  
paler than grass and lack little  
of dying.

(*CP II* 348)

Likewise in his correspondence, Williams can be found defending the sexual content of *Paterson, Book III*, responding (apparently without discomfort) to objections from Marianne Moore, that

ladies [like yourself] don't like to hear one of their sex mentioned in any but a genteel light; it infuriates them to be told that the Lesbian exists and has a perfect right to exist with their feeling that they, as women, have been denigrated.... I like the old gal [Corydon] of whom I spoke... I don't mind telling you that I started writing of her in a satiric mood – but she won me quite over. I ended by feeling admiration for her....

(*SL* 302)

If Williams's exuberance in disabusing Moore of her moral reservations about the episode verges on personal and literary condescension here, his remarks nevertheless indicate the humane and forward-thinking intentions he harbours for his poem. For all the paternalism (and bombast) of his approach, Williams's celebratory declaration that “the Lesbian exists and has a perfect right to exist” arguably signals something of the contemporaneity and generosity of this middle-class sexagenarian, writing in the early 1950s. As Williams adds at a later date, Corydon “has a hard part to play, and to my mind plays it rather well” (*SL* 304). In any case, in *Book III* the conversations between the two women are saturated with innuendo. “And how are you today, darling? // (She calls me darling now!)”, Phyllis



records of her early experience of working for her wealthy employer:

You mentioned a city?

Paterson, where I trained

Paterson!

Yes, of course. Where Nicholas Murray Butler was  
born . . . and his sister, the lame one. They  
used to have silk mills there . . .  
until the unions ruined them....

(*P* 151)

Likewise later, as Phyllis assists Corydon with her morning exercises the older woman exclaims: "...I wonder if you know how lovely you really are, Phyllis, my little Milk Maid (That's good! The lucky man!) I dreamt of you last night" (*P* 156). As the relationship develops, such flirtations grow more pointed, with Corydon proceeding to write a poem in honour of her nurse: "and the worst is", she announces, "I'm about to read it to you",

You dreamy  
    Communist  
where are you  
    going?

To world's end  
    Via?  
Chemistry  
    Oh oh oh oh

That will  
    really  
be the end . . .  
    you

dreamy Communist  
    won't it?  
Together  
    together

(*P* 160)

While critics have discussed Phyllis's and Corydon's interactions in terms of the

alternative sexual discourse underlying them, little attention has been paid to Williams's subtle exploration of social relations in this episode. Indeed, one commentator even goes as far as suggesting that “Williams defers discussion of class in order to focus on other modes of difference” in this section of the poem.<sup>329</sup> As the above extracts make clear, however, Corydon's apparent attraction to Phyllis is rooted as much in classist curiosity as in sexual desire – in an idea of the social other, whose relatively impoverished world seems exotic for the very “picturesque, peasant stuff” it contains (*P* 164). Once again, Williams's reference to the hyper-productive “silk mills” of Paterson, which Corydon suggests “the unions ruined”, is both pointed and contextually integral to situating the exchange that follows. “What sort of people do you come from, Phyllis?”, Corydon queries, despite already casting her as an attractive “Milk Maid” and “dreamy Communist” – as if these latter were mutual equivalents – coyly adding, “(If only I / could keep you!)” (*P* 151).

Vitality, and as with Williams's earlier inclusion of the Cress letters, the self-dramatising sexual politics and class-based innuendo in this section of the poem serve as deliberate counterpoints to Paterson's own penchant for romanticising the people and issues that so often attract his poetic attention. In a delectably self-conscious gesture on Williams's part, the poem that Corydon composes for Phyllis quickly assumes in microcosm a similar formal range and shape to that of *Paterson* as a whole, as she shares her work with the younger woman each morning and their mutual familiarity (and implied intimacy) continues to grow. Conjuring a decaying aspect of her home city, New York – where the “houses [are] placarded: / Unfit for human habitation      etc      etc” – Corydon adopts

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<sup>329</sup> Mikkelsen, “Pastoral, Pragmatism and *Paterson*”, *American Literature*, Vol. 75 Issue 3, p. 614.





questions suggests, Williams incorporates such self-interrogatory modes into the poem not only as a means of exploring issues of identity politics and literary form, but also in order to engage various kinds of private erasure and cultural invisibility in Paterson (the city). Williams's poem deploys a range of self-conscious formal procedures to highlight its own textual limitations, but also to expose previously suppressed areas of Paterson's history. Moreover, *Paterson's* historical and historiographical discourses relate to (and shed light on) an equally compelling theorisation of place – as the next portion of this discussion indicates.

#### 4.6 *Place and History in Paterson*

Intended as “a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands”, *Paterson's* multiform structure constitutes not only an act of defiance against outmoded or rarefied ideas of aesthetic value, but also as a deliberate probing of the poem's own authenticity and place in modern society. “Anywhere is everywhere”, Williams insists, adding with an almost boyish exuberance:

You can learn from poems  
that an empty head tapped on  
sounds hollow  
in any language!

(*P* 231)

Williams fills Paterson's reclining mind with images and voices, creating a cornucopia of the city's varied identities – and not just from its political and social make-up in the present day, but throughout its history, as touched on in the opening section of this chapter. “Stand at the rampart”, Williams writes, as Paterson imagines himself transported through time while listening to the Passaic river,

and look away north by east where the church  
 spires still spend their wits against  
 the sky . . . to the ball-park  
 in the hollow with its minute fingers running  
 – beyond the gap where the river  
 plunges into the narrow gorge, unseen  
  
 – and the imagination soars, as a voice  
 beckons, a thundrous voice, endless...

(P 55)

To develop a native idiom, Williams suggests, is as much a process of incorporation as of innovation, drawing on and then adapting various sources of local memory in order to “define the traditional in terms of [his] own world” (*IWWP* 74). The result is that *Paterson* frequently feels as much like an exercise in historical thinking as an experiment in poetic invention – a reflection on past experience and contemporary circumstances alike. Such an impression is of course only compounded by Williams's tendency – discussed above – to feature and directly quote from prose sources, interpellating verse sequences with fictionalised narratives, extracts from local newspapers, and other arcane materials from his city's history. We learn in one prose segment, for example, of “Faitoute”, who died in 1829 when he “jumped from the falls of the Genessee river”, his remains only resurfacing the following spring:

Shortly before two o'clock August 16, 1875, Mr Leonard Sandford, of the firm Post and Sandford, while at work on the improvements for the water company, at the Falls, was looking into the chasm near the wheel house of the water works. He saw what looked like a mass of clothing, and on peering intently at times as the torrent sank and rose, he could distinctly see the legs of a man, the body being lodged between two logs....

(P 35)

Significantly, Paterson himself imitates and inverts this experience of revelatory descent and reemergence in his own journey into his city's psyche, following “[t]he water pouring

still / from the edge of the rocks, filling / his ears with its sound, hard to interpret” (P 16).  
Entering the slipstream of the city and its past, Williams's doctor-poet discovers “a sort of  
springtime” and thaw at work “within himself”, when “ice bound”, he leaps after

“the body, not [found] until  
the following spring, frozen  
in an ice cake”

(P 35)

That Williams also includes a condensed prose account of the original event described here is of course indicative of the formal range of the poem as whole, as well as demonstrating something of the eclectic vision of speech and history that *Paterson* conveys. Indeed, in acknowledging the multiplicity of forms and sources out of which aesthetic unity is gathered, Williams's poetics here arguably once again recall the historiographical reflections of Walter Benjamin.<sup>330</sup> In his notes on the concept of history, Benjamin argues that in order to articulate a given moment in time – to communicate a representative nexus of experience in the life of a community – the artist must create a common field in which the superficially disparate elements of shared history may congregate. Just as Williams creates in *Paterson* an assemblage of narratives and speech patterns that is also a single, unified form, so Benjamin in his theorisation emphasises both the particulate, irreducible quality of history as it is lived and the universal resonance of human experience. “Articulating the past historically”, Benjamin writes,

means recognising those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment. Historical knowledge is possible only within the historical moment. But knowledge *within* the historical moment is always knowledge *of* a moment. In drawing itself together in the moment [in this fashion]... the past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> See Billitteri's reference to Williams's “auratic politics of form” in “William Carlos Williams and the Politics of Form”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 30 No. 2, p. 51.

<sup>331</sup> Walter Benjamin, ed., Howard Eiland, *The Selected Works of Walter Benjamin: Volume IV* (Boston, 2006), p. 403.

Williams himself posits a similar viewpoint in his *Autobiography*. As Paterson struggles to conjoin his personal intuitions and the material facts of his city, so in his own memoir Williams emphasises the fundamental ordinariness of historical materials – an ordinariness which both invites and problematises their redemption in the poem:

How shall we in this region of the mind which is all we can tactically, sensually know, organize our history other than as Shaker furniture is organized? It is a past, totally uninfluenced by anything but the necessity, the total worth of the thing itself, the relationship of the parts to the whole.... One never knows what is of use in rebuilding the poem. One uses what one finds.

(A 333-4)

Such a principle seems to be operative in *Paterson*. In its intrepid, combining approach to poetic forms, historical materials, and the sounds and sights of his city's streets, Williams's poem attempts to make the “involuntary memory” of its city legible. The episode prior to Faitoute's fatal plunge from the precipice of the falls, for instance, includes extracts of a sentimentalised account of a mysterious death from 1812. According to the record, a day after walking above the Passaic falls with her husband, the “mortal part” of one Ms Sarah Cumming was “found in a depth of 42 feet” – to the anxiety of Mr Cumming, whose “sensations on the distressing occasion may, in some measure, be conceived”, although, we are told, they “cannot be described” (P 14). For Williams – advancing once again a curiously proto-feminist understanding on this occasion – interlocked with the apparently unspeakable nature of this tragedy is the resounding circumstance that Ms Cumming's death is in many ways defined by silence. Indeed, her entire experience is muted in the official record – the ornamental language and skewed (male) perspective of the prose report that Williams references effecting a melodramatic identification with Mr Cumming's point of view, without ever acknowledging Sarah herself as the true subject of the episode. As is the case of Beautiful



Thing, such a discourse perpetuates:

[a] false language.... A false language pouring – a  
language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without  
dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear.

(P 15)

Of course, Williams's concern here may be with institutionally and historically induced aphasia, rather than with the specifically gendered aspect of such experience, as I have suggested. A silence akin to Sarah Cumming's, after all, also hinders and defines the lost performer Faitoute in his last minutes – as the acrobatic daredevil fails to give verbal meaning to the risk and thrill of his endeavour:

A speech! What could he say that he must leap so desperately to complete it? And plunged toward the stream below. But instead of descending with a plummet-like fall his body wavered in the air – Speech had failed him. He was confused. The word had been drained of its meaning... He struck the water on his side and disappeared.

(P 16)

In any case, such disappearing voices in the recorded discourse of history are synecdochical of that larger lacuna that Williams strives to illuminate and resolve throughout *Paterson* – the gap surrounding real experience, made all the more painful (for him) by a language too outworn and ill-equipped to accommodate the rush of life around us, “the roar of the river / forever in our ears (arrear)” (P 17). Faced with such silences, Williams creates in the flow of *Paterson* a simultaneity of self-realisation, so that Ms Cumming's final moments are made homologous with those of Faitoute, and indeed with Paterson's journey into the toxic torrent of his city's identity. Descending like them into the water, into a “sea that sucks in all rivers”, Paterson proclaims

Thalassa! Thalassa!  
Drink of it, be drunk!  
Thalassa,  
immaculata: our home, our nostalgic

mother in whom the dead, enwombed again  
cry out to us to return  
(P 199-201)

By means of such echoing effects, as well as through direct quotation of source materials as the poem progresses, *Paterson* serves almost as a blueprint for that creative-historical mode that Benjamin envisions as historiographically necessary – founded on a concrete, but polyvalent conception of history, by which “a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past... [a] past become citable in all its moments.”<sup>332</sup> For Williams, similarly, *Paterson* must be both multi-form and multi-functional, simultaneously

a gathering up; a celebration... an identification and a plan for action to supplant a plan for action; a taking up of slack; a dispersal and a metamorphosis.

(P 2)

We should note that Paterson's dual urge towards historical salvage and poetic tribute also has a marked political aspect. For as the poem-journey progresses, Paterson's achievement of self-release increasingly depends on the extent to which his fellow citizens are able to share in it – or more accurately, the extent to which the experiences of the many unvoiced denizens of his city are given the verbal space and poetic legitimacy hitherto denied them. Hence, just as Wallace Stevens views the poem as “an abstraction blooded / as a man by thought”, Williams's doctor-poet sets himself the task of “loaning blood / to the past”, to the forgotten dead and their buried discourses (P 101).<sup>333</sup> It is in this spirit, indeed, that Williams attempts to engage with the repression – literal and historical – of native American tribes in the surrounding area, as we've seen already:

And there  
in the tobacco hush : in a tepee they lie  
huddled (a huddle of books)

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<sup>332</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Works*, p. 390.

<sup>333</sup> Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 333.

antagonistic,  
and dream of  
gentleness – under the malignity of the hush  
they cannot penetrate and cannot waken...

(P 116)

The point is that Williams's is often a silence-breaking art – in this instance quietly touching on the local history of what he describes elsewhere as “the Indians and their complex fate” (*IWWP* 97). It is in fact Williams's example in this regard that Ginsberg (with Bob Dylan's justice-lyric, “Hurricane”, in mind) credits as clearing the way for the “tough iron metal' talk rhymes” of later protest poetries from the Paterson area – Williams's grounding of the “pure North Jersey language” of his verse in the sometimes uncomfortable facts of history serving as the originary precedent, in Ginsberg's view, for later figures to follow.<sup>334</sup> Such historical attentiveness and realism may well be one of *Paterson's* great merits – that the deeper into life and time the eponymous doctor-poet wanders, the more formally and thematically diverse his poem becomes, unearthing alternative and subaltern narratives, “antagonistic” facts from the material fray, until “the ground” itself “has undergone / a subtle transformation, its identity altered” (P 18).<sup>335</sup>

With the exception of some fine work illuminating the eco-poetic impetus behind such a process in Williams's poem – a theme touched on in an earlier portion of this discussion – scant critical attention has been paid to the precise political implications of this particular trajectory Paterson's self-realisation follows.<sup>336</sup> For Paterson's “subtle transformation”

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<sup>334</sup> Ginsberg, “Bob Dylan's DESIRE: Songs of Redemption”, *Desire* (New York, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>335</sup> Although Williams is not discussed in Costello's study, the trope of eco-transformation he deploys here resonates with Costello's analysis of some of his contemporaries in *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Boston, 2003).

<sup>336</sup> See Joel Conarroe, *William Carlos Williams's Paterson: Language & Landscape* (Philadelphia, 1970); and more recently, Carlos D. Acosta-Ponce, “The Role of Environment and Nature...in William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*”, *Atenea*, Vol. 33 Issue 2 (Feb, 2013), pp. 71-90, and Lee Rozelle, “Ecocritical City: Modernist Reactions to Urban Environments...”, *Twentieth Century Literature*; Spring 2002, Vol. 48 Issue

occurs precisely when – and against the explicitly articulated pressure to “Forget it! For God's sake, Cut / out that stuff” (*P* 52) – Williams makes a point of highlighting episodes of ethnic and colonial violence from the region's past. “Fierce and implacable we kill them”, as Williams writes elsewhere of Americans' attitude to the native tribes, “but their spirit is master” (*LAG* 40).

Such an insight is reinforced in *Paterson's* description of the burning of the local library at the turn of the century, when an older image from the conflagration resurfaces – of the murder of a group of native Americans, accused of “killing two or three pigs” that had in fact “been butchered by the white men themselves”:

The first of these savages, having received a frightful wound, desired them to permit him to dance the Kinte Kaye, a religious use among them before death; he received, however, so many wounds that he dropped dead. The soldiers then cut strips down the other's body [while some stood] laughing heartily at the fun... he dancing the Kinte Kaye all the time, [they] mutilated him, and at last cut off his head.

(*P* 102-3)

The violence and racism recounted with such starkness here act as telling counterweights to the discourse of biased unspeakability *Paterson* had previously encountered (and criticised) in the case of Sarah Cummins. They also present a formal reproach to the nostalgia *Paterson* himself occasionally indulges. The uncensored account of past atrocity included here, for example, seems deliberately to counter-balance the doctor-poet's imagining of the “Totowa tribe” and their “river-farms resting in / the quiet of those colonial days” (*P* 193). In contrast, the earlier episode closes with clamour, protest and impotent grief, as a captive group of “female savages”

... held up their arms, and in their language excalimed, 'For shame! For shame! Such unheard of cruelty was never known, or even thought of, among us.'”

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1, pp. 100-115

(P 103)

Williams's implied emphasis here, on the apparently violent barrier between “their language” and his own (and that of the original source document), supplies a telling instance of sensitivity to the racial and material politics of language – particularly in the context of early- to mid-twentieth century discourses in America, wherein, as Joshua Miller has observed, “categories of racial whiteness came to depend on linguistic distinctions in ways that were only hesitantly acknowledged then and that remain only partially understood today.”<sup>337</sup> Or as bell hooks has written, in an adage that could almost be said to motivate *Paterson's* politically commendable exercise in excursive listening here: “it is difficult not to hear in standard English always the sound of conquest and slaughter.”<sup>338</sup> If it would be misleading to depict Williams as a postcolonial writer, as segments such as this imply: he at the very least engages a colonially conscious understanding of American space – and one often matched by an equally visceral perception of the formal inadequacy (and historical complicity) of American English as a mode of expressing such understanding. As Frederic Jameson observes of the episode above: the sounds of the “Kinte Kaye”, which Williams so insistently funnels from the silence of history to the present moment of the poem's attention, “punctuate the epic at crucial moments and restore to the record a fearful history of domination and imperialism”, accompanying *Paterson* as a whole and “subtend[ing] its movement like a great dirge, an expressive music not available in white North American culture”.<sup>339</sup>

As here – and something similar could be said of the inclusion of the Nardi letters in the

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<sup>337</sup> Joshua L. Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual America* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 8-9.

<sup>338</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, 1994), p. 169.

<sup>339</sup> Jameson, *Modernist Papers*, p. 43.

poem – the prose sequences that occur throughout *Paterson* thus effect what Williams terms “an enforced pause” (*P* 2). *Paterson's* incorporated historical accounts implant a politics of redress and acknowledgement into the poem's progression, as well as highlighting the gap in the register, the deficiency in the accepted discourse, with which Williams's representative poet must continually contend. If “[t]he language is missing them” and they die “incommunicado”, Williams suggests, *Paterson* will lend such figures a hearing: “*What do I do? I listen... This is my entire / occupation.*” (*P* 46).

It is in this context that Williams's man-city attends so searchingly to the stray scraps of speech, and the vanished pulse of lived experiences, as he makes his rounds. “Mud / covers them”, *Paterson* writes, but a “fertile(?) mud” nonetheless. Throughout the poem, indeed, and despite his mixed assessment of the earlier poet's achievement, Williams's portraits of local life feel like more jagged versions of what Whitman termed “chants democratic” – efforts to enter and emulate the breathing, beating life of the people around him, in all its gaiety and violence.

Who are these people (how complex  
the mathematic) among whom I see myself  
in the regularly ordered plateglass of  
his thoughts, glimmering before shoes and bicycles?

They walk incommunicado, the  
equation is beyond solution, yet  
its sense is clear – that they may live...

(*P* 10)

“And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am”, Whitman likewise proclaims: a creed of which *Paterson* would seem to approve.<sup>340</sup> Significantly, Williams himself professes elsewhere to admire exactly

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<sup>340</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1892), *Poems and Prose*, p. 203.

such a quality of expansive egalitarianism in Whitman's work, marking both a new beginning for poetry and a clear distillation, in Williams's view, of the defining facts of the elder poet's era. In "seeking a meaning involving the complex concerns of the world", Williams writes, we must perceive

that the philosophic, the aesthetic, and the mechanical are likely to stem in their development from the same root. One may be much in advance of the other in its discoveries, but in the end a great equalizing process is involved so that the discovery of the advance in the structure of the poetic line is equated by an advance in the conception of physical facts all along the line.

(LoG 30)

For Williams, then – following Whitman – the politics of modernity are less a theme to be referenced than a material phenomenon to be assimilated in aesthetic terms. "No ideas but in things" (*P* 9), Williams asserts, an adage that evolves over the course of *Paterson* into what is nearly a statement of faith: that "[s]ome things can be done as well as others", the field of what is accepted as poetry or knowledge widened to include suppressed areas of shared experience (*P* 15).

Literary innovation in *Paterson*, then, is linked to the poet's capacity to tread neglected social ground – expanding the parameters of poetry's traditional purview by including the "[p]laster saints, glass jewels / and those apt paper flowers", as well as the "senseless rapes" and "things unmentionable" that define and recur in the life of his city (*P* 38), the poem unfolding as a process of personal expression and almost sociological discovery.<sup>341</sup> As we have seen, Paterson's poetic advance thus strives to incorporate the real rhythms and material facts of an urban experience – and one which he acknowledges as being, very often, separate from his own:

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<sup>341</sup> For an overview of the purely formal concerns and accomplishments of William's "new measure", see Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (New Haven, 1985).

Outside  
                   outside myself  
                                   there is a world,  
 he rumbled, subject to my incursions  
 – a world  
                   (to me) at rest,  
                                   which I approach  
 concretely –

(P 43)

As discussed earlier, that this world of concrete forces is both exterior and attractive to Williams's protagonist is an essential part of its meaning in the poem. In some ways, indeed, Williams's combined state of separation and enchantment in relation to his subjects sharpens the focus of his goal: to praise and acknowledge the real figures of what he sees (not unproblematically) as the “laughing, toothless” underclass, typified for him by the “Heavenly man” in Sergei Eisenstein's film, *Time in the Sun* (1941):

– the leg raised, verisimilitude  
 even to the coarse contours of the leg, the  
 bovine touch! The leer, the cave of it,  
 the female of it facing the male, the satyr –  
                   (Priapus!)  
 with that lonely implication, goatherd  
 and goat, fertility, the attack, drunk,  
 cleansed

(P 58)

Williams's reference to Eisenstein's film here is instructive for a number of reasons. For one thing, it suggests that if *Paterson* proposes a poetics of inclusivity, then a fitting aesthetic analogy for its formal procedures may once again lie with cinema itself – an art-form which both represents and enhances that modernity Williams seeks to emulate in verse.<sup>342</sup> As Stephen Paul Miller has argued, “Williams looks toward film for a means of

<sup>342</sup> Although she does not discuss *Paterson* in any detail, Susan McCabe makes a strong case for the analogy between film and poetry in Williams's work; McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 93-133; see also Monique Claire Vescia's stimulating survey of social and photographic visuality in the poetry of three American poets, including Williams: *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in...* (London, 2006).



grasping the power implicit in the modern era in which he finds himself.”<sup>343</sup>

In purely technical terms, film is the pioneering medium for that process of visual repetition and tropic elaboration which Williams deploys throughout *Paterson* – giving rise to formal unity and sequence, on the one hand, and the potential for popular appeal and engagement on the other. In this regard, cinema is potentially a politicised art of the highest order, uniting the prospects of self-expression and social solidarity in a single field.<sup>344</sup> For Williams, significantly, this latter quality is a vital element in film's analogical appeal. Hence, Paterson's celebratory recollection of Eisenstein's “drinking”, “dribbling” day-labourer is tied to an equally appreciative recognition that the film was censored for years – “suppressed”, Williams writes, “but . . . persistent” (*P* 58). The implication being that such censorship should be taken as a sign of the film's significance, much in the way that Beautiful Thing's appeal in the poem lies in her “defiance of authority” (*P* 119) – the great director's depiction of down-to-earth humanity, his ability to exhilarate and engage a mass audience on these terms, suddenly acknowledged in all its political urgency. “This [is] the undying” (*P* 57), Williams's protagonist observes before the entrance of Eisenstein's peon into the poem.

If Williams's appreciation for filmic innovation stands in stark contrast to that of his contemporaries – Eliot, for example, claiming to be “incapable of being convinced by the arts of the cinema” –<sup>345</sup> *Paterson's* conception of cinema as a political art, along with his imitation of its formal procedures as the poem evolves, marks an important feature of the

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<sup>343</sup> Stephen Paul Miller, “The Abstract Expressionist Housewife: Fracture, Transposition, Williams and the Three Phases of Modernism”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 32 Nos 1-2 (2015), p. 160.

<sup>344</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 313; see also Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen*, Vol 16 No 3 (1975).

<sup>345</sup> cit., C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford, 2015), p. 150.

poem's theorisation of modernity in general. Williams is seeking an idiom drawn “[f]rom the mouths of Polish mothers” (*A* 311), which at the same time can be found “listed in the Telephone / Directory” (*P* 10) – a democratic poetry that hums with all the mechanised music that modern mass experience entails. So, in a similar vein, Williams can declare elsewhere that “the movies are a moral force”:

Nightly the crowds  
with the closeness and  
universality of sand  
witness the selfspittle

which used to be drowned  
in incense and intoned  
over by the supple-jointed  
imagination of inoffensiveness

backed by biblical  
rigidity made into passion plays  
upon the altar to  
attract the dynamic mob...

(*CP I* 214).

Here, and above, Williams suggests that cinema should be celebrated for its technical sophistication, but also for its ability to communicate with people on their own terms; a medium capable of representing the life of ordinary American citizens (and their equivalents in other countries, in the case of Eisenstein's film) even as it appeals to the same on a mass scale – the political art par excellence. As Alberto Toscano observes,

[...] there is a deep and complex affinity between the technologies of reproducibility [including cinema] and the psycho-social landscape of modern masses who, depending in part on the uses to which those technologies are put, can appear to themselves as classes in conflict or be spectacularly reified as trans-class peoples [...]<sup>346</sup>

If Williams's invocation of Eisenstein partly proposes a solidarity (or at least, a

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<sup>346</sup> Alberto Toscano, “The Promethean Gap: Modernism, Machines and the Obsolescence of Man”, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 23 No. 3 (September, 2016), p. 598.

commonality) of experience and identification between Paterson's working classes and the international labouring masses, his portrayal of cinema-goers as a “dynamic mob” manifests an all-too-familiar mix of fascination and disquiet – re-casting the anarchic peasant audience of medieval passion plays in a modern mould, and one which the poem's persona (as ever) doesn't seem to fit. “Doctor”, a voice calls out,

... do you believe in  
'the people', the Democracy? Do  
you still believe – in this  
swill-hole of corrupt cities?

(*P* 109)

Despite his self-depiction here, in some ways Paterson's role couldn't be more unlike that of a man of the people – and the point is telling. For if anything, Williams is closer to the figure of the painter, or indeed the film director: the outside observer of the crowd, to whom the forms of common experience he portrays are both familiar and alien. Paterson's expressed admiration for the artist Brueghel could just as well be taken as summarising his attitude to Eisenstein, as he surveys the vista of his city with its teeming masses and reflects:

– it is a scene, authentic  
enough, to be witnessed frequently  
among the poor (I salute  
the man Brueghel who painted  
what he saw –

(*P* 224)

These last lines of course reiterate Williams's insistence, mentioned earlier, that “[t]he only human value of anything, writing included, is intense vision of the facts” (*SE* 71).

Williams's visual quotation from Eisenstein's film is significant in another (perhaps more

obvious) respect – namely in the implications of making such an allusion in the first place. Searching for an example of what shape and direction his country's democratic art should take, Williams selects a scene from a Russian director's censored depiction of Mexican history. As discussed in a previous chapter of this thesis, Williams's poetic emphasis on a life-in-common – on an art that transcends national divisions and class prejudices – along with his vigorous expressions of solidarity with Russian and international artists, garners him a reputation for anti-patriotic leanings among conservative critics and literati, particularly in the period in which he is working on the early books of *Paterson*. Despite his distress at such measures in reality, *Paterson* has Williams's representative poet not only praising Eisenstein, but also issuing a pugnacious call to common sense and shared principles, asserting these against the drumbeat of an unthinking nationalism. The “Senate”, *Paterson* contends,

[is trying to] deliver 'the bomb' over to a few industrialists. I don't think they will succeed but . . . that is what I mean when I refuse to get excited over the cry, Communist! they use to blind us. It's terrifying to think how easily we can be destroyed, a few votes. Even though Communism is a threat, are Communists any *worse* than the guilty bastards trying in that way to undermine us?

(P 62)

Of course for Williams, as we have seen, the expressive individualism and the spirit of internationalism evidenced in the segment of *Paterson* here in fact represent the apogee of the democratic principle – a standard he often invokes as definitive of American society's promise, and yet utterly lacking in the post-war relations of the world's military powers. It is in this context, indeed, that Williams finds himself in his poem, “Russia”, both isolated and stirred to internationalist reverie, articulating a dual sense of hope and panic: “I, alone dream”, Williams writes, “before the impending / onslaught” (*CP II* 144)

Seth Moglen's interpretation of Anglo-American modernism is perhaps relevant here, detecting as he does a unifying tendency among artists of Williams's generation to mourn the destruction of humane values in a world of increasingly militaristic international relations and globalised capital flows.<sup>347</sup> Embedded in such a world order, Moglen suggests, the modernists – and certainly this is true of Williams in the late 1940s – “record an experience of growing alienation, a crisis in the capacity for social solidarity at the public level, and for emotional and sexual intimacy at the private”.<sup>348</sup> So, as we have seen, Williams declares that in an age of generalised warfare, the poet must “omit / the silly word exile” and draw instead on the example of Whitman and Mayakovsky – whose “voice came / like the outpourings of the Odyssey”:

O Russia! Russians! Come with me into  
my dream and let us be lovers,  
connoisseurs, idlers – Come with me  
in the spirit of Walt Whitman's earliest  
poem, let us loaf at our ease – a moment  
at the edge of destruction.

(*CP II* 145-6)

In a similar spirit of political solidarity and artistic connection, Eisenstein's Mexican day-labourer – who drinks “from a wine-skin with the abandon / of a horse” – represents in *Paterson* a kind of symbolic cousin to the loud, lewd picnickers who so compel Williams's protagonist on his wanderings (*P* 58). As such, the figure, although belonging “to another medium and another epoch”, as David Kadlec notes, serves as an “emblem for the inclusiveness that enables Williams to recover” working-class life and history from “the sterile goings-on of *Paterson*”, the “image” fitting – Kadlec continues – “because montage allows it to fit there.”<sup>349</sup> In his earthy humanity and unabashed behaviour, the

<sup>347</sup> Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity* (Stanford, 2007), p. 17.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>349</sup> David Kadlec, “Early Soviet Cinema and American Poetry”, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol.11 No.2 (April,

Mexican peon represents for Paterson exactly that commonality of experience which he finds among his city's working classes, if not in the verse traditions of the larger society in which he is writing. Indeed Williams himself confesses to experiencing the same emotion towards many of his medical patients, whose difficult lives and sheer strength of character he often celebrates. "I was deeply sympathetic and filled with admiration", Williams remembers, "I would have done anything for them" (*IWWP* 49-50). As James Laughlin writes, Williams's medical "practice was among the poor / And the working people", some of whom "could only pay him with a / Sack of vegetables from their / Gardens."<sup>350</sup>

Despite the hint of condescension in Williams's remarks, the sentiment he expresses in fact can be interpreted as a form of progressive political consciousness, and one which he sets out to develop and test in the *Paterson* project. For all the occasions when he entrenches the alterity of his fellow citizens, Williams's eponymous doctor-poet still proves capable not only of sympathising with the "suffering" and "surroundings" of his patients, but of condemning what he views as the structural inequalities that give rise to them. *Paterson*, in other words, mounts an efficacious critique of the social and political norms of its own place and era – as the final section of this chapter shows.

#### 4.7 Conclusion: *The Venture of Paterson*

If Paterson can seem variously to deplore and to elide the implications of the social environment he moves through on his rounds, he nevertheless succeeds in establishing a thorough-going critical perspective on the society he lives in. Such a perspective is grounded in two broad tendencies over the course of the poem: firstly, his (at least

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2004), p. 322.

<sup>350</sup> Laughlin, *Remembering William Carlos Williams*, p. 55.

intended) egalitarian emphasis in describing the people and public spaces he encounters, as discussed above; and secondly, in the habit of tract-like digression he indulges for explicitly political purposes. “Money sequestered enriches avarice, makes / poverty”, Paterson asserts, politicising the gospel of the hillside pastor Klaus Ehrens by condemning not the abstract ugliness of greed, but the concrete impact of accumulated, private wealth. Burdened by conditions of material deprivation, and living in a culture that itself seems avaricious by design, Paterson further suggests that the challenge facing the multitude of everyday muses he meets on Paterson's streets is all too often a stark one:

to win  
the Congressional Medal  
for bravery beyond the call of duty but  
not to end as a bridge-tender  
on government dole

(P 182)

As here, one of the most winning qualities of Williams's work is its enduring disdain for the inegalitarian nature, as he perceives it, of American society – in spite (or perhaps because) of the relative comfort of his own social position. As we have seen, and in what Paul Mariani describes as a devastating attack on the “American dream”, such perceptions inflect Williams's scathing critique, elsewhere expressed, of that same culture of personal enrichment he beholds alongside the contrasting vista of general poverty around him – and of which *Paterson* offers so vivid a poetic portrait. In place of a genuinely egalitarian community, Williams declaims,

We have an excellent and highly endowed hospital in the metropolis for dogs and an attractive canine cemetery in the suburbs. There are capital yachts and private vessels for transoceanic travel, airplanes, and flying heroes, deluxe cars, princely estates in the West where liberal barbecues are the fashion, and in the East as well, museums, collections and the patronage of swanky Old Masters, horses, racing – Palm Beach and the abandon of an occasional war for profit: even expensive

universities for the propagation of something that passes for the arts.<sup>351</sup>

This latter passage perhaps helps to clarify the second tendency in Williams's long poem – and specifically, Paterson's willingness to act as a kind of poetic pamphleteer for Social Credit, the movement for federal credit reform in the United States. The advantages of such a system, Paterson contends, include assurances that the “[m]anufacturer is paid in full”, “[w]orkers are paid in full”, “[w]e do not add to the National Debt”, and that all of these are accomplished without increased state control, or popular unrest. Reading an “*Advertisement*” for Social Credit, Paterson finishes: “The Constitution says: *To borrow money on the credit of the United States*. It does not say: *To borrow money from Private bankers [...] we must reform our finance system*” (P 180).

Although often dismissed by critics as populist bombast, or just “some Pound-modified economics”, Williams's critique of the US federal banking reserve system is in fact well founded.<sup>352</sup> As Alec Marsh has suggested, Williams's “Jeffersonian critique” of modern American society “stands above all for a fairer, more democratic distribution of the fruits of industrial labor. It seeks to democratize capitalism by reorganizing its benefits.”<sup>353</sup> Recent analyses by economic historian and former credit analyst Nomi Prins, similarly, largely affirm the critical perspective that Williams advances. The “United States”, Williams writes in 1936, “is a political democracy in form but one thoroughly subverted by a rival economic structure which in fact negates much of the democratic intention” (ARI 99) – a conclusion matched and clarified by Prins's retrospective observation that while the “Fed would not prove able to stop [economic] crashes or crises” in the decades after its foundation in 1907, it did manage “always [to] provide financing to the big banks

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<sup>351</sup> cit., Mariani, p. 352.

<sup>352</sup> Jameson, *Modernist Papers*, p. 11.

<sup>353</sup> Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson*, p. x.





other most prominent modes of addressing America's economically uneven state of affairs.<sup>355</sup> As Mike Weaver suggests, the Social Credit movement “proposed a greater degree of socialisation without socialism”, and so found support mainly among liberal-minded “middle-class professionals who wanted a non-socialist welfare state”.<sup>356</sup> Paterson's economic analysis may be sound, then, but his political position – like Williams's own – is perhaps more reformist than the poem's revolutionary imagery suggests. As Williams writes: the task of “group power” in America is that of recognising “the newly discovered significance of economic forces [...] the most dangerous of which is today credit control” – thus downplaying the elitist organisation of society, which his rhetoric elsewhere seems so intent on exposing.<sup>357</sup>

As such, Williams has repeatedly induced the ire of leftists for failing to advocate more radical forms of opposition to America's capitalistic economy.<sup>358</sup> In truth, such criticism very often touches the pulse of Williams's complex position (discussed throughout this thesis) of being both sympathetic and external to the material injustices he addresses in his poetry. However: the built-in checks to Williams's political positions – his leaning, in *Paterson*, towards legislative reform over radical action – ultimately should not be used to delegitimise the consistency of his efforts to address issues of social inequality in his work, including in *Paterson* itself. For Williams's long poem is arguably rooted in the most radical of cultural recognitions: namely, that in a community in which “knowledge

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<sup>355</sup> See Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene*, p. 117; and Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background*, pp. 97-107.

<sup>356</sup> Weaver, p. 107.

<sup>357</sup> cit., Mariani, p. 381.

<sup>358</sup> Williams's occasionally vexed relations with the American Left, particularly during the 1930s, are discussed in Milton A. Cohen, “Stumbling into Crossfire: William Carlos Williams, *Partisan Review*, and the Left in the 1930s”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Volume 32, Number 2, pp. 143-158; and Bob Johnson, “‘A Whole Synthesis of His Time’: Political Ideology and Cultural Politics in the Writings of William Carlos Williams, 1929-1939”, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), pp. 179-215

[is] restricted” on class grounds, the people-powered literature that its doctor-poet seeks to create and record may serve as a mode of criticism and correction – and one that extends even to the “fallacies and illusions upon which the present method of financing the national budget is based” (*P* 180). It is on this basis of this assertion, moreover, that the multiform structure of the poem functions and evolves – historical reference, economic theory, and personal expression all congregating in a unified, yet flexible poetic field. Partly quoting a private letter from Ezra Pound, Williams writes:

and seeinz az how yu hv / started. Will you consider  
a remedy of a lot :  
i.e. LOCAL control of local purchasing  
power .  
? ?

Difference between squalor of spreading slums  
and splendour of renaissance cities.

Credit makes solid  
is related directly to the effort,  
work: value created and received,  
“the radiant gist” against all that  
scants our lives.

(*P* 185)

Like Marie Curie, the “genius” who changed history when she isolated “THE GIST” of uranium (*P* 184), Paterson sets out to discover the poetic equivalent for his time. “No ideas but / in the facts”, Williams's man-city declares (*P* 27) as he presses against the material conditions around him – “all that / scants our lives” – in search of a new measure, a form of speech that will be both inherent and innovative in American society. In the cosmology of Williams's poem, just as uranium is symbolic of mankind's destructive and curative powers, Paterson's sought-for prosody must be capable of cleansing every edifice of corruption as “[c]yclone, fire / and flood” are (*P* 97), at the same time that it represents “the most perfect rock” on which a new democratic culture

may be built (*P* 80). “It is dangerous”, Paterson observes,

to leave written that which is badly written. A chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world... for all that is put down, once it scapes, may rot its way into a thousand minds, the corn become a black smut, and all libraries, of necessity, be burned to the ground as a consequence.

Only one answer: write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive.

(*P* 129)

In an era when “the language is worn out” (*P* 84), though the life of his city is “thrashing” and palpable (*P* 81), Williams directs his creative efforts in *Paterson* towards achieving nothing less than the naturalness of a living verse, sustained and intensified to epic proportions. Encompassing documentary extracts, dramatic sequences, treatise-like divagations, and experiments in the variable foot, the resulting music is both restorative of real experience and renovative of poetry's capacities – as Paterson gains his “voice, one among many (unheard) / moving under all” (*P* 55). In this respect, at least, and although Williams's poem raises as many questions of identity-politics as it answers, the political direction of *Paterson* may be understood as fundamentally democratic. Writing against Alexander Hamilton, along with the many other elites and “panders” of America's civic and poetic traditions, Williams turns his attention to the forgotten subjects and suffering figures of his locale. Ultimately, indeed, Williams recognises in the “great beast” of the American public not just a certain poetic validity and interest, but a human face – as of the woman who “walks rapidly ... in worn slacks”:

Grey eyes looked  
straight before her.

Her  
hair  
was gathered simply behind the  
ears under a shapeless hat.

Her



## 5. Conclusion: On “the sharp edge of the mechanics of living”

### 5.1 Williams's Radical Hope

In his insistent attention to the civic, social, and scientific actualities of his time, and in his dauntless democratisation of poetic form and language, Williams stands as one of the most perennially pertinent American poets of the twentieth century. As such, this thesis has attempted a critical appreciation of his poetic work, elucidating its socially framed aesthetic, but also interrogating many of its discursive limitations. This last emphasis, indeed, has been crucial in shaping the direction and outlook of the preceding chapters: a reminder that no matter how fluently realised, literary innovation – even, as in Williams's case, when itself founded on and permeated by an ethics of social insight – rarely evades the necessities of political critique. Throughout this discussion, Williams's objectification and *othering* of working-class, racialised, and female subjects, for example, as well as his unbridled ease, on occasion, in substituting rhetorical provocation for meaningful political response, have been cast not as incidental by-products, but intrinsic components of his literary praxis. If such tendencies are arguably counter-balanced by a politically pugnacious effort on Williams's part to enlarge the scope of his own poetic voice to include the life and material experience of others, it remains true that the effects of such cultural politics can be as unsettling as his intentions (in many cases) seem to be sound. As Maxine Kumin observes in her poetic tribute to Williams, “WCW”, an implicit condition of his literary canonisation seems to be that readers “forgive the poet's [lines like] *he was one // of those fresh Jewish types / you want to kill on sight*”, and remember instead “his revulsion against fascism / his admiration for the workingclass // women

whose babies he brought forth”, along with “the freshness” of the “plain American / speech that he saluted in his poems”, a tacit injunction which can be difficult, at times, to follow – as the previous chapters of this discussion have shown.<sup>359</sup>

Without understating such critical tensions (which define and recur throughout his work) this thesis has also sought to contextualise Williams's poetics by reference to the news cycles of his day, to national debates and civic discourses surrounding issues of race, nationhood, warfare, and nuclear proliferation, and to the cultural politics of his contemporaries – these last ranging from the virulence of Pound's fascist sympathies to the complicated insulation of Stevens's social and racial views. My hope is that Williams, and the cultural politics *he* espouses throughout his life, are clarified – perhaps even affirmed – by such contextual exercises.

While Williams's rhetoric may seem at times to be ill-judged, and his literary egalitarianism inadequate, then compared to his fellows at least, he can nevertheless be seen to develop a sophisticated and (relatively) sensitive conception of literary craft – very often to the purpose of exposing and counteracting the cultural mystifications of his day. Whereas Pound's literary (and other) critiques of his time frequently descend to conspiratorial posturing, tinged with noxious prejudice, Williams by contrast perceives the various politico-cultural contagions his work attempts to expose and resist as originating in a corrupt political and economic system, sustained by the staid conventions of a reactionary literary establishment. “THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM”, Williams writes in *Spring and All*, “try to get hold of the mob [...] seize those nearest

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<sup>359</sup> Maxine Kumin, “WCW”, eds., Coghill, Tamaro, *Visiting Dr. Williams*, pp. 92-93.

them and shout into their ears: Tradition! The solidarity of life!” (*CPI* 185). In opposition to such a view, Williams advocates “contact [...] between life and the imagination”, between art and society, between citizens of every race, sex, and class – a condition and practice he declares to be “essential to freedom” (*CPI* 187).

Reading Williams's poetry, Robert Lowell suggests, becomes an almost “Dantesque journey, for he loves America excessively, as if it were *the* truth and *the* subject [...] His flowers rustle by the superhighways and pick up all our voices.”<sup>360</sup> And yet, the ebullient Americanism to be found throughout Williams's work and correspondence is rooted in neither an ethnic, elitist, nor even necessarily patriotic nationalism; rather, it serves as one expression of Williams's modernism – his urge to record and acknowledge the realities of lived experience, by individual example and commitment. Against Pound's posited “virus”, “the bacillus of the land in my blood” (*SE* 8), Williams's sense of *Americanness* emerges as a primarily idealistic projection, centring on the will to defy authority by sheer strength of imaginative endeavour. “Here”, Williams writes, “we are starved, choked – writer and reader both. Our tastes dictated to us by cash”, so that the most valuable poet (Williams has the sharecropper H.H. Lewis in mind in this instance) is the one who “speaks with fervor [and] a revolutionary intensity of purpose” against such impositions – like “the American patriot of our revolutionary tradition” (*ARI* 76-77).

In each of these points, and in their fusion, Williams stands in refreshing contrast to many of the now-canonical poets with whom he is classed today, and indeed to some of the more perturbing and pernicious political trends of his time – as his remarks in 1941

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<sup>360</sup> Lowell, “Dr. Williams”, *Complete Prose*, p. 42.



(concerning recent events) imply:

[I] was chairman in Bergen County, N.J., of a committee for medical aid to Spanish democracy while the Storch Squadron went out with their planes on Easter while the women and children were in the streets – people with whom they had not the slightest quarrel – and blasted them to butchers' meat in the holy Basque city of Guernica 'to see how effective the planes and bombs would be.' And I stood up in the 8<sup>th</sup> St. school in Hackensack and warned and begged for a few dollars to send – not guns or ammunition – but bandages, old clothes, surgical instruments – and to their everlasting shame not a single physician in the whole county, Friedland of Edgewater who had already gone to Spain excepted, so much as turned a hair, though I sent a personal card to every one of them.

(ARI 165)

As Kumin suggests, Williams's “revulsion for fascism” – apparently upheld in isolation from his townspeople and fellow medical practitioners, as well as many of his literary contemporaries – and his consistent willingness to salute “the workingclass” and “women whose babies he brought forth” must count for something (and may count for a great deal) in historicised analyses of his work.

As above, much of the preceding commentary has sought to illuminate and then balance out the first intentions with the final implications of Williams's literary practice. In my closing comments, however, I hope to sketch out an alternative (if related) framework for understanding both the social literature and the poetics that Williams cultivates over the course of his writing life. Drawing on the pedagogical philosophies of *radical hope* outlined by Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, and synthesised by other educators in their wake, the concluding portion of this analysis argues for a socially engaged and performatively exploratory pedagogical approach to Williams's poetics. I suggest, moreover, that the cultural politics of Williams's aesthetic invite exactly that mode of critically efficacious pedagogy that Freire and Greene, among others, have advocated in

their respective studies.<sup>361</sup>

Definitionally speaking, the philosophy of radical hope is both a blueprint for liberatory pedagogical practice and a partisan political outlook – each element activating and enriching the other in practice. As Robert Lake and Tricia Kress have observed, by engaging teachers and learners collectively “to see beyond 'what is' into a more democratically just and humane world of 'what might' be”, radical hope provides

... a 'theory of change' in which imagination can be understood as an insurgent praxis useful for destabilizing the contemporary global neoliberal order that is more concerned with creating workers and consumers than democratically minded citizens.<sup>362</sup>

Formulated, then, in opposition to the reigning marketisation of democratic rights and the public sphere in the second half of the twentieth century, “radical hope” emphasises students' capacity for critical thinking and self-actualisation, and encourages educators to engage expressive and politically expansive practices of reading, discussion, and demonstration in their work environments. In place of a *closed-door* distinction between pedagogical approaches to the arts and a critical or activist-oriented reflection on social issues, Greene suggests that “teachers” strive “to recapture” in the classroom the spirit of those “struggles for civil rights, for women's rights, for human rights, none of which have been fully achieved”<sup>363</sup> – and to do so with the aim of “imagining a future in full awareness of approximations and uncertainties and even the likelihood of failure.”<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> As such remarks imply, the educational praxis outlined here is propositional rather than evaluative – a series of suggested interpretative outlooks and practices, and not a collation and analysis of classroom responses to these.

<sup>362</sup> Tricia Kress, Robert Lake, “Mamma don't put that blue guitar in a museum: Greene and Freire's duet of radical hope in hopeless times”, *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 2017 (Vol. 39, No. 1), p. 60-75.

<sup>363</sup> Maxine Greene, “Teaching in a Moment of Crisis: the Spaces of Imagination”, *The New Educator*, Vol 1 No 2 (April, 2005), pp. 77-80.

<sup>364</sup> Idem.

This last point is instructive – as a reminder, for one thing, that even the most apparently utopian impulses in the discourse of radical hope gain their focus from an interrogatory and materially precise understanding of cultural politics . As Lake and Kress summarise rhetorically: “Who benefits from a hopeless present? Who loses? [...] What is to be gained and who is gaining by framing people's desires for equality and the alleviation of suffering as infantile?”<sup>365</sup> Asking such questions will not in itself achieve “the alleviation of suffering” in society, of course, but by incorporating them as motivating factors into an inclusive pedagogical praxis, radical hope nevertheless grounds its humanistic aims and methods in a context of concrete civic engagement.

As such remarks may suggest, radical hope is an unusually *poetic* educational philosophy – and in a particularly Williams-esque fashion: conceiving of “literacy” and learning as creative acts that are also, as Freire notes, exercises in “critical comprehension”, which “without any illusion of triggering [wider democratic] liberation” will “nevertheless contribute to its process.”<sup>366</sup> By interpreting the individual practice of learning as a civic, moral, physical, and imaginative experience in which both teachers and students act out in unison “their right [to] have a voice”, and the democratic prerogative “to defend this right”, radical hope conceives of education in much the same manner as Williams understands poetry: as “the purest, most accurate form of what it is to know” (*EK* 66), as he puts it, with the vital proviso that “knowledge” itself “has no absolute value and all the value it has exists in the deed” (*EK* 189).<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Kress, Lake, “Mamma don't put that blue guitar in a museum”, *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 2017, p. 72.

<sup>366</sup> Paulo Freire, trans., Donaldo Macedo, *The Politics of Education* (New York, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>367</sup> Paulo Freire, trans., Donaldo Macedo, *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (Boulder, 1998), p. 65.

The question of educational organisation and reform is one that preoccupies Williams throughout his literary career. The “old academy”, Williams contends, “must be replaced by a more resourceful, a more liberal, a more fertile breadth of purpose” (*EK* 3-4). Crucially, such a proposed pedagogical and institutional overhaul is folded into Williams's wider musings on the meaning of literature, science, philosophy, and historical understanding, and the interrelationships that exist between these fields. Deploring what he sees as a pervasive “emptiness” or cultural malaise in American society, Williams argues that “[t]he effect of education” as it current exists:

is surely to keep us, as Americans, from each other; the history we are taught is particularly blank – or rather the history we are not taught is terrifying when one looks back at the years that have been spent solely to keep us ignorant. But the chief effect of it all is to have allowed time to pass during our most impressionable years without coming into contact, actually, with what has happened and is happening around us.

(*EK* 64)

Such reflections chime fluently with Howard Zinn's later notes on standard educational proceedings in the academic humanities, including literary studies: “[y]ou're never asked [to] question how it is that some people are rich and others are poor”; students are rarely “taught to challenge what is there” in society, but rather are encouraged “to believe that this is all natural.”<sup>368</sup> For both Zinn and Williams, the task facing educators is to shake off such presumptions and help to form, in a group-learning setting, a new and critical awareness of “what has happened and is happening around us” (*EK* 64). As Christina Oltmann observes of the *Embodiment of Knowledge*: Williams “establishes poetry as a form of knowledge equal in value to the hierarchically ordered disciplines”, and in the process “links his poetics to the socio-political change that he envisioned.”<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Howard Zinn, ed., Donaldo Macedo, *Howard Zinn on Democratic Education* (Boulder, 2005), pp. 36-37.

<sup>369</sup> Christina Oltmann, “Poetics-Poems-Politics: The Politically Subversive Force in Williams's Poems of the

The passage above in fact bears another obvious resemblance to the reflections of Greene and Freire: in its critical insight into the “blank” and depersonalised nature of modern education. “If [a political] community is clearly unjust and inequitable, should not the educator be concerned primarily with social change?”, Greene asks with a similarly engaged sense of pedagogical purpose: “Why transmit a heritage conceived to be sterile or 'sick'? Why keep a declining culture alive?”.<sup>370</sup> As is true of Williams's poetics, Greene's educational impetus is both diagnostic and pragmatically responsive to the social and cultural situation in which she works.

Williams's poetry may thus be seen to share with the pedagogical work of Greene and Freire a contemporaneity of creative outlook. Just as Williams discerns that “the movies” are “a moral force”, for example, Greene contends that “films” are best understood and engaged by educators as vital “efforts to make sense of the world”, noting that they “suggest something of how young people” in particular “interpret the age in which they live.”<sup>371</sup> Such an insight is of course pertinent to our critical and educational approach to Williams's *Paterson* – particularly in light of Jim Jarmusch's recent film of the same name, as previously discussed. Standing as a partial tribute to Williams's long poem, the film riffs on many of the motifs and literary procedures of the earlier work. As Williams's *Book I* opens with “[a] man like a city and a woman like a flower / – who are in love”, “his / arm supporting her [...] asleep”, for instance, so Jarmusch's film begins with a man named Paterson (living in the same New Jersey town), lying in a similar position beside a

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1920s and 1930s”, ed., Ian Copstake, *The Legacy of William Carlos Williams: Points of Contact*, p. 46.

<sup>370</sup> Maxine Greene, *Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age* (New York, 1973), pp. 3-4.

<sup>371</sup> Greene, *Teacher as Stranger*, p. 15.

sleeping woman. Even the fact that the central character in Jarmusch's film is a bus-driver (rather than a doctor) may be taken as an oblique inflection from Williams's poem, in which

[...] Inside the bus one sees  
his thoughts sitting and standing. His  
thoughts alight and scatter –

Who are these people (how complex  
the mathematic) among whom I see myself  
in the regularly ordered plateglass....  
(P 9)

Most relevant to the discussion here, however, is not that Jarmusch's film is partly filtered by Williams's work, but that it serves actively to resituate the earlier poet's images and creative tenets in a modern context – as with the guest appearance in the film of Method Man, the hip-hop artist and street-poet (as Williams partly was). “I'm tryin'a figure out how to spit it out”, Method Man says in one scene, adding that “wherever it hits me is where it's gonna be” – lines that illuminate the craft and code of contemporary hip-hop, but also serve to echo and re-formulate Williams's emphasis on the speakability and relatability of verse, and the relationship between literary meaning and local place. Jarmusch, in brief, manages to elucidate both cultures (latter-day hip-hop and Williams's late-modernist poetics) by merging and over-layering them – and so opens up new ways for readers to understand and relate to each.

As suggested above, a pedagogy that sets out to engage contemporary modes of communication and understanding will also encompass (or at least allow for) the development of political concerns by students and educators – which Williams's poetics also invite. Just as Greene links “authentic and relevant [educational] inquiry” to an active awareness of the forms “of hegemony, alienation and anomie” that exist in advanced

capitalist society,<sup>372</sup> so Williams can insist that an “exposure to the sharp edge of the mechanics of living” is “necessary to the poet” – enabling “him to observe and to weigh” the force of modern circumstances, which in turn will “give his words pungency and a charge” (*SE* 237). Like Greene, Williams suggests that in face of the “cheated existence” and alienating conditions that many citizens find themselves struggling under in American society (*EK* 26), writers must forge a relational, physically grounded understanding of knowledge – an understanding which, for Williams, manifests itself as a form of praxis: to “smell, hear and see with words” (*SE* 266). “We see every advantage to a man” in gaining “up-to-date information” about the world through an “experience of its significance in his own environment” (*SE* 32), Williams observes, clarifying elsewhere that knowledge is found “not at the end of the deduction but in each phase of it and everywhere” (*EK* 71) – an argument that later pedagogical practitioner-theorists have also advanced.

Wendy Kohli, for instance, notes how Greene's adoption of an “existentialist-phenomenological stance” in her pedagogical writings relates to her belief “that all knowing [is] the embodied, situated knowing of actual persons in real-life settings” – a form of knowledge that, if realised, can activate “the social imagination” of learners and teachers, and in-so-doing “disrupt instrumental rationality and subvert the authoritarian practices that [dominate] much of the contemporary educational landscape.”<sup>373</sup> The “prime destination of the thing produced [the poem]”, Williams asserts with a similar emphasis, is “to have the beholder through [their] imagination *take part* in it, thus & only thus to

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<sup>372</sup> James Giarelli, “Maxine Greene on Progressive Education: Toward a Public Philosophy of Education”, *Education and Culture*, Vol 32 No 1 (2016), pp. 5-14.

<sup>373</sup> Wendy Kohli, “The Dialectical Imagination of Maxine Greene: Social Imagination as Critical Pedagogy”, *Education and Culture*, Vol 32 No 1 (2016), pp. 15-24.

complete it.”<sup>374</sup> Or as he writes elsewhere: “poetry”

[...] should be the  
audience itself, come out of itself  
and standing in its own eyes, leaning  
within the opening of its own ears,  
hearing itself breathe, seeing itself  
in the action –<sup>375</sup>

Importantly, in his piece, “Impromptu: The Suckers”, Williams relates such concepts directly to the issue of democracy and justice in America, casting the jury-members who condemn Sacco and Vanzetti as

[...] men already rewarded for  
their services to pedagogy and the enforcement  
of arbitrary statutes. In other words  
pimps to tradition –

(*CP I 270-271*)

As we have seen elsewhere in this discussion, such a perspective functions admirably as political critique; but it also holds clear implications for poetry and pedagogy, and how we conceptualise of these practices. As the extract above indicates, Williams in fact interprets the political targeting and judicial punishment of the two anarchists as symptomatic of the elitist standards of American “pedagogy”, dominated by “pimps to tradition” whose reverence for “arbitrary statutes” is justified in terms of “the glory of the state” – despite being at odds with “the facts” of the case, as Williams understands them (*CP I 270-271*).

Williams's disdain for “arbitrary statutes” is also of a piece with his equally fervent

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<sup>374</sup> cit., David L. Walker, *The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams* (New Jersey, 1984), p. 117.

<sup>375</sup> cit., Eric Keenaghan, “The Impersonal Is Political: On the Living Theatre of Williams's *Many Loves*”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 33 Nos 1-2 (2016), p. 114.



impatience with contemporary poetic conventions based on the strictures of “some arbitrary or convenient stanza” – for him a politico-cultural circumstance, as much as it is a formal one (SS 126-127). “The major imperative”, Williams argues, is “to make the line fit the language, not the language the line”, and to do so in response to “the hammering of contemporary necessity” (SS 126-127). Or as he rhetoricises elsewhere: “what we would write were / it not for the laws against libelous truth” (CP II 173). In a similar vein, Peter Jones suggests that “[t]he key” to achieving both civic self-knowledge and creative engagement with texts in the classroom, “is not following rules but developing *understanding*” – a process necessarily more involved, cooperative, and critically challenging than the experience of learning (or writing) by rote.<sup>376</sup> When “we put into practice an education that critically provokes the learner's consciousness”, Freire likewise observes, “we are necessarily working against myths that deform us” –<sup>377</sup> a tenet of educational praxis that concisely echoes Williams's own conclusion in the poem above: that “[n]o one / can understand what makes the present age / what it is” so long as they remain “mystified by certain / insistences” (CP I 272), a circumstance the poem itself sets out to rectify and dispel.

As discussed earlier, much of this politically demystifying function in Williams's poetry relates not only to his appreciation for the objective features of his daily locale, but to his will to register the material deprivations and often conflicting social (and perceptual) experiences of modernity as he encounters it. The “oppressed”, as Freire reminds us, “are not marginals, are not people living outside society. They have always been inside” – as Williams's socially conscious (and for him, culturally intrinsic) portraiture of America's

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<sup>376</sup> Mike Fleming, *The Arts in Education* (London, 2012), p. 118.

<sup>377</sup> Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, p. 41.

so-called “non-entities” also attests (*CP I* 70).<sup>378</sup>

It is in this precise respect – in light, that is, of his urge to fashion a poetics grounded in and sensitive to the otherwise nameless life, language, rhythms, and impoverishments of urban America – that Williams's work arguably most invites pedagogical interpretation by way of the radical hope educational philosophers, and associated critics. “How often is class or poverty or exploitation discussed in schools?”, asks Terry Wrigley – a prompt that students of literature might reformulate to query: how often is “class or poverty or exploitation” discussed in, and in relation to, American poetry? What are the implications of this relationship?<sup>379</sup>

Such questions are often coded into the very make-up of Williams's poetic work. “The wealthy / I defied”, he writes in one late poem: the wealthy and those “who take their cues from them” (*CP II* 321). For “the poor” of Rutherford, Williams recalls by contrast, “I was deeply sympathetic and filled with admiration [...]. I would have done anything for them, anything but treat them for nothing, and I guess I did that too” (*IWWP* 49-50). “I never tire of the mystery / of these streets”, he writes, where “flags in the heavy / air move against a leaden / ground” (*CP II* 108-9) – recasting the patriotic symbols of American nationhood in terms of the “the factory, the dirty / snow” known by the working poor, the snow “trampled and lined with use” (*CP II* 109).

The point is instructive, for while there has recently been a healthy upsurge in scholarship

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<sup>378</sup> Paulo Freire, trans Myra Bergman Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 2000), p. 55.

<sup>379</sup> Terry Wrigley, “Culture, Class, and Curriculum: A Reflective Essay”, ed., Peter Jones, *Marxism and Education* (London, 2011), p. 33.

dedicated to the perceptions of “class”, “poverty”, and “exploitation” that populate Williams's poetry, it is also commonplace for both academic and general commentators to sanitise their discussions of such elements – presenting Williams's poems as conversational celebrations of ordinary living, for example, without accounting for the impulse towards cultural critique and commentary that often gives rise to such effects.<sup>380</sup> Williams's “wide clarity and dashing rightness with words” – as Lowell puts it – are excised of their (often formative) social frames and inflections.<sup>381</sup>

Such considerations are pertinent to our understanding of Williams's “To a Poor Old Woman”. In full, the poem and title read as follows:

TO A POOR OLD WOMAN

munching a plum on  
the street a paper bag  
of them in her hand

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

You can see it by  
the way she gives herself  
to the one half  
sucked out in her hand

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

(*CP I* 383)

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<sup>380</sup> As in the following 2010 panel discussion of Williams's work, for example, chaired by Alan Filreis and available as a podcast from the American *Poetry Foundation*: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/75547/the-poem-is-remembering-me-a-discussion-of-william-carlos-williams-the-red-wheelbarrow-and-flowers-by-the-sea> (accessed 04/08/18).

<sup>381</sup> cit., Linda Funkhouser, Daniel C. O'Connell, “‘Measure’ in William Carlos Williams's Poetry: Evidence from his Readings”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 12 No. 1 (March, 1985), p. 44.

On first encounter, the piece seems an exemplary exercise in physical immersion, portraying a sensual experience whereby a woman “munching a plum” is “[c]omforted” by its taste and texture – to the extent that by the poem’s close, “a solace of ripe plums” seems “to fill the air” (*CP I* 383). The woman’s very experience of “munching” is apparently creative of this final “solace” – a process evoked and imitated in the alternating bites to the phrase, “They taste good to her”, in the second stanza, each line delectably gathering up the closing pause of its predecessor with a different physical and linguistic emphasis: “They taste good / to her. They taste / good to her” (*CP I* 383). The phenomenological clarity of the scene is so concentrated, indeed, as to result in a near-symbiosis of the woman’s identity and desire, action and appearance, as “she gives herself” to the fruit “sucked out in her hand” – a confluence of materialities that the poem, quite simply, finds “good” (*CP I* 383).

As such, a full appreciation of these lines may only be possible when students and teachers are able to pitch the weight of a plum from hand to hand with each new line, and in knowing the sensational intimacy (“so sweet / and so cold”) of “munching” a plum in public –<sup>382</sup> an appreciation that itself invites those pedagogical practices of embodied learning that radical hope theorists advise. As bell hooks has argued, “[l]iberatory pedagogy really demands [that] one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through those limits” – a “return to the body” which enables learning participants “to speak of ourselves as subjects in history”, and which would also, in this case, help to

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<sup>382</sup> Daniel Morris takes issue with this line of the earlier poem as an example of “hyperbolic description” on Williams’s part; Morris, “This is Just to Say This is the End of Art: Williams and the Aesthetic Attitude”, *William Carlos Williams Review*, Vol. 32 Nos 1-2 (2015), p. 61.

unlock the complex material dynamics of Williams's poem.<sup>383</sup> As hooks notes, the “power of the liberatory classroom” arises out of “the power of the learning process, the work we do to establish a community” with one another, and in the critical and social understandings we develop therein.<sup>384</sup>

“To a Poor Old Woman” may in fact be interpreted not just as an evocative and sensually suggestive descriptive piece, but as a direct literary manifestation of what Freire calls “conscientization” – a process that broadly corresponds to what Williams himself formulates in 1946 as follows: “[i]t may be inconceivable”, he writes, “that in a single poem the world can be set right, but it is truth. Nothing does happen, except in the minds of a few; but it is drastic, what sometimes happens in the minds of a few (SS 162). So, in Freire's terms, “conscientization” occurs when the learner (or in Williams's case, the reader) experiences through pedagogical praxis

a change in his/her awareness of the reasons for social problems. For instance, he/she 'is capable of perceiving hunger as more than just not eating, as the manifestation of a political, economic and social reality of deep injustice'.<sup>385</sup>

Williams's poem may thus be understood as a portrait of hunger – of material and social deprivation – rather than of a particular person, or of physical desire (and its solace) . The poem raises the question as to whether the woman's evident appetite is truly a reflex of pleasure, or a matter of necessity – a question that alters the resonance of the second stanza and final line to suggest that, while such a feast may indeed “taste good” to this poor old woman, the same is not necessarily true of the speaker (as the title also implies): the tang of poverty and the sense of observational powerlessness suffusing the scene

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<sup>383</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>384</sup> hooks, p. 153.

<sup>385</sup> Kress, Lake, p. 63.

finally qualifying the “solace” of her (hardly extravagant) open-air meal. “For what loss”, Robert Von Hallberg queries, “does [the woman] require solace? The poem does not say, but the title does: she is poor and old” – a pointed qualification on Williams's part that surely negates Von Hallberg's later claim that “Williams does not stress the political side” of the woman's situation.<sup>386</sup>

The issue is nevertheless an important one. For if we do decide to suppress the poem's aesthetic of radical hope, as Von Hallberg ultimately does, we are left merely with a cross-pollination of semblance and reality, perception and desire, much closer to the imaginative procedures of Stevens, for example, than Williams's usual social factuality. In that case, the comfort and “solace of ripe plums / *seeming* to fill the air” (my emphasis) would point away from the street-woman's poverty, age, and isolation, and towards Stevens's “many selves, so many sensuous worlds” – the “mid-day air” at the close of Williams's poem now “swarming / With the metaphysical changes that occur, / Merely in living as and where we live.”<sup>387</sup> As this thesis has demonstrated, however, Williams's conception of literary purpose (and indeed, of poetic form and measure) is interrogatory in its politics and holistic in its social approach. Throughout his work, Williams is concerned to produce “an art that hopes to engage the attention of a modern world”, as he phrases it in 1954, challenging “our social concepts, our schools, our very religious ideas” (SS 202-203) – a poetry “embodying”, as he stresses elsewhere, “the whole of the living contemporary world” (SS 126).

Such a materially attuned understanding of poetic praxis in itself justifies a political

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<sup>386</sup> Von Hallberg, “The Politics of Description”, p. 144.

<sup>387</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 287.

reading of the poem, in line with Freire's pedagogical insights above – a hermeneutic approach highlighting the civic and culturally diagnostic concerns that Williams's literary description mobilises. Meaning that some awareness of urban poverty in 1930s New Jersey, for example, as well as the national background to and Williams's own biographical experience of such circumstances, will expand our understanding of the poem's aesthetic – and can clarify Williams's life-long engagement of such social-literary observational techniques.<sup>388</sup> Educators, in other words, may integrate in the classroom, without contradiction, a collective close-reading of the poem with engaged references to American social history, as well as to Williams's literary corpus as a whole. As such, it is more than appropriate in a tutorial setting for students together to riddle out the aesthetic difference (and the social implications of such a distinction) between ravenously consuming plums from “a paper bag” on the street and quietly eating the same fruit, previously saved for breakfast, from an “ice-box” – and to do so with a view to understanding something of urban and suburban experience in Depression-era New Jersey. Such an approach is entirely in line both with Freire's and Greene's educational philosophy and with Williams's own aesthetics of cultural production.

As we have seen, however, what most marks out the pedagogy of radical hope from such guidelines for historicised close-reading is the former's quintessential aim of achieved self-actualisation for teacher and students, individuals and the group – the creation, that is, of what Greene terms an active “social imagination” of the present, rather than a solely historical (and in that sense, passive) illumination of the materials discussed. Such pedagogy, as Lake and Kress observe, is primarily “a political and moral practice that

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<sup>388</sup> Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins's understanding of 1930s America as “socially bankrupt and politically unstable” may again be relevant here; cit., Williams, *The Contours of American History*, p. 414.

holds potential for self/other/world transformation.”<sup>389</sup>

In this respect, the praxis of radical hope arguably supplies what American literary history, and the academic study of poetry in particular, has long demanded. Stephen Burt, for one, has called for “ideas of artistic inviolability” to be replaced by a conception of “poems [as] events and performances, occasions for other events”, observing:

[poems] persist, can be traded and shared, and re-entered, in classrooms and far outside them, in a way that [...] street protests or even a dance performance cannot. That thing-like quality [gives] them part of the value they have.<sup>390</sup>

Similarly, through the practices of embodied, immersive learning and open discussion alluded to above, Greene's philosophy wills educators and learners alike to discover in their studies the knowledge that they themselves are (or are capable of becoming) “uncomfortably disturbed by the status quo” today – and consequently to be “stimulated and pushed” by their educational experience “to envision a better society.”<sup>391</sup>

Within such a framework, students of Williams's poem should be encouraged to interpret the poem's imagery and formal procedures in light of their own understandings (and perhaps experience) of poverty, hunger, street-walking, and people-watching – and so to gauge Williams's contending impulses towards descriptive pleasure and social critique, compassionate observation and presumptuous voyeurism, against their own. Just as importantly, such a pedagogical approach enables the learning group to explore the pertinence of Williams's poetics of social evocation (and critique) to contemporary, local manifestations of deprivation and political inequality – thus putting into practice that very

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<sup>389</sup> Kress, Lake, p. 72.

<sup>390</sup> Stephen Burt, “Is American Poetry Still a Thing?”, *American Literary History*, Vol. 28 No. 2 (Summer, 2016), p. 284.

<sup>391</sup> Kathleen Knight Albowitz, “Maxine Greene on Democracy and the Social Imagination”, *Education and Culture*, Vol 32 No 1 (2016), pp. 1-4.



credo on which Williams's poetic work may be said to be built:

[that] the local in a full sense *is* the freeing agency to all thought, in that it is everywhere accessible to all: not in the temple, of a class, but for every place where men have eyes, brains, vigor, and the desire to partake with others of that same variant in other *places* which unites us all.  
(EK 23)

How are hunger and poverty portrayed, mediated, and experienced in contemporary society? How might Williams's poetic engagement of such subjects deepen our understanding of these and other issues today? By asking such questions, and by combining the literary resources and historical knowledge brought to focus in the poem with their own capacities for cultural creation and analysis, learning participants may catalyse that transition from mechanistic analysis to critical action that Greene and Freire envision, while also fulfilling Williams's own understanding of (and hope for) the modern poem: to draw a recognition of universal, humanistic possibility from the actuality of local circumstances – “the freeing agency to all thought” (EK 23) .

Such a pedagogical scenario and approach transforms the classroom from a space of insulated discussion to a zone of progressive, democratic praxis, while interpreting and deploying the poem itself as that “social instrument” Williams suggests it to be (SL 286). As Dana Savonick has noted, “the individualized myth of the exceptional student” comes to be replaced by “a vision of education as collective liberation”, with the added consequence that “literary studies” itself becomes “redefined”: “not as the production of secondary texts about singularly great works”, but rather “as the production of literature: critical and creative texts that emerge from 'the imagery of lives, the anger and flare of urban youth'.”<sup>392</sup> If “IT / CONTAINS NOTHING OF YOU”, as Williams declares, “it

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<sup>392</sup> Dana Savonick, “Changing the Subject: Adrienne Rich and the Poetics of Activist Pedagogy”, *American Literature*, Volume 889, Number 2 (June 2017), pp. 306-331.

must go down” (*P* 123) – a principle that may be applied as much to the classrooms and curricula of modern literary studies as to the verse traditions he himself is so intent to renovate.

Poetry as an occasion for individual self-fashioning, pedagogy as the site of social liberation: the association and mutual implementation of such propositions seem ideally suited to Williams's temperament and praxis. “[H]ave you read anything that I have written?”, Williams asks, declaring with a Whitmanesque flourish, “It is all for you” (*P* 218) – a credo that may be taken by readers and educators everywhere as an invitation to construct from his work not only a record of *his* place and time, as academic scholars are wont to do, but an image (and a critical understanding) of their own. As in Williams's poetry, moreover, these fresh imaginations of our present world may serve not only to “give praise” and literary texture to our experiences (*CP II* 431), but to challenge and expose the conditions of social unease (or disease), of creative stasis and institutional complicity that extend the many corruptions of our current society. As such, our study of Williams's work – our study of poetry at large – can itself become that “enforced pause” in the daily round, out of which may be formed our own “plan for action to supplant a plan for action” (*P* 2), leading to the “new world” Williams dares (and dares us) to imagine: in which the solaces of art are durable and real, and the ecstasies of life are generally shared (*CP I* 183).

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